

The call came when Miranda Otto was doing a photo shoot in Los Angeles. "My agent said, 'Steven Spielberg wants to see you.' I thought, 'It's got to be a joke.'" Three months pregnant, Otto assumed she would be unable to accept the role. "Steven was one of the first people I had to tell. 'Oh,' he said. 'Actually, it would be quite good if the character was pregnant. We'll change it in the script.'" Two months later, Otto was starring opposite Tom Cruise in the \$200-million *War Of The Worlds*, an adaptation of the H. G. Wells literary classic.

Fast-track ahead eight months and it is a sunny Friday in June, the first day Otto has spent away from Darcey, her nine-week-old daughter, whom she clearly adores. Her husband of two years, actor Peter O'Brien, is looking after the baby with, she hopes, enough "expressed milk" to last the day. "Darcey's in good hands," she says serenely. "I miss being with her but I'm calm with it. Why should I be stressed?"

A popular misconception of Otto is that she is flaky and dreamy but what is striking is her flawless composure. "I am very organised. I like things to run well." He father, veteran actor Barry Otto, agrees. "She's meticulous, a girl who always wrote herself notes and still has lists of things that have to be done. And she gets them done."

Dressed in a black skirt and cardigan, a scraggly pastel scarf thrown around her neck, Otto's look is understated, almost careless – more first-time mum than Hollywood actor. Nonetheless, with her foaming strawberry-blond hair and pale jade eyes,

the 37-year-old possesses a startling beauty. There is a depth of vulnerability to her, a quality at odds with her considered, intelligent answers. She is self-effacing, surprisingly so, given an acting career that has spanned two decades, beginning with *Emma's War*, when she was 17, to her breakthrough role as Eowyn, the warrior princess in the second and third *Lord Of The Rings* films. "I get more luck than I probably deserve," she says of her role in *War Of The Worlds* (which opens on Thursday).

Her part as Mary Ann, ex-wife of Ray (Cruise), in *Worlds*, is not huge but it's "an incredible break to be in a Spielberg film. I feel very proud of that." Otto found Cruise to be "a real gentleman, very courteous, very kind" and a sharp contrast to the frosty persona often portrayed in the media. Spielberg was "very calm, nurturing ... paternal and friendly [who] likes to play a lot". "It was a nice, easy job," says Otto. "Nothing crazy."

Off screen, Otto is neither an operator nor ruthlessly ambitious. She won't take "tough bitch" roles – she says it's hard to relate to characters "without any vulnerability" – and she finds Hollywood a challenge, "living in that hothouse environment, always being around actors and everyone talking about who is doing what role". She half laughs. "I'm not thick-skinned enough. I admire the people who have stuck it out. They deserve it."

Unlike her NIDA sisters – Toni Collette, Cate Blanchett – Otto has never lived in Los Angeles and when she's not working, she gets "really bored there". She likes Sydney too much, with its

breakfasts by Bronte Beach on a Sunday morning and dinner with Dad at home. Her decision to travel back and forth suggests both an uneasy relationship with stardom and a sensible streak of self-preservation. "It is the typical thing that you are hot one minute and then you are not. It's nicer to keep some kind of median."

Brought up in Brisbane, Otto lived briefly in Hong Kong with her actress mother, Lindsay, after her parents divorced in 1973, before settling in Newcastle, north of Sydney. She excelled academically and pursued ballet for many years, ultimately switching to acting (via a brief flirtation with medicine). "I wanted to be a soloist but I have a slight scoliosis and realised that in dance you have to be physically perfect." Besides, she says, "I wasn't content in the corps de ballet. You don't get to be centre stage." Her father's influence was undoubtedly profound. "He always gives 110 per cent."

Otto is discerning about where she devotes her energy. Rather than capitalising on her international profile from *Lord Of The Rings*, she declined to run for a part in a Hollywood film, opting instead to play Mrs Hurtle in the BBC miniseries *The Way We Live Now*. She won't say which film it was – "it wasn't huge but a decent film." There are "lots of things" she has gone for and "would have loved to have got". Among them would be the female lead in *Being John Malkovich*, which she lost – only just – to Cameron Diaz. Yet there is no hint of green-eye, rather wistfulness. "I wish I could muster it. Sometimes I feel very confident and at other times I don't."

THE WORLD OF MIRANDA OTTO

Photography Peter Brew Bevan

Don't confuse her outward serenity with dreaminess. Home-grown Hollywood actress Miranda Otto has a successful career – 20 years and counting – plus the dual roles of wife and mother. Now she's sharing the screen with Tom Cruise. As Claire Scobie discovers, that takes determination and focus.

