

NZ actress tagged for stardom

Fast becoming the "it" girl of New Zealand film, Emily Barclay speaks to HALEY LYNCH about her role in *In My Father's Den*.

Emily Barclay doesn't fit the mould. Her cropped black hair is playfully unruly, and at 162cm she's decidedly pixie-like.

On this icy clear day in the Auckland University quad, she appears shivering, wearing a black puffer jacket that swallows her whole.

"It's because it's cold, not for fashion," says Emily matter-of-factly.

Underneath is a black hoodie with the band name 'Bleeding Through' emblazoned across the front.

On top of this she wears another hoodie with pink kitty ears, and paws for mittens.

Her figure-hugging black jeans are adorned with a shiny silver-studded belt and a bulky chain that dangles around the hip.

With her frilly little girl socks, and baby pink lace-up shoes, she exudes a charming naivety.

But immature she is not. The tattoos on her back, wrist, and leg are all special in their own way, and they're a part of her now.

She likes punk rock, hardcore. Some of her favourite bands are Agnostic Front, the Anti-Heroes and Sick Of It All.

A staunch vegan, Emily refuses to eat meat or dairy products.

But despite her punk rock tendencies, girlish voice and child-like giggle, Emily Barclay is worldly beyond her years.

She is outside the square, and as unlikely as she seems, the 19-year-old is fast becoming the "it" girl of New Zealand film.

Just don't tell her that. At home and across the Tasman, critics have raved over Emily's performance as the naïve and passionate Celia in the cinema adaptation of Maurice Gee's novel *In My Father's Den*, which was released in New Zealand this month.

Directed by Brad McGann, the film is a mysterious and psychological drama/thriller about an emotionally defunct photo-journalist, Paul Pryor (Matthew MacFayden), who returns to small town New Zealand following the death of his estranged father.

It is there he meets 16-year-old Celia (Barclay). For Celia, Paul represents a freedom and worldliness that she craves.

But, when Celia disappears, questions are raised about their friendship.

In My Father's Den had the largest budget of any debut film directed by a New Zealander, and was the first to get funding from the UK Film Council.

It was the opening movie at the Sydney Film Festival in June — a massive accomplishment in itself — and then screened around New Zealand at the Telecom International Film Festival in July.

By all accounts, the film is destined for big things.

It is compelling, heartfelt, raw, and tragic.

And there is no surprise that Emily would also be tagged for stardom.

But Emily doesn't want to be like everybody else.

"I don't want to be the next Anna Paquin or Keisha Castle-Hughes. I just want to be myself, and do my own thing. Nowhere else in the world are people compared like that.

"In a way I think it's almost slightly reductive to them. They don't want to be compared to an unknown girl who's done one movie."

And she is still relatively unknown — except to more avid film buffs.

Emily says grappling with the fame-thing is "kinda weird".

She smiles as she recalls an incident when the film premiered at Sydney's State Theatre.

"Me and my mum were so pumped, we were doing a little dance in the street, and these people walked past, and my mum goes, 'Excuse me, you see that girl in the poster? That's her,' and I was like, 'Yeah, that's me... famous...watch out,'" she jokes modestly.

But it is blindingly obvious to anyone who has seen the film that this is one young starlet who won't be disappearing into the depths of obscurity any time soon.

"I don't want to be the next Anna Paquin or Keisha Castle-Hughes. I just want to be myself, and do my own thing"

Emily admits she has always been a bit of a drama queen.

Even in her early school years she was constantly acting up.

"I was always the little shit at school, being naughty and winding people up. I was always having dramas with friends, and fights like most little girls do... 'Oh you're her friend and not my friend, and I don't want to be your friend anymore'."

She has lived in the same Remuera house — (which she is reluctant to mention for fear of being stereotyped) with her mother, a landscape designer, her father, a doctor, and 18-year-old sister Sophie — for her entire life.

Emily attended Diocesan School for Girls (another label she wishes to avoid), and in her sixth form year switched to Senior College, where high school friends remember the budding actress as "extroverted, funny, full of energy, and fun to be around".

Her love affair with acting began in her early teens, and it was then that she decided it was something she desperately wanted to do.

