

Actor Matt Whelan is tall. Just over 190cm. Even sitting across from him, my gaze lifts to match his eye level. We're at his local cafe, around the corner from his flat in Devonport, where he's held in pretty good stead: When I realise I've forgotten my wallet the barista says my tea is "on the house", and by way of explanation, nods towards Whelan saying, "He's a regular here." Good to know.

Somehow, despite his stature, Whelan, 27, blends in. I get the feeling he'd blend in anywhere; adapt to any surroundings. He wears a checked trilby-style hat, a plain black jacket and a grey grandpa button-down tee.

GO BOY

Best known as Brad in TV2's *Go Girls*, **Matt Whelan** is about to appear in a challenging lead movie role. **Sarah Murray** talks to an actor on the rise.

Soul music blares from the speakers and Whelan really does look like he's in a scene from a movie. He's got movie star good looks, too. Dark dishevelled hair, dark eyes, thick black eyebrows and a distinct five o'clock shadow covering his squared dimpled chin. When he smiles, more dimples get sucked into place on his cheeks.

He speaks slowly, rhythmically, with long pauses. The tempo quickens when he gets excited or talks about something that interests him – like his new film – and he jiggles ever so slightly on his chair.

Best known as Brad Caulfield from TV2's *Go Girls*, Whelan is the lead in local film *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying*, which is to be released on April 26. Written and directed by Kirstin Marcon, it is based on the novel *Seraphim Blues* by Steven Gannaway.

"This was my first opportunity to really drive a film," says Whelan. "It's a huge step. I was nervous at first, reading the script, because I knew it was a very challenging role and because I knew it was going to be challenging to pull off."

Whelan plays Michael, a young guy diagnosed with a terminal illness. When his community in Hamilton raises \$200,000 for experimental treatment, Michael runs off with the money and has an incredible time overseas instead. It is in Europe that he meets a French drifter (played by *Gossip Girl*'s Roxane Mesquida) and falls in love.

London, Paris, Berlin, and Venice – you name a romantic European city and they were there. Criss-crossing across the globe, Whelan and the tight-knit crew of 12 filmed the overseas part of the film in a snow-blanketed Europe – said to be experiencing its coldest temperatures in 150 years. Whelan and Mesquida had to wear sleeping-bag style coats between takes, their makeup froze to their faces and eventually they were snowed in while in Venice, forcing them to rearrange a planned stop in Hong Kong. It was fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants filming at its best.

"We had like a skeleton crew and were just able to pull out the camera on a whim and start shooting a

The Most Fun You Can Have Dying





scene,” he says excitedly. “One day we were on our downtime and Kirstin turned up and stood there for a second and said, ‘Do you guys... wanna shoot something? We’ve seen something cool.’ So we were like, ‘Yip, sweet, we’re up for it.’ It was just really impulsive and fresh and fun.”

If Whelan wasn’t an actor he might have been a basketball player. His father was a New Zealand captain, and his grandfather also played for the national team. But even though he too had a love of the sport, he really didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life following high school.

Brought up in Christchurch, the son of two school teachers, Whelan was always told, “Don’t ever become a teacher.” Although drama was his favourite subject at Christchurch’s Lincoln High, he opted to pursue a career in radio, moving to Nelson to start a course at NMIT (after failing Bursary English and missing out on his first choice of broadcasting school in his home town). During that year his path shifted. Approached by some friends from the film school to act in their short films, he merely thought he’d give it a go. And that, as they say, was it.

“I was just really drawn to it,” he says about acting. “And I enjoyed it. I just loved that I could be in somebody else’s life, I guess. That I could inhabit someone else’s shoes. That’s still one of the main things I really love today about acting – experiencing as many different lives as possible.”

From Nelson, Whelan moved back to Christchurch to learn the trade at the Hagley Theatre Company. Realising he’d finally found his calling, he applied and got in to Toi Whakaari Drama School in Wellington.

