



# Magic from the mat

*An interview with Rachael Coopes could have taken place on stage, in front of a television camera, on a movie set or in front of a writer's keyboard. All these things have been part of the fecund and successful creative and professional life she leads. Befittingly, though, it took place sitting cross-legged on yoga mats and that seems just about right because, as you will see, for Coopes the yoga mat is where everything comes together.*

Words TERRY ROBSON



For a young woman, Rachael Coopes has crammed a lot of experience into her life. She's a working actress, writer, mum and yoga teacher. When we sit down together she has just delivered a rehearsal draft of a play called *The Climbing Tree* for the Australian Theatre for Young People. She's in the midst of researching a play based on Australian boxer Les Darcy, having won an honorary fellowship at the State Library of NSW to assist with the research. On the boil are a couple of books on yoga and there are many other projects in the wind. Coopes is a genuine "triple threat", not just in the conventional "acting, singing and dancing" sense (although she does fit that bill), but rather in a trinity of skills that's more profound. In Rachael Coopes you'll meet the storyteller, the intellectual and the philosopher.

## Lights, camera, "discovery"

Coopes had her classic "big break" into feature films straight out of school, but it wasn't as though this was a long-held dream being fulfilled. She grew up in Sydney's Drummoyne and then Double Bay being raised by a single mum. Coopes was a competitive gymnast, going to national level in rhythmic gymnastics, having started at age 11. She was also going very well at school and, while acting was there peripherally for her, it was by no means centre stage in her childhood.

"I went to the Phillip St Theatre," she recalls. "They had a great school. I've never

seen anything like it since. You'd do some drama in the morning, then do some dance and some singing. It was a whole day on a Saturday, so you had to be pretty serious about it. I was doing drama at school as well, but it wasn't like I was always getting into the school musical. I was always the side roles or smaller roles. I loved English and loved writing."

Then destiny stepped in. After high school, Coopes undertook a degree in commerce at the University of Sydney and, during her first year, a friend of a family friend who worked for an advertising agency was looking for young people to be in a still shot for an early computer ad. "I did this still shot," Coopes says, "and this woman said, 'I've got an agent that you could meet who might be able to get you some more little bits and pieces.' I met this agent and I clicked with her straight away. It was just timing. There was this audition for a film called *Billy's Holiday* and I went along. I was so green; I'd never had any formal training.

"I got a callback and, being a 19-year-old first-year university student, I almost didn't go to the callback because I didn't think I'd get the part, and I was hung-over that day! I just wanted to stay home and eat pizza with my friends, but I pulled myself off the couch and when I went to the callback they had me auditioning with a whole bunch of other actors. I'd basically got the role but hadn't been told. They were just testing me against other actors for my friend roles in the film."

As always with Coopes, a touch of insight

is never far away and she observes, "It's challenging when young actors ask me how to begin a career. I don't know what works but what I do know is that, if you are creative, no matter what you do, it will keep calling you. Whether you do it forwards or backwards, or inside or out, whichever way you go, your creativity is going to find you. The flow of that happened for me very quickly at a time when I wasn't sure what I should be doing. It was a tap on the shoulder from the Universe, saying, 'I'm going to make it really easy for you and see what you do with it.'"

If you read any of Coopes' written work you'll find charm, depth, honesty and directness. That's what you get in person, too, and she is typically candid about that first film experience. "I wasn't a great actor. I was green. I look at my work in *Billy's Holiday* and it's OK for an inexperienced person. It's certainly not profound; it certainly wasn't an incredible newcomer performance. It was OK. I was an average young actor with no training and I didn't have a natural ability like some young actors do who get put in front of a camera."

Equally typically, she shows great respect and gratitude to those around her. Coopes recalls, "The demands of a film set are very challenging when you aren't sure what you want to do with your life. There were some incredible mentors there for me. Richard Roxburgh was incredible. He had done a degree and I was doing first year uni exams while we were shooting. He pulled me aside one day and he said, 'Don't minimise it. It's

great that you have a brain and it's really great that you want to use it. If you are meant to do this job, you will."

