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Parting shot

When Chelsie Preston Crayford made a film inspired by her relationship break-up, it became a family affair. **by SARAH CATHERALL**

photograph DEAN O'GORMAN

Chelsie Preston Crayford: taps break-up pain in her second self-directed short.



It may be only 13 minutes long, but Chelsie Preston Crayford has poured a lot of herself into her latest movie. She wrote it. She directed it. She cast her daughter, Olive Crayford Edwards, in it – something her mother, esteemed director Gaylene Preston, did to her regularly over the years.

The film, *Falling Up*, charts a young mother's break-up with her partner, something Preston Crayford did not too long ago. "The danger was that the film would become public therapy, and I never had any interest in that," she says.

Still, the 31-year-old says it was a film she needed to make, and the theme – about holding on and letting go – is universal.

Her ex and Olive's father, cinematographer Ray Edwards, shot the film. "To be honest, I couldn't have made this film without Ray. It would feel wrong to make the film without him and without his blessing," she says.

Edwards was her ex of two months when she told him about her idea. He surprised her by saying he wanted to shoot it.

"I was unsure," she says, her bright eyes darkening. "But then I thought, 'Who better to capture this intimacy between a mother and a daughter but her dad?' It's such a testament to him that he was willing to do that, and that he wanted to help make it happen. He wanted to be a part of the telling of it."

"Ray is a film-maker, so there is a level of creative respect. We were able to separate our personal and creative lives. It was also fun, which is a weird thing to say."

A graduate of Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School, Preston has been acting professionally since her late teens. Her credits include an award-winning role in Aussie crime series *Underbelly: Razor* and parts in her mother's *Hope and Wire* and *Home for Christmas*. She spent some of her childhood on sets while her mother made *Bread & Roses*, about unionist Sonja Davies, and comedy-drama *Ruby and Rata*.

Preston says her daughter is an intuitive actor and director. "Sometimes I really like what Chels does, and she says, 'Oh, that's just a mother talking.' But how she comes at things is really interesting."

"With *Falling Up* – I'd think this whether she was my daughter or not – there is something elemental in that short film that sums up a whole experience that so many of us have been through. It expresses it clearly, emotionally and simply, and also presents a psychological and intellectual path to somewhere else."



Olive Crayford Edwards (Marama) and Chelsie Preston Crayford (Ra) in *Falling Up*.

“Narratives about break-ups in the mainstream largely oversimplify things ... We are conditioned to think that he is the baddie.”

Falling Up is Preston Crayford's second self-directed short, following 2013's *Here Now*. This one had its challenges. She says she struggled as an actor to return to the pain that had inspired the story. "I don't usually hold back as an actor, but I had to

do pick-up shoots [extra filming] because I could see I was holding back. Normally, you have the barrier of a character or someone else's writing, but I didn't have that."

There is little exposition in the poignant film as viewers watch mother Ra (Preston Crayford) caring for her daughter, Marama (Olive), in the aftermath of the relationship break-up with Sam (Anton Tennet).

Viewers watch scenes from everyday domestic life – Ra putting Marama to bed, feeding her and watching her playing, while her ex pops in and out of their lives.

Although a break-up forms the basis of the film, Preston Crayford says it is not the true story of hers, and could be anyone's. "I wasn't interested in going into details, but I was interested in the emotion of the time, and the tension of holding on and letting go."

"I wanted to show the complexity of the situation. Narratives about break-ups in the mainstream largely oversimplify things ... We are conditioned to think that *he* is the baddie, but relationship break-ups are way more complex than that."

"It gives voice to an experience that I know is common but isn't often depicted. There's a break-up, and then spending days with a toddler, which can be a lot of things at the same time – it can be joyous, and it can be relentless. You have this

as a mother when there's very little room for yourself as a person ... I was interested in exploring that."

Preston Crayford's future projects include appearing in *The Bad Seed*, a television adaptation of Charlotte Grimshaw's novels *The Night Book* and *Soon*.

"I feel like I'm going to work when I'm working on other people's projects. Writing is so hard, but you feel great when you get it right. Directing is such a lot of fun." ■

Falling Up screens in the NZ International Film Festival's NZ's Best 2018 short film competition in Auckland, July 28 and 30; Wellington August 1-2.