

By DAVID LESER

Two years after Heath Ledger scandalised sections of middle America with his near-miraculous performance as a gay cowboy, he would light up the screen with another *tour de force*, this time as the lovelorn, heroin-soaked poet, Dan, in the Australian cult movie, *Candy*.

Little known outside Australia, this film was based on a loosely autobiographical book of the same name written by Australian author, Luke Davies. In the film Ledger somehow managed to find his way inside the twisted, twilight world of the drug addict.

*I pull the syringe from her arm and drop it on the table and hold my thumb down over the tiny hole I've made. I release the tie with my other hand. Candy looks down at her arm like a child who's relieved that the inoculation is over. Then she says, mmmm, and her facial muscles relax and she lies back on the bed and says, that is heaps better. Heaps better. Fuck oh God. Fuck fuck fuck. This is the best. Oh God, this is awesome.*

This was – as the New York Times commented of Ledger's role – acting of the first order. "Ledger looks and plays the part of the scheming user exceptionally well. He's deep in the character's skin right from the start."

Ledger and his co-star, Abbie Cornish – who recently appeared opposite Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* - had received their tutoring from an expert, a heroin addict belonging to a Sydney group called "Proud Users."

"Abbie and Heath got lots of lessons with a prosthetic arm on how to inject," the film's producer, Margaret Fink told *Vanity Fair*. "They had instructions from an expert ... and Heath was as convincing as one could have been."

In the wake of Ledger's death last week in a New York apartment, it is tempting to now speculate that Ledger simply took his heroin classes too seriously. One Australian tabloid newspaper asserted as much by reporting that Ledger had spent several days at a drug rehabilitation facility battling an addiction to heroin following his separation last year from American actress, Michelle Williams.

At the time of writing there was no way of confirming this. What could be confirmed was that Heath Ledger's death had shattered his family and closest friends, as well as the proud and close-knit Australian film industry.

Margaret Fink, who came to prominence in Australia nearly 30 years ago when she produced *My Brilliant Career*, a film that brought to the screen the striking talents of a young Judy Davis and Sam Neill, was heart-broken at the news of Ledger's death. Having chosen him specifically for the heroin addict's role in *Candy*, the 73 year-old producer told *Vanity Fair* she was now at a loss as to how to reconcile his passing.

"I can't believe this important actor has gone," she said, her voice trembling. "He was a great actor, a fantastic actor ... and my version of this is that it was a tragic accident. Heath wasn't a victim like River Phoenix or Judy Garland. He was a victor. He was a tremendous life-force and he was just so immeasurably attractive.

"After the shooting (of *Candy*) I realised what it was about Heath. He was dead sexy. Abbie (Cornish) was mad about him and he was very gentle and thoughtful in his response to her. She fell in love with him while we were shooting and it would have been funny if she hadn't. I loved him too."

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Heath Ledger's smouldering appeal first came to the public's attention 9 years ago when, at the age of 19, he appeared in the Australian crime thriller, *Two Hands*, a role

which helped secure for him his first major appearance in an American film, the forgettable *10 Things I Hate About You*. A year later he starred opposite Mel Gibson in *The Patriot* and, following that, as a braveheart in the piece of fluff called *A Knight's Tale*.

“Ledger played this role like a tousle-headed surfer,” said noted Australian film critic, Paul Byrnes, “and audiences around the world swooned.”

Other unremarkable films followed and it wasn't until 2005, when he appeared as a gay cowboy in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, that audiences around the world came to see what a prodigious talent he was— and this from someone who had never formally studied acting.

Based on the true life story of a gay Australian rodeo rider and son of a Vietnam war veteran, Ledger's performance in *Brokeback Mountain* resulted in a best actor nomination at the 2006 Academy Awards, a prize he ultimately lost to Philip Seymour Hoffman's *Capote*.

Adam Sutton, the gay Australian horseman whom Ledger had modelled himself on, was at the Malibu home of Australian, singer Olivia Newton-John, when he heard the news of Ledger's death.

“All I can say about him is that he was an inspiration to me,” Sutton said. “He gave me the strength to find myself and tell my story, and that's something that I know helped a lot of other people. All I want to do now is carry it on as his legacy.”

In an outpouring of grief not seen in Australia since the death of INXS frontman, Michael Hutchence, a veritable Who's Who of the film industry paid tribute to the young actor's talent and character. Cate Blanchett had only just learnt of her nomination for two Academy Awards when she was told of Ledger's death. (One of Blanchett's nominations was for best actress for her portrayal of Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There*, a film which Ledger had also played the inscrutable folk legend.)

