

# WHITE HOT

A STRING of REJECTIONS in 2022 left EMMY AWARD-WINNING *New Zealander* MORGANA O'REILLY unsure if she WANTED to CONTINUE ACTING. Now she's SET to STAR in ONE of THE WORLD'S BUZZIEST series, THE WHITE LOTUS

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE photography MICHELE ABOUD styling GRANT PEARCE

WHEN MORGANA O'REILLY heard that she'd been cast in the third season of *The White Lotus*, her first reaction was pure incredulity. "All I remember saying [to my agent] was, 'Are you sure?'" she laughs. "I was so happy. Your grown-up brain wants to rationalise and go, *Okay, whatever*. But you need to let that inner teenager just scream around the house because [it's] so insane." It's little wonder that snagging the gig is the stuff of teenage dreams for the Kiwi actor. A mega hit in terms of both ratings and critical acclaim, the series' first two seasons have attracted more than 100 award nominations and scored wins at the Golden Globe, GLAAD Media, Emmy and Screen Actors Guild awards.

O'Reilly's casting in *The White Lotus* came off the back of one of her hardest years, in 2022. "There were about three jobs that I got really close to [getting] that would have made a big difference to things," she recalls. "Man, those close calls, they *really* hurt. When I came out of that year... I was able to find some sort of liberation. Auditioning after that, I knew I had something that is only me. [Auditioning for] *The White Lotus* was no different."

Does O'Reilly feel the pressure for season three to live up to the series' first two instalments, especially in the wake of – spoiler alert – the death of fan favourite Tanya McQuoid, brilliantly portrayed by Jennifer Coolidge? Part of her is mentally bracing to be "ripped apart online", she confides. "I hadn't ever come across [such hype] in my career because I have never done anything on this level." Although not at liberty to divulge much on what exactly to expect in season three, she suggests that "it's going to be great. There are some amazing sequences and characters."

Working with showrunner Mike White was a highlight. "Hearing him cackle behind the monitor, he is having such a blast," she recalls. "So you do, too, you know?" He's apparently also on board with his cast improvising a little. "I've worked with directors who go, 'No, that's not how I saw it', whereas

Mike [says], 'That's different. Love it. What else?' He's very encouraging."

Having wrapped filming for *The White Lotus*, O'Reilly is now deep in production for *Stories About My Body*, a film adaptation of the one-woman stage show she penned and stars in, due for release in 2025. The act debuted at the 2022 Melbourne International Comedy Festival and documents her struggles with the

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way she has viewed her body throughout her life. As we speak, it's school holidays so she and her husband, New Zealand screenwriter and director Peter Salmon, are juggling work while caring for their two children, Luna, nine, and Ziggy, five. "It's all quite chaotic at the moment," she admits, although despite the apparent disarray, she is unfailingly charming and laugh-out-loud funny.

O'Reilly was born in Auckland to Mary-Jane O'Reilly, a choreographer who cofounded and performed with contemporary New Zealand dance company Limbs in the '70s and '80s, and design and marketing director father Phil. She attended Western Springs College and around age 13, joined Auckland-based Out Loud Theatre Company, led by actor and director Rosalind Gardner, which seeded an ambition to act professionally. "There were a handful of older kids [who] took it seriously. That was a defining point [for me]."

After obtaining a Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts at the Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland, O'Reilly toured global fringe festivals from Edinburgh to New York with her one-woman comedy performance, *The Height of the Eiffel Tower*. Next came comedy series *This Is Littleton* on

ABC2 and *Sunny Skies* and *Nothing Trivial* on New Zealand's TV3 and TVNZ 1, respectively, before crossing the ditch in 2014 to appear as troublemaker Naomi Canning in *Neighbours*. She played the lead in Kiwi director Gerard Johnstone's horror-comedy film *Housebound*, while her interpretation of Vanda in the play *Venus in Fur* for the Auckland Theatre Company earned her an Excellence Award for Acting at the 2016 Auckland Theatre Awards. Between 2019-22, she featured in Kiwi sitcom *Mean Mums* and, more recently, in New Zealand's ThreeNow series *Friends Like Her*, about a surrogacy arrangement turned sour.

The personal and professional crossed paths during the pandemic when O'Reilly and Salmon – who has directed episodes of *Rake* and *Offspring* as well as acclaimed New Zealand series *After The Party* (2023) – collaborated to create comic-thriller miniseries *INSiDE* for Sky New Zealand. O'Reilly's character, Rose, refuses to leave her house during a COVID lockdown, instead spying on video calls thanks to her job at a video chat app.

The production, filmed in the couple's Auckland home, scored the International Emmy for Best Short-Form Series in 2021. O'Reilly opted for a casual viewing party on her friends' back deck to watch the ceremony. "To me, it was like going to watch the Rugby World Cup: [just] fun to watch. I was like, *I'm here for the glass of champagne*." Suffice to say, their win made for a pleasant surprise.

"[There was] one year which left me wondering if I still had the stomach for acting," reflects O'Reilly of 2022, during which touring with *Stories About My Body* kept her "alive emotionally and financially". The O'Reilly of that era would likely pinch herself if she could see where she is now. "[I'm] only now starting to feel how *The White Lotus* might change things," she says, hinting at some exciting plans in the works. "To be able to turn to my nine-year-old and go, 'You're watching your mum's dreams come true'. This is the best." HB



Marina Rinaldi top, \$1445; from top, Tiffany & Co. Lock bangle in white gold, \$12,600, and Hardwear Link bracelet in white gold with diamonds, \$44,800.

*HAIR* Max Serrano.

*MAKEUP* Monique Jones.