



# Body of work

Discovering she carried the BRCA2 breast cancer gene presented actor Veronica Neave with two stark choices, writes **Jane Scott**

Veronica Neave is a drama queen, and I mean that in the nicest sense of the word. Well known to Brisbane theatregoers (this year she has delivered acclaimed performances in *God of Carnage* for Queensland Theatre Company and *The White Earth* for La Boite), she is an actor and physical theatre performer whose working life is full of tragedy and crisis, excitement and heightened emotion.

But nothing this diminutive 41 year old has experienced on stage could have prepared her for what she has been through during the past two years, events that are canvassed in her book *Pieces of Me*.

In 2007, Veronica was diagnosed with the BRCA2 breast cancer gene mutation, increasing the probability of her developing the disease to more than 85 per cent. The Mount Tamborine-based actor's grandmother, great-grandmother and great-aunt all died of breast cancer. Her mother is a cancer survivor and her two sisters are also BRCA2-positive.

"I really wasn't ready for a positive result," says Veronica. "I thought I was the one in the family who wouldn't get breast cancer. So I spent about a year researching the options, which were few and far between. It was a choice of radical surgery or waiting to get breast cancer. A prophylactic mastectomy was the only thing that offered a reduction of probability from 85 per cent to about five per cent."

In *Pieces of Me*, Veronica charts the gruelling physical and emotional trauma of having her breasts removed, and the dilemma of deciding whether to have a breast reconstruction.

"I'm one of those people who don't want to alter my body in any way at all," says Veronica. "Any sort of breast enhancement for me was a foreign idea and I really struggled with it. It's to the detriment of my character, I feel, that I chose to [have the reconstruction]. It was almost an easier way out."

Read the chapters on her reconstruction and I guarantee you'll disagree. The surgery is painful and complex. Writing the book was the simple part. "I've been storytelling all my life," she says. "I've learned from the greatest of writers – I've been standing on their shoulders for 21 years, using their words."

The book has made her mother, who has survived two bouts of breast cancer, proud. "The book pays homage to my mother and to women before her," says Veronica. "It respects their stoicism and strength, and their survival of this horrendous disease."

**PIECES OF ME** (Big Sky Publishing, \$24.99) is out now