

Profile



LOYAL: Pana Hema-Taylor plays the best friend of dying Michael (Matt Whelan) in his new film.

It's all gangbusters

Life is good for Pana Hema-Taylor, playing a loyal pal in an upcoming Kiwi film and buffing up for more *Spartacus* action.

GANGS OR acting? At 17, Pana Hema-Taylor chose the latter, and he's glad he did. The Wairoa kid groomed for the Mongrel Mob ended up moving to Christchurch in his teens and catching the acting bug from inspirational Aranui High drama teacher Robert Gilbert. Now 22, Hema-Taylor has appeared in hit film *Boy*, Sunday Theatre production *Nights In The Gardens Of Spain*, and hugely popular TV show *Spartacus*, where he played core character Nasir, an escaped slave-turned-rebel.

This Thursday his latest film, *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying*, hits the big screen. The knockout local drama is the story of hedonistic Hamiltonian Michael (*Go Girls'* Matt Whelan) who, on learning he has terminal cancer, steals the \$200,000 raised for experimental treatment and flies to Europe, determined to live his final weeks in a haze of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.

Hema-Taylor brings an endearing combination of softness and strength to the role of David, Michael's loyal best mate. "Pana combines youthful energy and compelling screen presence with vulnerability and wisdom beyond his years," raves debut director Kirstin Marcon.

"Throughout the shooting process I found Pana's insights into David and the script blew me away."

Filming took place in New Zealand and Europe. Did a trip to Monaco, Berlin and Munich entice him? "Secretly, yes, but it was more the strength of the script, Michael and David's really believable relationship, and getting the chance to play a good guy for once, rather than just bad boys," he admits. "I'm a sucker for love stories, too."

His own ain't bad.

When he met his partner Danielle Cormack in 2009, she was the costume/set designer for a play he was acting in.

"I think she quite liked that I had no idea who she was. I just thought she was a beautiful woman. Then one of my mates told me she was an actress so I Googled her and was like 'wow, she's a New Zealand idol'. We were friends for a long time first."

Cormack, 41, is in Sydney with their 2-year-old son Te Ahi Ka to film TV show *Rake*. The devoted dad can't be there as he is at *Spartacus* boot camp in Auckland, buffing up for season four.

"We go where the work is. We're sort of gypsies



FAMILY: Pana Hema Taylor and Danielle Cormack.

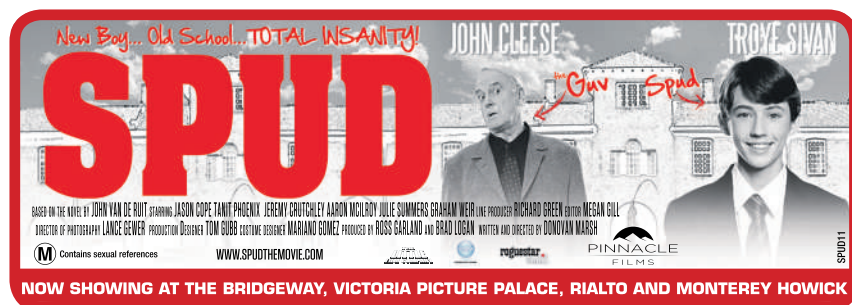
at the moment." Yes, being apart is "always hard", but he Skypes his family nightly, "singing my baby boy to sleep".

Whanau means everything to Hema-Taylor, who'd ideally like more kids, "but things are happening and doors are opening. I had no idea things would go so well, I really didn't. I was just saying yes to stuff I liked, to challenges." Career hopes? "Getting really great scripts and roles, maybe getting to Hollywood."

Many teenagers, especially from his hometown of Wairoa, see him as a role model. "I'm just starting to notice that, so I'm watching what I'm doing these days. I think about it quite a bit, and I don't take it lightly."

Sarah Lang

The Most Fun You Can Have Dying is in cinemas from Thursday.



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