

She is known for being the youngest in a famous family, but budding actor and director Gracie Otto has plans to change that. Angus Fontaine tries to keep up with the latest girl around town.

# Blonde

## ambition

Photography by Peter Brew-Bevan

**S**lim. Blonde. Long. Blue. Soprano. So Gracie Otto's resume reads. Truth is, that ain't the half of her. She's also proficient in the disparate disciplines of clarinet and French, is dangerously adept at boxing, surfing and snowboarding, was a state softball player and represented Australia and NSW in futsal (indoor soccer). Did we mention her break-glass-in-case-of-emergency ability to play a recorder through her nose?

Otto might be fresh out of film school, but dizzying forecasts for her future abound. Acclaimed director Gillian Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career*, *Oscar And Lucinda*) hails her "energy, passion and talent", while Ben Ferris, executive director of Sydney Film School, says, "Gracie is an extremely ambitious, motivated, focused, charismatic and talented director. She's on a fast path to somewhere special."

Turns out Otto knows it, too. Today, she rolls up to Sydney's Centennial Parklands Cafe in a dusty, rusty, totally bombed-out but still chic midnight-blue 1960 Mercedes and lolly-legs it over in a splay of angled limbs and rosella-red lipstick. It's true what her father, actor Barry Otto, says: "Gracie looks like Grace Kelly and walks like John Wayne." But there's a little black dress in the boot "for emergencies" and a "highly stressed" phone charger snaking across the back seat. Such are the twin talismans of Gracie Otto.

Fixing me with the startling ice-blue orbs that echo the mad-but-beautiful intensity of her father, the Sydney-born 21-year-old presses "GO" on G.Otto and lets fly. Her incessant flitting includes her athletics career ("If I'd stuck to one sport I could've

been the best"); her book aversion ("I've hardly ever read a book in my life - I'm a visual learner"); her clumsiness ("I'm a smart person, but when it comes to simple tasks I'm a dope"); her rich-kid radar ("I wanted to be a private-school girl but Mum thought I'd be a snob, which I would've been"); her pain cravings ("I've got no scars, no piercings, no tattoos. I've never broken bones... but I've always wanted to"); even her famously bad dancing ("I have my own beat - it's scarily woeful").

But Otto's eyes tell a different story, one of a bloodline bearing closer scrutiny. Her father Barry is a beloved veteran of stage and screen and star of *Cosi*, *Strictly Ballroom* and, most recently, *Australia*. Her mother is Sue Hill, a founder of Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre and the staging boffin behind Schools Spectacular, the world's biggest youth variety event. Otto's half-sister is Miranda Otto, the flame-haired siren who made her name in Australian indie classics such as *Love Serenade* before hitting it big in blockbusters *The Lord Of The Rings* and *War Of The Worlds* and marrying another actor, Peter O'Brien.

Which makes Gracie Otto a thespian thoroughbred. Not that she likes talking about it. "This always comes up in interviews," she growls. "I've always loved being Barry's daughter and Miranda's sister and I'm proud of their success. The downside is that I get negatively geared in the comparison - if I wasn't an Otto, my performances would get scaled up a lot more."

Maybe that's why older brother Eddie doesn't act (instead he's an all-rounder in Sydney first-grade cricket) and why Otto palely loiters on the fringe of

the big time. Hell, even the house Otto grew up in and still calls home - a rambling inner-city manor replete with marble fireplaces and coachman's quarters circa 1885 - has star power. The house was used in *Monkey Grip*, the classic 1982 Aussie film based on the Helen Garner novel. As father Barry gleefully points out to visitors, "Colin Friels and Noni Hazlehurst had sex in our bay window!"

Otto's first exposure to her gene pool's predisposition was the sight of her father riotously nude on the Belvoir stage in Patrick White's *Night On Bald Mountain*. Something clicked, she recalls. "I've been around theatres since I was a baby, but that was the moment I remember thinking, 'Riiight, so this is what Dad does.'"

Her own stage debut came aged eight in a spooky mobile phone ad. "A young couple are hopelessly lost in a country town and they see this crazy old man, played by Dad, who gives them directions. But everyone, even the dog, has Dad's face. Finally, they meet this little girl - it's me with Dad's face superimposed on mine. Pretty freaky, right?"

Uh-huh. Big sis solicited Otto's second gig. "Miranda used to fly me over to wherever she was working - Italy, America, wherever. When I was 14, it was New Zealand for *The Lord Of The Rings*. I got decked out as a Gondorian with a wig and robes and everything. If you watch the massive coronation scene at the very end of the trilogy, you'll see me right up the back, not really caring."

Although she hobnobs at family barbies with the likes of Judy Davis and Peter Carey, it's clear →

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Hair and make-up: Natashia Savonno, Sydney; Emily McGregor; Gracie Otto wears Michelle Robinson shirt; Marnie Sullings bodysuit; Sassi & Blake jeans; vintage hat from Grandma; Tasso A. Tippo; Bicycle courtesy of Centennial Parklands Cycle Hire