Coopes' career in film, television and stage has been diverse since that first breakthrough opportunity. She has appeared in iconic Australian television series such as *McLeod's Daughters*, *White Collar Blue* and *The Secret Life of Us*. She has also worked as a drama coach on films such as *The Sapphires* and ABC television's *Cleverman*. She is a prolific writer for the stage ever since her first play, *Art House*, which was first produced at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2009.

All of Coopes' storytelling skills came together in the television comedy series, *Life Support*, which she starred in and wrote for. It was after her work on *Life Support* that one of her most profound life experiences came as she was awarded a scholarship to study in Paris with the renowned teacher Philippe Gaulier.

## Paris & Gaulier

Philippe Gaulier is, as his name may suggest to you, French. He is a master clown, a playwright and theatre director and has established the École Philippe Gaulier in Paris. It was to this school of theatre that Coopes won her scholarship.

I ask Coopes about the reputation Gaulier has for tearing down students in front of the class. She replies instantly, "Oh, my God, yes, but he also brings out magic in every single student. He's forever saying, 'I cannot tell you how to do it; only you know how to find

your magic.' The tearing down is not about humiliation, it's not about degradation, it's not about breaking the actor down. For Gaulier it's about showing your soul. When I first went there, I could be funny, I was always strong with comedy, I could write, I could create, but I found it really hard to be vulnerable on stage. He got me up in one exercise and something cracked inside of me and I could finally feel what it felt like on stage to be genuinely vulnerable."

One of Gaulier's maxims is, "If you want to be comfortable, don't be an actor. If you want to be comfortable, be a pharmacist." According to Coopes, "The discomfort comes from taking a risk and moving into territory where the ground is unsteady. It is scary. I think that every single one of us has something to say and if you are fortunate enough to take some risks, crack yourself open a bit and stay curious instead of reverting to judgement or aversion, then you potentially can find magic, something special. There's no magic in the safe route."

## Play School

Of her work on *Play School*, Coopes says, "Hardest job ever. Most fun job ever. We shoot two-and-a-half episodes a day. That's an hour and five or 10 minutes of television, which is unprecedented. It's remarkable. As an actor, it's like doing theatre for TV. You have to turn up and you have to know your lines, you have to be ready to play and to be very present. You are learning four or five new songs plus a two-hander half-hour theatre show.

Sometimes there's 15 pages of dialogue where the camera doesn't break. It's hard."

In addition to presenting, Coopes also writes some episodes for *Play School*. She explains, "We have a two-hour writer's meeting for every episode I write. Two early learning specialists, a producer and myself. We go through the whole episode. I do the storytelling around the building blocks that they give me. I take the responsibility very seriously. I'm very committed to it and feel very privileged to be under the guidance of the people making it. We know we are part of an iconic piece of Australian culture. Everyone is invested."

It's clear, too, that Coopes has a genuine passion for writing for young people. "I love writing for kids and teenagers," she says. "It's not a stepping stone for me. I genuinely am fascinated by storytelling for young children and teenagers. We form our emotional world when we are teenagers. I believe in the power of theatre for teenage audiences. *Sugarland*, the play I wrote, has some very full-on themes and I was under pressure to take some things out or minimise them, but I said no because theatre provides teenagers something very immediate and very real."

## Life explodes

They say that into every life a little rain must fall and in 2012 Coopes experienced a storm. As she explains, "I found myself pregnant and separated, which was the last place on Earth I wanted to be, having come from a single-parent home and watching how hard

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*“Time on the yoga mat should be getting curious about who and what you are.”*

my mum had to work. It was very painful for everyone involved — a relationship falling apart when you are pregnant and all the things that go with that.”

Then in March 2013, she gave birth to her son and he had reflux, which meant he didn't sleep for the first 18 months of his life. Coopes remembers, “For 18 months I didn't sleep longer than 45-minute cycles. I was back on stage, because I had to be — I was the breadwinner — when he was four months of age, touring with *Play School*, doing live shows in Canberra in the middle of winter, with a baby waking up every 45 minutes next to me. It was tough.”

