



Avalon creative Raelee Hill reflects on her almost three decades of acting on stage and screen... and reveals there's more in the wings.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

Peak performance

With her long, curly red hair and green eyes actor Raelee Hill is like a lioness with her cubs, as she bounds into the Sneaky Grind Café in Avalon with her sons, Tully and Cass.

COVID-19 has brought the Australian film industry virtually to a standstill. Raelee says she worked on an AFTRS short film, 'Sunset Country', which was filmed on the Victoria and South Australian border in March this year, and eight-year-old Cass tells me proudly that she is in Peter Rabbit 2, which she finished filming in December 2019.

"The boys were certain I would be playing a squirrel, but I'm actually a person," she adds with a laugh.

But despite work being slower than usual, Raelee oozes positivity.

"Creative people are prevailing in an environment like this, because they are able to think outside the box, and be imaginative about how to move forward," she says.

Tully, aged 11, is in Year 6 at Avalon Primary, and when the lockdown happened Raelee felt devastated for his classmates and him, in the last year of primary

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school, missing out on their camps, dances and other special events, because of the COVID-19 restrictions. So, she started what she calls "a little project" called 'Happy Chapters'. She filmed the now home-bound Year 6 students reading story books for the Kindergarten to Year 2s. With a very long lead on a microphone and a long-lensed camera, to comply with distancing rules, she filmed them reading different characters, then edited the segments, added pictures from the story books and also music. The result is a series of captivating segments, which even caught the attention of the ABC's Radio National.

"There was me at the beginning of lockdown thinking 'I'm trapped, I need to be creative and what am I going to do?'. And it was such a fun project, and as awesome for me as it was for the kids."

Raelee grew up in the Wynnum Manly area of Brisbane, which she says wasn't as well-to-do back in the '70s and '80s, as it is today. She studied English Literature at the University of Queensland, but didn't finish the final year of her degree because she got a role on the soap opera, 'Paradise Beach'. She'd done amateur acting work in

her teens, but this was her first professional gig. Sporting long nails and fake eyelashes, she played the over-the-top Loretta Taylor.

"I loved Paradise Beach, because television was new to me and I was training on the job. Also, I met two of my very best girlfriends on that show [Kimberley Joseph and Megan Connolly], so it has a special place in my heart."

This was the start for her of 12 years almost continuous television and film work with very little downtime. Roles in *Blue Heelers* and then playing Serendipity Gottlieb in *Neighbours* took her to Melbourne for a few years. Despite her very successful career she admits there were precarious times, and in her early 20s she lived in her car one winter.

"I knew things were dire, but they were never catastrophic, because if push came to shove, a friend would take care of me, and later, when that friend had no money, I would take care of them."

Raelee moved to Sydney when she was cast as Constable Tayler Johnson in *Water Rats*, and she worked on the series for three and a half years.

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"Because the best time to film for light is either early morning, or late afternoon, we worked some really long hours, so you get really tight with the people you're working with, and your cast mates are like family."

Raelee's first experience of theatre came in 2000, when she played Wendy Darling in *Pan*, the musical extravaganza which ran at the Capital Theatre for six months.

"I got to dance around on stage all night as a 12-year-old and fly with my own Peter Pan, Troy Woodcroft, who was amazing." She does admit on a couple of occasions there were flying catastrophes when the characters Peter, Wendy, John and Michael's wires got crossed and they ended up in one tangled mess 60 feet up in the air. But despite elbows and butts in

one another's faces, they kept delivering their lines as if nothing was amiss, while the fly boys in the wings yanked and hauled to try to get them out of the lights and down.

She played Sikozu, a role written especially for her, in the American science fiction series *Farscape* for a couple of years, and then later when the show was revived as a mini-series. In between, she was working in a craft store in the city.

"Six months earlier a clairvoyant had told me that I was going to meet a guy, because of a crash. I was living in Balmain and couldn't get to work because there'd been an accident on the Anzac Bridge. So, I went to a café and was drinking my coffee and writing letters in the empty courtyard, when this guy comes and sits right next to me." Raelee says she thought

he was a "weirdo" and refused to look at him, despite noting, when he started talking on his mobile, that he had a beautiful voice. When she left the café, he was waiting for her outside and offered to give her a lift to the CBD.

"I looked at him for the first time and said, 'Yes, you can,' because he was gorgeous. Isn't David terribly handsome?" she says to Connor, who is making coffees, and immediately clarifies that he is.

So, she got into a car with this complete stranger "and he sang My Funny Valentine and Mona Lisa - all these beautiful songs". Her now partner, David Poppleton, is in the band Nothing Too Serious, which plays regularly at Avalon Bowlo. Raelee describes him as an 'Avcat', explaining that he's was born and bred here, is a surfer and was

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Clowning around in the photo booth with partner David Poppleton; filming *The Long Road To Heaven* in Indonesia; sci-fi character Sikozu; with Kimberley Joseph and Megan Connolly back in her *Paradise Beach* days; with sons Cass and Tully; as 'Wendy' with Troy Woodcroft (Peter) promoting *Pan*.





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Continued from page 33 school captain of Barrenjoey High in 1976. His career has been in property, and she adds he's a 'marchitect' – someone who makes architecture marketable. In the early years of their relationship they lived in his apartment in Potts Point and spent weekends at his shack in Clareville.

"We were living the dream."

Due to a chromosome imbalance Raelee was told she couldn't have children, but after several miscarriages Tully and Cass were born. The Potts Point apartment was too small for the family, and it was Raelee who suggested they should pull down the shack and build a bigger house up here. David had the DA in immediately, but even though, she says, it's idyllic on the northern tip of the peninsula and the perfect place to raise children, she admits she's by nature a city-phyle, rather than a village dweller.

"I would rather be in a room of 100 strangers than 100 people I know."

They made Avalon their



WATER RATS: With the cast of the popular '90s Channel 9 series.

permanent home in 2014, and a year later Raelee met actress Toni Pearen, who was also living in Avalon and had two small children. They have set up the screen acting school, The Talent Co, and run classes for 9- to 11-year-olds, 12- to 13- and 14-year-olds upwards. For this oldest group, Raelee writes a short film every term, then directs and edits it.

"It's been as much fun being behind the camera with these kids, as being in front of the

camera," she says.

With her youthful looks and high energy, it's hard to believe Raelee is 47. It is as if there is an unstoppable creative force within her, and a sense of infinite possibility.

"I've always been really lucky," she says.

But as I depart I can't help think she has always made her own luck and it's just a question of what this talented actress will turn her hand to next.

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