A dangerous liaison

Paramount+ drama *Fake* finds Asher Keddie playing a woman caught up in a relationship with a master of manipulation. The *Offspring* star tells **Siobhan Duck** why she loves storylines that leave viewers reeling



In too deep: Birdie (Asher Keddie) doesn't see the red flags in her relationship until it's almost too late.

Cover: Sam Bisso
Images: Sarah Enticknap

ON A mad dash to the airport in an Uber, Asher Keddie's character, Birdie Bell makes a string of frantic calls to friends and family begging them for money.

Preoccupied with securing the funds for her happily ever after with her new love Joe Burt (David Wenham), she cannot – or rather, will not – see the many red flags that are right in front of her in that car ride.

But viewers certainly will. That's what makes *Fake* such a riveting – albeit occasionally uncomfortable – drama to watch.

Keddie is particularly proud of that excruciating episode (the fifth of eight), which was filmed almost entirely inside the car and framed on her increasingly harried face, enthusing that the claustrophobic setting made for "deeply experiential" viewing.

"It was such an ambitious episode that I was so thrilled we decided to make it," she says.

"Imogen [Banks, who produced *Fake* and worked with Keddie on *Offspring*] had that idea very early in the piece when we were discussing how to shape the drama, having been inspired by the book.

"And she said, 'I've got this really mad idea' and I love it when she says that. I mean, she's been saying that to me for 15 years now."

Keddie loves being involved with risk-taking projects, even if they occasionally leave viewers reeling.

Who could forget the moment when little Lou (Alex Cook) suddenly – and without warning – dropped dead scooting through the park seven episodes into winning viewers' hearts in the first season of *Love My Way* in 2004?

Or what about when Patrick (Matthew Le Nevez) got hit by a car just weeks before Nina (Keddie) gave birth to a much longed-for baby in season five of *Offspring*?

"It was devastating," Keddie reflects of the iconic death of Patrick in 2013.

"I remember we upset so many people. The storyline was fantastic, but yes, brutal.

"Lou's death was another memorable one, but we don't do it [kill any beloved characters] to you in *Fake*!"

Instead, *Fake* finds other ways to pull the rug out from under viewers, like that Uber episode.

Based on Stephanie Wood's book about her own experiences falling for an online charlatan who convinced her he was a wealthy landowner when he was really a bankrupt fantasist, *Fake* follows the similar journey of the fictional food writer Birdie.

Although Keddie has no firsthand experience of online dating herself, she was eager to bring Wood's story to life on-screen because it was "frighteningly relatable" to most people.



Charm offensive: David Wenham brings a plausibility to Joe's behaviour towards Birdie (Asher Keddie).

"When she first wrote that article [about her experiences, which later evolved into a bestselling book], the response that she got from people who also had a Joe, or an experience of a Joe, in their lives was truly overwhelming," Keddie enthuses.

While few would have dated a liar as extreme or manipulative as Joe, Keddie says a lot of people will identify with wanting to see the best in someone they love, to the point where some may ignore warning signs.

"David [Wenham] said something really interesting the other day to me, and that was that we inherently trust people when we meet them," she says.

"And we believe what they tell us. Until we can't anymore, and I think that's Birdie's experience. That pushing down of her instinct is something that I found particularly interesting to explore. It's been an amazing project to work on."

Birdie's trust certainly gets tested in *Fake*, as Joe spins her tall tales about a vindictive ex-wife, remarkable feats of heroics and, of course, his vast wealth.

Keddie says it took an actor as "intelligent and skilled" as Wenham to make some of Joe's more outlandish behaviour feel utterly plausible.

"Thank goodness that it was David because he's very difficult to disbelieve – he's so bloody good," she smiles.

"So even after I read something on the page, and we'd worked on it a zillion times, I was occasionally still questioning Birdie's response to things but then I'd get on set with David and he'd give it to me. And I'd be like, 'Oh, yeah, I believe you'."

Fake marks the third time that Keddie has played a character based on a real Australian journalist. In 2011, she played Ita Buttrose in the ABC miniseries *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo*, while last year she starred in the Binge series *Strife*, which was loosely based on Mia Freedman's experiences launching her website Mamamia.

Keddie laughs off any suggestion that she is purposely working her way through the who's who of the Australian media landscape.

"I haven't really thought about that because I see all three characters so differently – it's the person inside that I'm interested in exploring – and so what they do for a job, (while it certainly plays a part in the way they tick and the way that they're influenced and the influence they have) they are so vastly different that I haven't seen that many similarities in them," she says.

"But yes, there's a theme there, only it's coincidental."

Keddie didn't spend time with Wood before shooting *Fake* to prepare for her performance.

"And it was similar with Ita," she shrugs of playing Buttrose more than a decade earlier.

"There's this kind of strangely perverse thing that I like to do to myself as an actor, and that is to really explore a character that's in a script, as opposed to a book or someone's real life.

"Of course, I take lots of things on board, but it's really my own research that does it. I seem to have not wanted to get into conversation and then be influenced by the person themselves."

■ *Fake*, streaming, Paramount+