Otto is sitting in the make-up chair in a Sydney photographic studio, preparing for this shoot. Dotti, the make-up artist, unzips Otto's suede boots and begins painting her toenails. "My nails haven't had much attention recently," Otto murmurs. Hardly surprising given her commitments as mother, actor, wife. How does she fit everything in? "Brrggghhh," Otto blows out a sigh. "I don't know how I am going to juggle it. It's going to be a day-by-day thing." She pauses. "It's like getting married. It makes you reprioritise everything. When I got married, I would turn things down because I thought it was more important to be here to make sure..." – she hesitates, wary of saying too much – "...my relationship works rather than always saying yes to everything."

This is not how the majority of celebrated actresses operate. In an industry fuelled by ego and money, it's not fashionable to talk about sacrificing anything for one's child or spouse. If you are famous and wealthy – last year, Otto earned about \$1.4 million and ranked No. 49 on *BRW* magazine's list of Australia's 50 Richest Entertainers – you hire a nanny and get back to work.

"There are things that I can't do and Pete can't do because of our relationship and because of having a baby. That's just life. If something is worth doing, we make the sacrifice to be away from each other." When Otto went to Namibia in November 2003 for *Flight Of The Phoenix*, an action flick (opening next month) in which she stars opposite Dennis Quaid and Giovanni Ribisi, O'Brien went, too. It was hard, she says, "because he couldn't work". →





From top *The Well* (1997); *Dead Letter Office* (1998); *In The Winter Dark* (1998) with Richard Roxburgh; *A Doll's House* (2002) with Peter O'Brien; *The Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers* (2002).

Miranda's...

Greatest fear "Drowning. I nearly drowned when I was about five. Luckily, my parents rescued me. But I have a terrible fear of water."

Greatest indulgence "Chocolate. Sugar – that's my biggest vice. And taking time to just be lazy."

Perfect Sunday "Those that just roll on, when you don't have anything you have to do. Often my dad and Sue [Hill, his partner] come over to see Darcey and we go for a walk."

Personal motto "When I was at high school, I was about to quit ballet when I went past a church. It said, 'Winners never quit. Quitters never win.' I think perseverance is important. You don't get anywhere if you stop trying."

Mentor "Robyn Nevin because she's a fantastic actress and director, who is now running her own theatre company. She's kept pushing herself. She's intelligent and very strong."

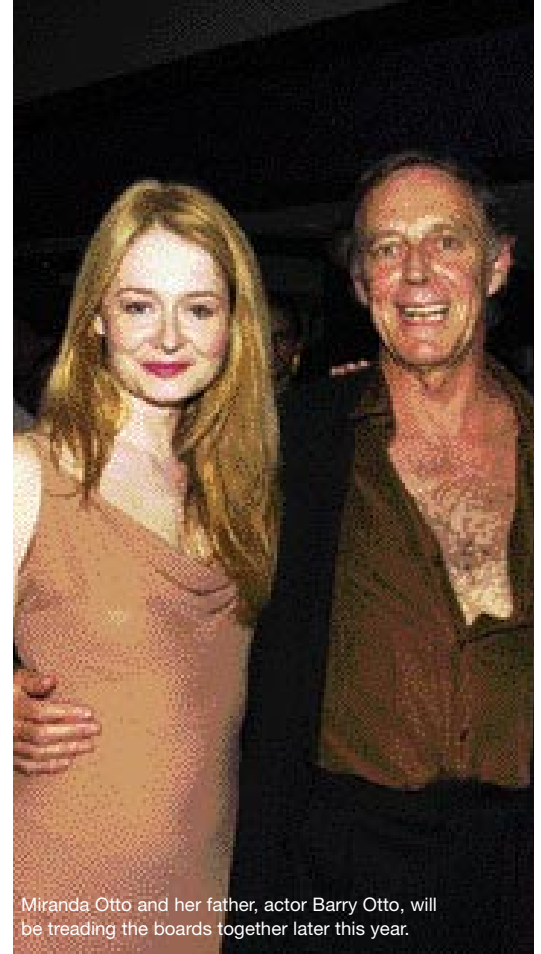
Dream role "A lawyer. That's not necessarily a dream role but someone who has an intellectual rather than an emotional line. A complex character, with as many contradictions as possible."

But the film business is reasonably flexible for new mothers. "You just have to be more careful about what roles you choose. It would be hard to do a lead role until [Darcey] is a bit older because the hours are long – 12- to 16-hour days." And if the option arises to take Darcey on set with O'Brien, would she go? "Absolutely. I don't mind not working."

In a *Sun-Herald* interview three years ago, Otto complained about the "aching loneliness" that accompanied her job. Her high-profile relationship with actor Richard Roxburgh, which began after they starred together in 1997's *Doing Time For Patsy Cline*, ended in 2000 because, rumour has it, of extended periods apart. It would seem she has learned from experience. These days, she says, "it is a strain having to work away" but it does help that she and her husband are in the same profession. "I don't think anybody else would put up with it."

