

Bouncing back

Jodi Anasta opens up about her split from husband Braith and her excitement at returning to television.

By **SHANNON MOLLOY**

AFTER a rough start to the year, Jodi Anasta is determined to get her groove back.

The 31-year-old began 2016 suddenly single, after ending her three-year marriage to rugby league legend Braith Anasta in December.

But, never one to succumb to life's challenges, the Logie-winning former *Home and Away* star picked herself up, dusted herself off and got busy reassessing her goals.

One of them was to return to performing after a prolonged absence. And this week, she makes her debut on long-running soap *Neighbours* as schoolteacher Elly.

"It's surreal, all this change," she says. "But when you look at everything you've done, how you can be better, how much more you want in life and what might be next for you, it's exciting and empowering to start ticking things off the list."

It took a little while to settle back into life on a TV set, she says. The frenetic pace of a show such as *Neighbours* means learning and conveying pages of dialogue a day.

While she perfected that skill as Summer Bay's Martha MacKenzie for five years until 2010, Anasta says she was a little rusty.

"It's not like riding a bike," she laughs. "The second week on set though, it hit me – this is my happy place. I'd found it. I'd been working so hard to have that opportunity and for it to happen, to be in the midst of it ... I felt such enormous gratitude."

Joining the Ramsay Street cast, on a rumoured lucrative three-year contract, was not without its challenges, she says.

Anasta lives in Sydney, where she and Braith share custody of their two-year-old Aleeia, and moving to Melbourne where the show is filmed was out of the question. However, producers were keen to snare the popular personality and moved mountains to make it work.

"I felt a little selfish having this restriction on the job, but that's the way it is," she says.

Back in action: Former *Home and Away* star Jodi Anasta returns to our screens as schoolteacher Elly on *Neighbours*.



"My daughter comes first. We came up with a compromise. It was a long process but it was worth it. *Neighbours*' [bosses] were incredible and they made it work, which I think says a lot about the show and how important family values are."

A good relationship with her ex, and a solid approach to their co-parenting, also helps to make the arrangement work.

"We work together and as a result we have a very happy, vibrant and enthusiastic little girl who's thriving. She's happy and that's what is most important to us," Anasta says.

"If she's happy, to me it says the dynamic between Braith and I is working. He's a wonderful father and I feel very lucky that we have a good relationship."

Aleeia is "the perfect mix" of both

parents, with hints of being a natural performer and a potential sporting star, Anasta says.

"She's got so much personality... she's an entertainer – and her hand-eye co-ordination is next-level, too."

There's no doubt the difficulty of the break-up, as well as navigating this new chapter in full glare of the public eye, hasn't been easy.

But Anasta says things finally feel like they're starting to fall into place – and she couldn't be happier.

"Maybe it's because I'm ready for it and I'm in a good place ... but I feel like things are working," she says. "I've worked really hard to achieve things in my life and I feel like it's all coming together."

NEIGHBOURS

MONDAY TO FRIDAY, 6.30PM, ELEVEN

WALL SET TO SHINE AS ALF'S SON

DUNCAN Stewart is all grown up. Oh, and he's got a slight Kiwi accent to boot.

The formerly delinquent teenage son of Alf Stewart (Ray Meagher) is returning to *Home and Away*, and this time he's played by New Zealander Benedict Wall.

The 32-year-old actor admits he finds it amusing to play an Australian TV icon's child. But having lived in Australia for seven years – dating recently departed Summer Bay resident Jessica Grace Smith for several of those – he's confident he can pull it off.

Duncan returns after Alf's stroke. While he's there to reconcile with his dad, Wall says Duncan will bring the requisite soap secrets along with him.

While his trip to the bay isn't set to be permanent, he's open to the possibility of returning in the future if he's asked. "I love the show. You get paid to go the beach and work with nice people. It's nothing to sniff at," he says.

Plus, he's got firm friends in the cast. In addition to dating Smith, Wall has collaborated with *Home and Away*'s Tai Hara on a short film that is doing the festival circuit. And fellow Kiwi George Mason is also a familiar face.

"George and I have worked together in New Zealand as well – we were both on *Shortland St* at the same time," Wall says.

"I auditioned for Ash (on *Home and Away*) and George got that role. I also auditioned for the role he got on *Shortland St* and then I came in afterwards – so that happened twice."

HOME AND AWAY
MONDAY TO THURSDAY,
7PM,
SEVEN

By
Tiffany
Dunk

