

Profile

Riding the wave

Chelsie Preston Crayford plays two desperate housewives, including her own grandmother. **Sarah Lang** reports.

NEPOTISM, SAID some folks, on hearing that film-maker Gaylene Preston had cast her own daughter in this month's local movie *Home by Christmas*. Weird, said others, that actress Chelsie Preston Crayford would jump at the chance to play her own grandmother, Tui, in the doco-style drama about World War II wrenching her grandparents apart.

But Chelsie, whose pensive pauses would be disconcerting if she wasn't so endearingly direct, is having none of that. No wonder, given she repeatedly turned down the role. "There's doubt when you're cast by your mother, so I wanted to be sure I was the right person, chosen for the right reasons."

Gaylene's reasons were simple: her daughter's gift for acting and her familiarity with Tui. "But it was hard to get Chelsie to agree; she circled the part for a long time. The fact she didn't leap at it — you know, 'Mum made a film and I'm going to be in it' — says a lot about her. Chelsie is very thoughtful about what she takes on." Giving up on getting a yes, the film's director/writer/producer nearly cast another actress.

Eventually, though, Chelsie, 23, warmed to the idea. To help Gaylene decide whether the doco-meets-drama style would work, Chelsie agreed to play Tui in a test shoot. Then Gaylene, while tracing her father's wartime footsteps around Europe, showed that footage to Cannes friends, who said Chelsie simply must play the part. And that impartiality convinced the young actress.

What makes this poignant film part-drama is the imagined visualisations of what happens after Young Ed (played by homegrown star-turned-Hollywooder Martin Henderson) signs up for the war with his mates after rugby practice, telling his pregnant wife he'd be home by Christmas. Just 25, Tui struggles with loneliness, a newborn son and the fear her missing-in-action husband will never return.

Interwoven are doco-style scenes which recreate Gaylene's audiotape interviews with her father, in what was a dying gift to his inquisitive daughter (who plays herself). In a pitch-perfect, understated performance by *Goodbye Pork Pie*'s Tony Barry, Ed matter-of-factly tells Gaylene about a war he normally would never speak of: from defeat in the Egyptian desert and two years in Italian prison camps to a risky escape through the Alps. But he dodges many more personal questions such as soldiers' dalliances with women; things he perhaps thought best left unsaid.

Two years after Ed's 1992 death, Tui, then 77, moved in with Gaylene and 7-year-old Chelsie in Wellington — and stayed nearly a decade. "She helped bring me up," says Chelsie, whose parents split when she was 4. "I needed someone and Tui needed someone."

Neither imagined Chelsie would one day play her in a movie — and Chelsie would never have done so if Tui, who died in 2006, had still

been alive. "But it felt right. Knowing Tui so well helped me play her."

Still, before she could fit her grandmother's vintage housecoat — carefully converted into a floral dress — she had to drop some weight. Says Gaylene, 62: "I rung her up and said, 'Now Chelsie, as a director I think it'd be a good idea if you lost a few kilos. As a mother, I want you to do it safely.'"

You get the feeling that if Chelsie felt put out, she would say so. "It's a real trap in my profession — feeling your body needs to look like everyone else's. But I understood Gaylene's reasoning: she was sticking my head on to old photos of Tui, and Tui was a waif. So I didn't take offence, and I didn't have to do anything drastic. I just said 'well you pay for it then!'"

Gaylene obligingly shelled out for a gym membership.

Once filming began, director and actor didn't have to put aside their mother-daughter relationship. "It was a strength rather than a weakness," mulls Chelsie. "We had a creative respect, a certain intuition, and a level of trust that's hard to achieve in a short time with a director you don't know. We could divorce ourselves from our egos and just focus on a story which meant so much to us. We didn't always know the answer to what we were chasing, but knew it when we saw it." And while the movie's dialogue is sparse, Tui's emotions are written all over Chelsie's face.

Getting into Tui's headspace brought home to Chelsie just how hard that time must have been for her grandmother. "One day, filming at the Silverstream Railway Station, there was a train full of boys, tooting and hollering, and that really hit home." The almost incomprehensible difficulty of saying goodbye, the ongoing uncertainty — and the fear that the boys might never come back. "I can totally understand how you'd feel lost and reach out."

Tui, who grew up in the Depression, left school at 13 and devoted herself to her family, had a much smaller world than her daughter's and granddaughter's. Playing a hemmed-in housewife has reminded Chelsie not to take for granted the feminist fight that's enabled her to experience a bigger world, and have a career. "Still, I never wanted to be one of those cliched little girls who said 'I want to be an actress when I grow up'. Don't muck around wanting to be it. If you're going to be it, be it."

It's a philosophy she has put into practise since the water-safety commercial in which Chelsie, 4, told us to "have fun in the water but

do what you oughta". The award-winning drama-school grad's CV now spans feature films (*Eagle vs Shark*, *Show of Hands*), short films (*Fog*), TV shows (*The Cult*), and plays (*Ruben Guthrie*, *That Face*).

On Tuesday, she and friend Sophie Roberts open their play *Broken China* at Auckland's Basement Theatre. Made up improv-style by the duo, it's about two "perfect" 50s housewives whose cups of tea together shield unspoken crises. "It's *Stepford Wives* meets *Thelma and Louise*," says Chelsie. "What interests me about those [40s and 50s] generations is no matter what's going on under the surface, sometimes people — especially New Zealanders, even today — have a knack of



LIFE OF WOMEN: Chelsie Preston Crayford and Sophie Roberts as 1950s housewives in *Broken China*, left, and playing her grandmother, Tui, with Martin Henderson in *Home by Christmas*.

"No matter what's going on under the surface, sometimes people — especially New Zealanders, even today — have a great knack of not talking about it."

CHELSTIE PRESTON CRAYFORD

not talking about it." Like Ed; like Tui.

Chelsie seems the polar opposite of her needy character Hannah on *The Cult*. "Well, I have my moments. Actors have a reputation for being insecure and I think that's because what we're chasing after is often so ephemeral. And mostly you don't know where your next pay cheque is coming from, let alone what you're going to be doing in five years, or five months, so you can never assume anything. But I'm all right with not knowing. I'm just riding the wave." A wave that's washed her close to home.

Broken China plays April 13-17 at Auckland's Basement Theatre. *Home By Christmas* is in cinemas from April 29.