She doesn't come from a long line of performers — apart from a second cousin in England who is an actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company.



PHOTO: JOSEPHINE KNOWLES

DESTINED FOR BIG THINGS: Emily Barclay, star of *In My Father's Den*.

While her parents and Sophie have dabbled in theatre here and there, Emily has been the only one to take it to the next level.

At 13, Emily joined the Aspiring Young Actors drama group, where her tutor and mentor Jan Saussey says her raw talent stood out from the word go.

"She pushes boundaries and takes risks. She has never been afraid to try anything. Emily has an inner truth; she never looks like she's pretending. I also think she loves to be other people."

From there, her path into the limelight included a couple of "real cracker" made-for-TV American movies, including *Terror Peak*, where she appeared as Lynda (better known as *Wonder Woman*) Carter's daughter, and the ill-fated thriller, *No One Can Hear You*.

There has of course, been the mandatory stint on *Shortland Street*, which she says didn't win her any popularity contests at school.

"It was amazing... for like one week" she says in an over-the-top kind of way.

"I played some patient, and I had a tumour in my pituitary gland, which meant that I was having growth, womanly problems, and there was milk coming out of my boobs! Awesome aye?" she says cracking up.

"I got hassled so bad at school. This one kid used to come up to me and be like, 'Oooh I'm thirsty. Can I have some milk please?' It was so embarrassing," Emily giggles, her infectious laugh teetering on the fine line between mild embarrassment and fully-fledged cringe.

But the experience wasn't nearly enough to kill the acting bug.

Emily won the leading role of Celia in *In My Father's Den* when she was 18-years-old.

Celia and Emily are almost one and the same.

She speaks passionately about the complex character that she believes delves far deeper beneath the surface than the typical gum chewing, hair twirling, one-dimensional teenagers common on the silver screen.

"I guess I've always felt kind of out of step. I've never been the sort of person who's been doing what everyone else is doing or thinking what everyone else is thinking."

There aren't too many 19-year-olds presented with a serious film career, but Emily takes it in her stride.

"I kind of need a job right at present," she says jokingly, adding that she still works "like once a week" at a local video store.

She has also just finished work on a British mini-series called *Kidnapped*, based on the Robert Louis Stevenson novel.

"It was only for one day, a tiny part, but it's good to have some work," she laughs.

Emily was studying a Bachelor of Arts degree in women's studies, film studies, philosophy, and English at Auckland University until her film commitments took priority.

She plans to return next year, but for the moment, Auckland University hasn't seen the back of her.

She hosts a radio show every second Friday on BFM.

"Having a radio show is fantastic because you don't have to bore people with 'can you just sit in my room for a minute and listen to this song...and this song'," she explains.

Music, more specifically, hardcore punk, is Emily's way of life.

"It's an escape...a group of people who feel passionate about the same thing — and it's just a lot of fun.

"It's an expression of like, who you are, thinking about things differently and viewing the world differently. It's a group of

people who are likeminded about politics and the way you live your life."

It is this alternative world view that Brad McGann, director of *In My Father's Den*, believes sets Emily apart from her peers.

"She doesn't just see the world as a teenager, but as a wise individual. She cares about things living on the planet, and not just people," he pauses to laugh.

"Get Emily to tell you about the turtle."

Intrigued, I have to ask, and Emily happily fills me in.

"We were filming at this house, and they had a pet turtle in a really small cage — which bummed me out.

"Brad and I decided we would liberate the turtle."

The pair captured their hard-shelled friend, put it in a bucket covered with a towel, and managed to sneak it out to Emily's caravan.

"Then a lady from the set came out to my caravan and said someone in the house had lost a very dear pet," she giggles.

McGann says the freedom fighter role is typical of the Emily he knows.

"She speaks out against things she doesn't believe in and makes a stamp against the machine.

"I really admire that. The punk in her is a real asset."

You just need to look at her tattoos.

"It's grief," she says referring to the one on her calf muscle of a girl with tears dripping down her solemn face.

She is yet to get the matching "joy" tattoo on her other leg — it hurt too much.

"It's from this poem my grandma used to say to me which was: 'joy and grief are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine' — which is true because life is made up of really sad times, and really happy times, and that's what makes you a person."