When Otto gave birth, O'Brien was in Texas filming the supernatural thriller *Revolver*. "We made that decision." She pauses. "It was unfortunate that it didn't work out like we wanted it to. It was hard not being together. But harder on him." Media reports that he watched the birth on webcam were "not true. I don't know where that came from". Otto chose the name Darcey with O'Brien some weeks later – the name has nothing to do with *Pride And Prejudice*. "If anything, it is from [the dancer] Darcey Bussell."

Wearing a Collette Dinnigan ruched dress, in rose chiffon with fuchsia dots, Otto reclines on a sofa for the shoot. Her skin is translucent, her lips in a gentle



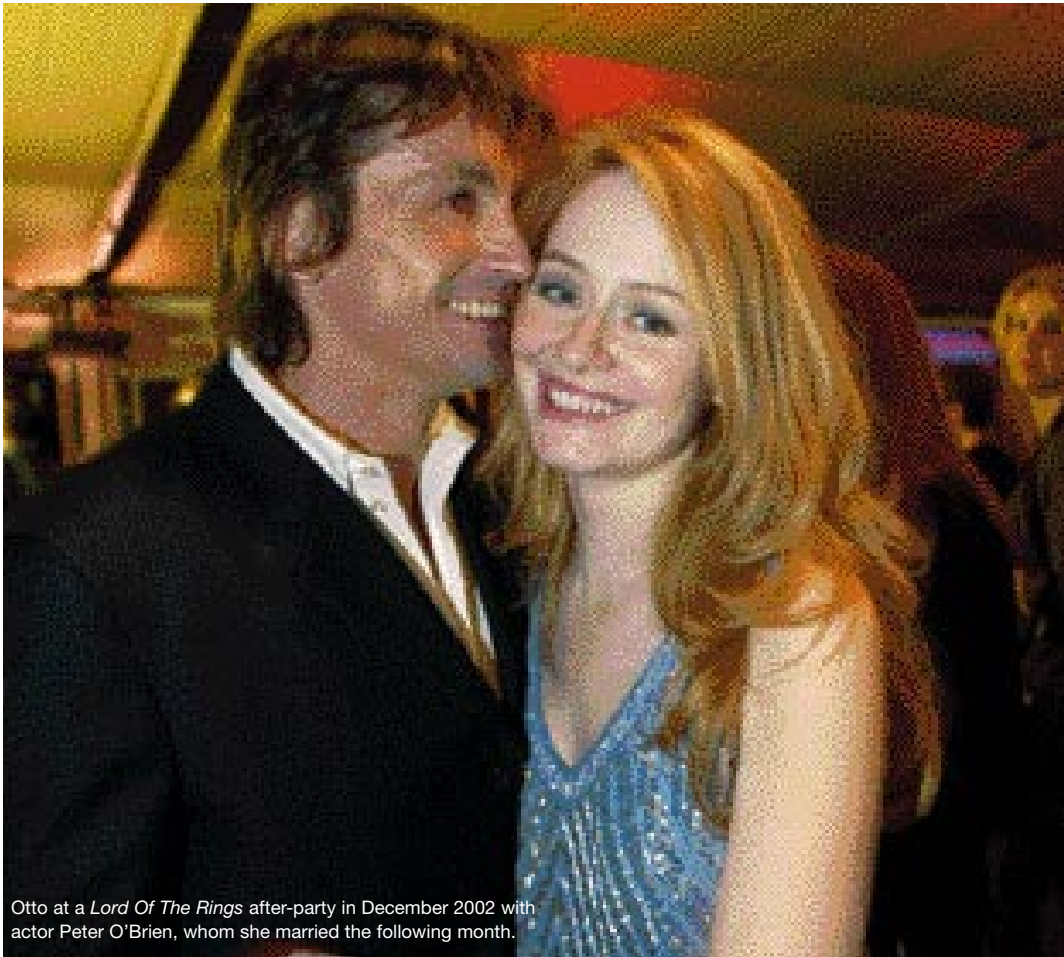
Miranda Otto and her father, actor Barry Otto, will be treading the boards together later this year.

pout. The scene is reminiscent of a shot from the extended version of *The Return Of The King*, the last *Rings* instalment, in which princess Eowyn is sleeping on a chaise longue.

Her mobile rings. It's O'Brien. Having drunk all the milk, "the baby is hungry and having formula for the first time". Collette Dinnigan, whose summer collection is being shot in a studio next door, wanders in, holding Estella, her 10-month-old baby. The pair discuss feeding dilemmas. At no point does Otto's serenity seem ruffled. "They are getting bigger by the minute," she quips, giving her breasts a gentle squeeze.