It was the support of family and friends but also yoga that got her through this time. “Having done yoga practice for so long, I had a strong sense of faith that in the end things would be OK. I couldn't actually see it, I couldn't picture it, however, I had this gentle faith that if you act with integrity, are kind, work hard and don't stay in victim mode, taking responsibility for everything that is happening, that everything will be OK.”

### The yogic philosopher

Coopes has been practising yoga for more than two decades and is an experienced teacher. When she talks about yoga she does so with depth and passion. She explains, “Time on the yoga mat should be getting curious about who and what you are. We start to get glimpses of where we are in a pose. If you are someone who always pushes when a pose gets uncomfortable, what happens if you just free up the breath? Or if you are someone who always pulls back and you don't believe you are strong enough, then what happens if you do hold for another breath and get stronger? Then you get these glimpses of ‘There I am’ beneath all of the ‘stuff’ in your



mind. It's this sense of soul, of connecting, a microsecond where you just know you.

“My teacher's teacher, my *paramaguru*, Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati, used to say, ‘Yoga is the experience where nothing is missing.’ That's the glimpse you get. Nothing is missing; you are not hungry for anything; you don't need to be anyone or anywhere else. I've lessened my attachment to enlightenment being this point in my life where everything is as it should be. It's the glimpses that it is all about.”

If you find yourself yearning for the glimpses yoga can offer you but feel daunted at the prospect of starting a yoga practice, Coopes has some reassuring advice. “The thing I love about yoga is that, whether you are a person whose knee is up around your ear, or whether you are a person whose knee is on the ground, you are both feeling the same thing. There is the same degree of discomfort, no matter where your body is in space. No matter how stiff you think you are, we are all feeling the same thing. That's the beauty of *asana*. The genius of the science of *asana* is that, if you progress in this lifetime, there's always going to be another physical pose to give you so you can keep discovering who you are. The poses themselves are not the point and are not the goal. They are just the vehicle through which you start to move your body.”

I express a small trepidation that some poses may be way beyond me, but Coopes smiles and says, “There is always a way into a pose. There is no way that anyone actually can't do a pose. Any good, experienced teacher will know how to give you the experience of feeling what you should be feeling in that pose. Turning up to the studio, parking the car, dealing with childcare, spending time on the yoga mat instead of spending time with your partner — that's the challenging bit. Once you are on the mat, if you have a good teacher, you are just doing what everyone else is doing no matter how experienced they are.”



Coopes has said, “Storytelling is my passion and my work. Yoga is my life.” I ask her what the distinction is here and she answers calmly, “For me yoga happens in every moment of every day. Storytelling is my creative world. Yoga refuels me in a very different way to creativity. My *dharma*, my purpose, I can see now, is to be a yogi and to share that with people. How that manifests is often in storytelling but not always. If I had to choose between storytelling and yoga, my answer is that I wouldn't. I can't.”

Among her many projects there is no shortage of future options for Coopes and she describes herself as content but not passively so. “I'm very content,” she says. “Contentment is a liberating place that doesn't mean there is no desire for change, but the only plan is to stay aware and conscious.”

As always, a textual reference is there to support her philosophy. Effortlessly, Coopes continues, “The *Bhagavad Gita* opens with a conversation between God and Arjuna, who represents us, everyday man. On the battlefield Arjuna has a panic attack. He's saying, ‘I don't want to fight.’ and God, Krishna, says, ‘Well, you have to fight. You're a warrior, but ... I will teach you yoga.’

That's the whole idea of detachment and being OK with what is. I don't see it as a passive position to take. I see it as being that if you want to change your life that's OK but you were brought to this place, this moment in time by all the previous decisions you have made. You are here; you are on the battlefield. You might not want to go into battle, but you can't just walk away and surrender from your life. Krishna saying ‘I'm going to teach you yoga’ is saying ‘Let's get a yogic mind’. What is a yogic mind? It's clarity. Let's get clear on who and what you are and what you want. Then you can formulate what you want from your life.”

Connect with Rachael Coopes on Instagram @rachaelcoopes or at rachaelcoopes.com.