Fast forward three years to 2007, when Whelan graduated and started filming *Show of Hands* (a film about a competition where the entrants had to keep their hands on a Land Rover to win) in New Plymouth. The next year he landed his part as Brad in *Go Girls*. It was a role that propelled him to his next as James in *My Wedding and Other Secrets*. That film by Roseanne Liang was loosely based on her documentary *Banana in a Nutshell*, about her early relationship with her now husband Stephen.

“I auditioned along with everyone else. But I think I just fitted the role in Roseanne’s mind of what she wanted – physically we’re [Whelan and Liang’s husband] very much alike. I mean, her neighbour even mistook me for her husband one day,” he says, laughing.

But Whelan did have one card up his sleeve – he

Photographs: Peter Meecham, supplied





My Wedding and Other Secrets

spoke Mandarin, a subject that at school he held on par with drama. Speaking a tiny bit of the language in the film was a prerequisite so, although rusty, Whelan cunningly walked into the audition and said in his borrowed tongue: “Hi. My name is Matt. I am six-foot-three.” Whether it was his looks or savvy, it certainly gave him a point of difference.

But has it all just been a bit of luck? “Um,” he takes a sip of his long black and pauses. “I think it’s a bit of both. I think there’s always a bit of luck in this industry – or a lot. But I also think hard work pays off. You really have to have the luck to have the two align,” he finally says.

Whelan’s stars do seem to be aligned. Since finishing Toi Whakaari, he has had an almost constant flow of work, not to mention the awards and accolades. In 2010 he won a Qantas Media Award for Best Performance by a Supporting Actor for his role in *Go Girls*, and last year was nominated for an AFTA award (losing out to Rawiri Paratene).

As for hard work – his process as an actor seems studious to the point of obsessive, drawing on everything he’s learnt from drama school to anything he’s ever heard of actors doing. “I do my character lists. With Michael in this film I would write down everything that was an incontrovertible fact. Anything that says something like, ‘Michael picks up a cup’ – that’s a fact. No matter how small or how trivial they



Old Brad (with co-star Alix Bushnell as Britta)

appear, I write it down.”

He follows that list with things he says about himself. The next list is what he says about others. And finally, a list about what others say about his character. He also finds songs and pictures that express particular feelings of the character. “I’m a very visual person. So in my folder I would stick pictures of people that I felt had similar energies to the character.”

Folder? “Yeah I take my folder everywhere, on the plane, everywhere. The images become part of the whole process as well. I could open the folder and feel a fresh sense of inspiration.

“I really worked my ass off – I also read the script countless times. That’s a huge thing for me. I read it as much as possible, so I really didn’t have to think about it on the day. It was just kind of *in* me by the time I started shooting.”

Go Girls co-star Alix Bushnell, who plays Britta and was in the year below Whelan at Toi Whakaari, says “he’s one of the most hard-working actors” she’s ever met. She also says he’s always been a great comedic actor. “When you’re in your third year at Toi, you have to do a solo performance. Matt’s was hilarious. I vaguely remember it involving a step ladder and him pretending to be God. There were fits of laughter in the audience.”

The current season of *Go Girls* has seen Whelan’s character not only take over the lead narration but also



New Brad

undergo a complete personality transformation, from an awkward banker to a suave and sophisticated bar owner. Bushnell thinks the change highlights what a strong actor Whelan is. “That was quite a diverse thing to do and he just did it effortlessly. It was such a wonderful transformation. He is absolutely a chameleon.”

“I can totally imagine him making it really big – especially in Australia or America. He’s got the looks, the talent and the drive. And now he’s got the body of work to launch from. The world is his oyster really.”

When I tell Whelan people are throwing around the word ‘chameleon’, he looks genuinely surprised and sits upright at the table.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he says, nodding. “That’s a real compliment. I aspire to be. My favourite actors are the ones that have the ability to transform. Actors like Daniel Day Lewis, Sean Penn, Philip Seymour Hoffman – they’re all chameleons in my mind.”

As for future plans – he has none, preferring instead to work on making his dreams come true.

“I would absolutely love to continue down the path of doing films. To get to the stage where I’m making a film a year – that would be a dream for me. But it’s such an unpredictable industry and you just don’t know what’s going to happen. So fingers crossed, I guess. I’ll just continue to work hard and hopefully some more luck comes my way.” ●

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