

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

THE OTHER HALF

by Jennifer Hansen



LEE ROGERS, HUSBAND OF SINGER KATE CEBERANO

Director Lee Rogers describes his wife as a creative whirlwind. And he's not exaggerating: while being in constant demand for live gigs, Kate Ceberano is writing a new album and has taken on roles including guest presenter on Channel 9's *Getaway*, artistic director for the Adelaide Cabaret Festival and an ambassador for Berlei. Not to mention being mum to seven-year-old Gypsy. Rogers is no slouch in the career stakes, either. After failing his Year 12 exams, he worked his way up through the ranks of the film business to become an award-winning director of commercials, film and TV drama. Like his famous wife, Rogers is also a practising Scientologist and is happy to talk about a philosophy that he says has changed his life for the better.

Jennifer: Were you interested in a film career when you were at school?

Lee: No. I had no idea what I wanted to do. Came from a real Sydney beachside sporty family. It was all about sport — rugby, cricket, tennis, surf, sailing . . . full-on sporty stuff.

J: What did you think you'd do when you left school?

L: In primary school, we did plays like *The Mikado* and *South Pacific*. And I remember the principal of my primary school saying to me: "You have a real flair for this theatrical thing. Make sure when you go to high school you keep it up." But I didn't. I went to a school where you were a wuss if you did theatre. Then a friend of my brother's was Graham Shearer, the fashion photographer, and he started putting me in *Dolly* magazine shoots in my teens.

J: So you were a model? Are you embarrassed by that?

L: No, not embarrassed. Though certainly not much cred comes with it. I never really thought of myself as a male model — more of the token gregarious surfer bloke you'd throw in the shot to get the girls animated. Next thing, Chadwicks took me on and I was going to auditions for TV commercials as an actor. I did over 30 ads.

J: What did you want to do when you left high school?

L: I had no idea what I wanted to do and I'd failed my HSC. Dad and Mum said, "Clearly you're not going to university, but you have to learn some kind of skill. You can't just go travelling". So I did a pre-employment course at tech. I managed to get a job as a junior technician with a small video production company, which was a lucky break. I got to learn on the job. With what I'd learned watching top directors make commercials, I started using the cameras and edit suites at work and making music videos for friends. The fourth music video I did was for a little band called Ratcat and the song went No. 1 on the Aria charts and they won Aria awards. Suddenly I was the new hot clip guy and I was off and running.

J: Was music a passion?

L: I don't have a music background, but

like any kid, I was passionate about music and always went to see my favourite bands. That's how I knew Ratcat. The budget for that video was less than five grand. I also shot a narrative element with Naomi Watts, who happened to be my flatmate. We had a short-lived romance when we were teenagers, then later we lived together for a couple of years in Bondi and I put her in everything I was doing. I left that company about a year later because I was very focused on directing more drama, movies and high-end TV commercials. I went freelance and I've been a freelance film director ever since.

J: Can you still ring up Naomi and ask to put her in your projects?

L: I wish! (laughs)

J: And you write film scripts, too?

L: Yeah, I went to LA at that point and did a couple of screenwriting courses and started writing. I directed some music videos and commercials over there. But I met Kate just before I left, in about '91 or '92. I had scored a job to direct a big concert video of Kate at the State Theatre in Sydney. But her boyfriend, who was the drummer in her band and co-manager, dropped her unceremoniously just before the concert. Nasty, nasty thing to do. So she was in Sydney away from home and it was terrible. I wanted to cheer her up so she could do a great performance, so I asked her out to dinner. We got on like a house on fire and we've been together ever since. For 20 years now.

J: It must have been a special night.

L: We had instant electricity. Instant soulmates, really. And then I went to LA because I was already booked and we commuted for a year or two. Then Kate did *Jesus Christ Superstar* and I flew back to direct one of the *Superstar* music videos.

J: Was your career focus more on music videos, films or commercials at the time?