Otto remains fiercely private but when asked if there was an immediate connection on meeting O'Brien, she gives a deep, fruity laugh. They met in early 2002 at an audition for the Henrik Ibsen play *A Doll's House* at the Sydney Theatre Company. Robyn Nevin, the artistic director, had lured Otto back from Britain to play Nora Helmer, the wife, and O'Brien was going for the part of Torvald, the husband. "I immediately felt on meeting Pete that he would be really good in the role. He had a strong sex appeal, which the role needed. But it was from an objective point of view at that stage." She smiles. "We spent a lot of time trying not to like each other because we both didn't believe in getting involved with people we were working with. So we didn't get into anything romantic until, basically, it was finished."

"There was no sense at all that there was anything between them during the two-month show," recalls Nevin. Less than a year later, on January 1, 2003,



Otto at a *Lord Of The Rings* after-party in December 2002 with actor Peter O'Brien, whom she married the following month.

they were married at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. Was it a romantic proposal? "I am not very good at these personal questions." Otto throws a cautionary look. "To be honest with you, it wasn't a proposal. It was something we knew almost immediately when we got together, that we would get married." Like an unspoken understanding? "Yes. I mean, we did speak about it but it was so obvious, it was..." She searches for the right word. "Seamless."

Ironically, perhaps, Ibsen's play chronicles the breakdown of an unhappy marriage where husband and wife act out roles. "It is relevant to today. There are a lot of people who are in relationships where, like the characters in that play, they are acting out roles for each other," says Otto. "I found the play really, really sad. In the end, they realise they have missed each other."

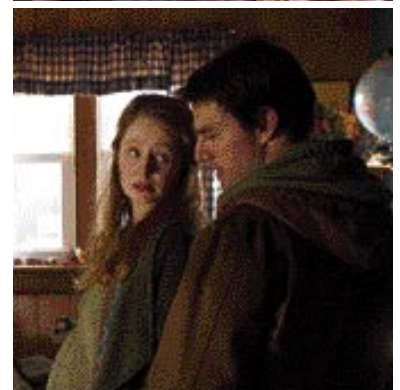
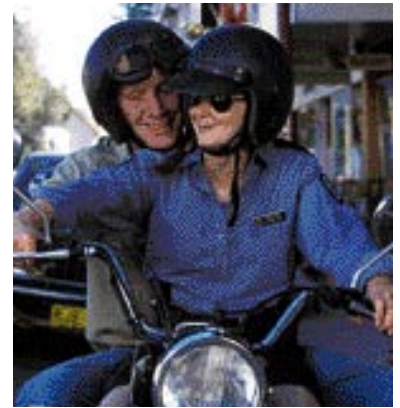
Is that something she has experienced? "Um. I think I have had experience of trying to ... how could I put it? I suppose I've been guilty of giving in to other people's ways and trying to fit in with a person in a relationship and not standing my own ground. Not being a doll so much but being very malleable." Is that all in the past? "I don't think you can say, 'Well, I'll never do that again.' It's not just in a relationship that you find you are trying to please people or not be as honest about yourself."

Otto has said that in her 20s, she felt "pushed around" and "pigeonholed" into younger-looking roles of "innocent, dreamy, pre-Raphaelite characters" and came close to quitting. In 1995, she decided if she didn't get one of six parts, it

would be "a sign" to do something else. Fortunately, she was offered a lead in *Love Serenade*, which went on to win the Camera d'Or at Cannes and Otto a Film Critics Circle of Australia nomination for Best Actress in 1997. Around that time, her luck changed and she appeared in a string of Australian films: *The Well*, *Doing Time For Patsy Cline*, *True Love And Chaos*. Did her relationship with Roxburgh help? She bristles, briefly. "I think I was more high profile than him at that time. I don't mean in terms of body of work but in terms of magazine exposure. I don't feel like I was climbing on his train."

Nor did she climb on her father's. With the exception of a brief scene in the film *Dead Letter Office*, father and daughter have never acted together. But now, it is fitting that Miranda's first post-baby work is to play opposite Barry in a thriller, *Boy Gets Girl*, at the Sydney Theatre Company in October. She plays a tough publishing editor, he a maker of soft-porn movies. She giggles delightedly. "I thought, 'Oh God, I hope Dad doesn't get offended'" because the character is much older than her father. "I envisaged playing something like *Uncle Vanya*, a delicate piece, where Dad would play my uncle," she says, "rather than him play someone loosely based on [B-grade movie director] Russ Meyer."

With three months of rehearsals and performances and little Darcey in tow – an acting dynasty under one roof – Miranda is not sure how she will cope. She gives a theatrical sigh. "But I have to go back to work because you just do, at some stage." ●



From top *Danny Deckchair* (2003); *Flight Of The Phoenix* (2004) with Dennis Quaid; *In My Father's Den* (2004); *Through My Eyes* (2004); *War Of The Worlds* (2005) with Tom Cruise.