



“NOW I CAN START *afresh*”

Newly single Melissa George is ready to fall in love again and fulfil her dreams of motherhood

Melissa George has always been one to wear her heart on her sleeve. Unlike some Hollywood stars who are obsessed with keeping their private lives, well, private, George seems to have no such qualms.

In fact, the last time she appeared on *sunday magazine's* cover, in November 2010, she gushed about her blissfully happy life with husband of 10 years, Claudio Dabed. As she described how he still brought her a cup of coffee in bed every morning, the journalist commented it was “obvious she [was] still hopelessly in love”.

Looking back, perhaps George was trying just a little too hard to convince people – and maybe herself – everything was OK in her marriage. Because, a few weeks after that interview was published, the couple quietly separated. It was only seven months later, when she was pictured kissing American hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons at a soccer game, that it became apparent George and Dabed had split.

Speaking from London, where she's shooting the new BBC/HBO spy drama, *Hunted* (“It's similar to *The Bourne Supremacy*, my character is fabulous,” she enthuses), she admits that while there were a couple of long-standing “issues” in her marriage, her decision to leave her husband was fairly sudden.

“It was something that happened pretty much overnight,” says the 35-year-old. “I kind of gave him five years’ notice on a couple of issues, and when it came up again for him, the lights just went out for me,” she says quietly.

“I did have the best marriage. It was so full of love, and he's an extraordinary man. I think I made a great choice. But, at some point, when it stops serving your needs as a woman and the things that you want for your life, it's either get out now or wait until it's too late. It was very hard for me, but I'm glad I did it.”

Although she declines to spell out exactly what the problem was, she hints, “anyone in their right mind would know what happened”. Was her desire for a baby behind the split? “I wanted children, yes,” she says, “but I still have time. Now I can start from scratch.”

The Perth-born actor admits her longing to become a mother weighs on her “every minute of the day. Some days, it rips my heart out. And then, other days, I almost forget about it because I'm so busy. My company, Hemming My Way, is doing well; my acting is going great, I'm financially independent and I'm not short of love – it's not as if I'm sitting around at home, moping.

“But whoever I have my baby with, I want to be proud of that man and I want to carry a child to a man who wants to do that as well. But, hey, I've got years when you think about it.”

She pauses to take a sip of her tea as her beloved French bulldog, Glee, jumps onto her lap (“Hello, baby,” she coos). She says she's fallen in love with London, where she's relocated for six months while filming *Hunted*. “I could probably live here, but I love New York and my heart is in Buenos Aires [where she lived for six months of the year with Dabed]. I think that's enough. Obviously, I'm not married any more, but that doesn't stop me going down there.”

George has been stepmother to Dabed's daughter, Martina, 16, since she was three. Given the sudden break-up of her marriage, is she still involved in the teenager's life? “Yes and no,” she says carefully. “She's really her daddy's girl and I was merely the caretaker. She's always going to be in my life and will come and stay with me in New York. But she has her mum and dad. It's hard, but it is what it is.”

Part of her strategy to deal with her marriage break-up (“Divorce is like a death; you're in mourning,” she says) was to throw herself into her work. First up was the critically acclaimed ABC drama *The Slap*, which, given the emotional complexities of playing aggrieved mother Rosie, can't have been an easy shoot.

“I was going through a lot and wanted to get it out,” she explains. “And do you know what's amazing? They pay you to do that. You go to work, you get it all out and then you go home and you're happy.”

Robert Connolly, who directed the heart-rending ‘Rosie’ episode of *The Slap*, watched George tap into some profound emotions for her performance. “I could feel she had emotionally connected with the character of Rosie in an extraordinary way. She and Anthony Hayes [who played her husband] had to make a compelling case for this highly dysfunctional marriage, so if she were going through her own [marital] crisis, it may have informed that.”

Filming her upcoming episode of SBS's *Who Do You Think You Are?* was equally draining. >



"I'd met Russell, I was homesick and going through a divorce, and I wanted to be with family. Then I was in Taunton [England], discovering all this stuff about my ancestors – you can imagine what was going through my head.

"But it was also good. I wanted a family, so to be reminded that was what it was all about was great. It reinforced my belief that I was making the right decision. It was a powerful experience."

George is at pains to point out she's in a happy place now. She even goes as far as saying she's had "the best year of my life. I'm having a good old time. It's been a lot of fun and I think it's only going to become more fun."

That may have had something to do with her on-off relationship with Simmons, the millionaire co-founder of Def Jam Records, who, at 54, is almost 20 years her senior. Which begs the question, given her ex-husband was also 12 years older, does she have a thing for older men?

"I do, but Russell's not old at all," George laughs. "He's younger than most, really. He's so vibrant; he's the air everyone should breathe. He's an extraordinary man. He's a yogi and vegan and healthier than 20 men put together. And he makes me laugh until I'm rolling on the floor."

She dismisses speculation she left Dabed for Simmons. "I had six months on my own before I met Russell," she insists.

However, a few days after our chat, she sends me a text saying

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they've split, confirming a Tweet from Simmons saying their long-distance relationship was "impossible".

"We have a big love," George says. "It's something that's not going to be easy to let go of, but I'm on a job and he's busy. I was going back and forth [between London and New York] and we had a great holiday in St Barts [in January]. But, at some point, a man needs a woman around. It's something we need to figure out, but we're very, very close and good friends. I have two more months of work here and then I'll be back in New York, so we'll see..." she trails off.

And what about those pictures that recently emerged of George, clad in a shimmering, slinky Victoria Beckham gown, enjoying what can only be described as a passionate kiss with a man at a recent BAFTA Awards after-party? She laughs, but won't reveal who he was, apart from the fact he's French. "It was pretty nice and pretty full on," she giggles. "We'll see about that one."

It sounds as if she's enjoying her new-found freedom. "Yes, but respectfully," she stresses. "It's not like no one knows [the situation], either. Everyone knows what's going on. But, yes, I am enjoying it."

Despite the emotional upheaval of recent months, George has no regrets about leaving Dabed, she says firmly. "I did the right thing. It was like an epiphany, where you look up at the sky and the clouds part and you go, 'That was what I needed to do.'"

"Life makes no mistakes. We forget that. It's all planned. As Pierce Brosnan, who I just worked with, told me, 'Melissa, life is about many chapters.' This is my new chapter." ■ **STORY: JOANNE HAWKINS**

The fourth series of *Who Do You Think You Are?* starts Tuesday March 27, at 7.30pm, on SBS One.