L: A bit of everything. A creative director at a Sydney agency saw that *Superstar* clip while I was back living in LA and offered me a big commercial. It was actually for Carefree tampons! I flew back and did that commercial and that got me started with a string of high-end commercial gigs. I really



Soulmates Lee Rogers with wife Kate Ceberano

MAIN PICTURE MANUELA CIFRA

enjoyed that, so moved back to Australia because Kate was living here as well, and I lived with Kate. At the time I had been sharing an apartment with Deborra-Lee Furness in LA.

J: So you were good mates with Deborra-Lee?

L: Yes. And I actually ended up proposing to Kate in Deborra-Lee's bathtub in LA. (laughs)

J: Had you planned it that way?

L: It was fairly spontaneous. I remember thinking, "this girl is really special and if I stuff this up, I'll regret it". It came more from a thought that: "We're apart so often and she can have anyone — clearly — and if I don't make a commitment to her, then we'll probably never make it."

J: Was it hard planning a wedding when you both came from different cities?

L: Yeah and in Australia, Kate is like, Miss Melbourne and I'm very much a Sydney guy. I could never have imagined living in Melbourne back then, but I do now and I love it. It's a fantastic city. Melbourne's a much better city to raise kids, but you can still have a cultural and vital life. I can't imagine Kate living anywhere else. She loves Melbourne deeply.

J: Career-wise, what's your focus now?

L: To direct more scripted TV drama and comedy. There's a lot of great shows coming out of Melbourne. And, of course, keeping the TV commercials going, too.

J: Do you want to direct films?

L: I've done several films. In one, I wrote the script, directed, produced and played the lead. It went to Cannes and sold to a lot of territories. Kate also played the lead in that one. And I've got a couple of other

features written and am hoping to raise the finance to make them.

J: You must lead a busy life with Kate's many commitments and your travelling for work. How do you juggle that with being parents?

L: We live in a big house with Kate's mum and step-dad. Kate's step-dad Ben is her tour manager and looks after her affairs. Kate's mum, who managed her for about 10 years, assists, too, and, while we're away, looks after our daughter. So it's a family affair. Kate's mum is incredible. Not only has she a brilliant mind and gives Kate great career guidance, she's an amazing grandma. Gypsy adores her. She's a happy, healthy, gregarious little kid, so the arrangement works.

J: As a couple, do you face pressures from this industry that are different to those who work, say, nine-to-five jobs?

L: Oh yeah. I mean, just the sheer fact that we're apart about 50 per cent of the time. And the other factor is we're meeting interesting people and working on an intimate level with other people, so you are constantly presented with opportunities and temptations, so you need to be good at keeping your integrity intact, to not go astray and stuff it all up.

J: A lot of women in Kate's position might feel entitled to behave like a diva — being talented, beautiful and successful. Does she have any of the diva in her?

L: Not really. Kate's driven by inspiring people. She wants to make a difference in a positive way and it's not all about Kate. She's never done drugs. She only drinks a little bit. I guess those diva antics tend to happen more in this biz when those elements are abused.

J: But no one's perfect. Does she have any annoying habits?

L: I call her the toothbrush robber. She travels so much, she's always losing toothbrushes. She never knows which one is hers or what colour it is. So she uses whatever's there.

J: What are her best qualities?

L: She's pretty hot! She's a good laugh . . . she's very funny. But probably the quality I admire the most with Kate is that she's not focused on fuelling the celebrity thing. She's first and foremost an artist who's interested in creating truthful and aesthetic works. And being a good example for others to be inspired by. Her attention is not on creating this mysterious *Superstar* facade that draws people in. Kate just wears her heart on her sleeve, for better or for worse.

J: But she doesn't talk about her religion, does she? About Scientology?

L: She's happy to talk about it to the right person, but most avenues of the media aren't going to print exactly what she says and how she said it. She'll speak on live TV interviews, like with Andrew Denton and Kerri-Ann. Then she's happy to talk about it. But if it can be edited and taken out of context, then she tends not to talk about it.

J: Do you share the same beliefs?