“I'm thrilled by the nominations but more profoundly saddened by the loss of Heath,” she said in a statement. Nicole Kidman described Ledger's death as a “terrible tragedy,” while Rose Byrne, who starred opposite Brad Pitt in *Troy*, said: “Heath was an enigmatic, wonderful and endlessly generous friend and colleague.”

From Los Angeles Russell Crowe called Ledger “a gentle, beautiful man, a fine actor and a loyal friend,” while Mel Gibson declared: “I had such great hope for him. He was just taking off, and to lose his life at such a young age is a tragic loss.”

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Heath Ledger was born in the remotest city on earth – in Perth, Western Australia - almost 29 years ago. At the age of 17 he arrived in Sydney almost penniless, but determined to break into the acting business.

Two days before his twenty-fifth birthday – on April 4 2004 – he was sufficiently wealthy enough to buy a 2.7 million euro house in the exclusive Sydney beachside suburb of Bronte with his then partner, Michelle Williams. The house came replete with a wine cellar for 1700 bottles, plus a home cinema with tiered seating and panelled walls made from Tasmanian oak. It was – or seemed to be – the perfect Pacific refuge for a man on the cusp of Hollywood fame and impending fatherhood. But by the time Ledger and Williams' daughter, Matilda Rose was born the following year – in October 2005 – Ledger, a profoundly private man at the best of times, was starting to feel the pressure of his celebrity. Television crews would regularly fly over his house to get footage of him while the paparazzi staked out the property from other vantage points. So oppressive did it become that neither he nor Williams were able to step out onto on one of their four decks without being photographed.

In January 2006 it all came to an ugly climax when Ledger allegedly spat at photographers while they were trying to shoot him on the set of *Candy*. Not long afterwards the paparazzi retaliated by squirting him and Williams with water pistols as the couple walked the red carpet for the Sydney premiere of *Brokeback Mountain*. Ledger is said to have cried over the incident and left the country the next day. "It's disgusting and awful," he later told Australian journalist, Fiona Connolly. "I would never in a million years do anything like that. I'm not some sort of dirty spitter."

But what about calling one of my colleagues a "fucking cunt" and pointing the middle finger at numerous journalists? Connolly asked. And what about the legion of stories about your foul, and sometimes, violent temper?

"That's been my problem," he admitted. "It's not necessarily a tantrum thing but it's a really bad way in which I've handled myself in the past. I can admit it's a little out of line to pull the finger out and I'm trying not to do that anymore. I'm trying to bite my finger these days."

The truth is Heath Ledger couldn't cope with the relentless scrutiny he was under, and nor could many people blame him for it. Only late last year did Nicole Kidman testify in a Sydney court that she'd feared for her life because of a paparazzi's furious car pursuit of her.

As her friend, Russell Crowe, once explained to this writer: "If you've got photographers up your arse most days of the week of your life, what are you supposed to do?"

In Heath Ledger's case it was to sell up and move to New York with Williams and daughter, Matilda. By September of last year, however, he and the American actress had separated and by Christmas he was back in Perth spending the Australian summer with his family.

This time, mercifully, he was left alone by the media, a fact for which he was deeply grateful. In a heartfelt phone message to the *West Australian* newspaper's film editor, Mark Naglazas he said: "I don't know whether it's a conscious thing or an unconscious thing, giving me space and respecting my privacy. (But) it's just been awesome."

Ledger's family called for the same respect last week on hearing the shocking news of their son and brother's death. Emerging from their Perth home on Wednesday Ledger's father, Kim, accompanied by his wife, Sally, and daughter, Kate, read a statement about the "very tragic, untimely and accidental passing of our dearly beloved son, brother and doting father of Matilda.

"Heath has touched so many people on so many different levels during his short life that few had the pleasure of truly knowing him. He was a down-to-earth, generous, kind-hearted, life-loving and selfless individual who was extremely inspirational to many."

Among those he inspired was John Travolta who said he would gladly give up all his awards to have Ledger back. "Actors need other actors to be inspired by, and he was my actor. He was my favourite actor and my favourite talent. I think this is like losing James Dean."

Neil Armfield, Australia's leading theatre director and the man who directed Ledger in *Candy*, told Vanity Fair that Ledger, along with Johnny Depp, had emerged as the greatest actor of his generation. "He and Johnny Depp have been taking these wild character leaps but somehow managing to keep themselves securely centred.

"With Heath it was like he cut his own way through the forest ... he managed to bring this utterly spontaneous innocence but deeply passionate longing to his work and one felt so privileged being so close to something so private."

All the roles that Ledger could have created for himself had now vanished. “There was so much in store for him,” Armfield said. “There are rows of stillborn performances inside him.”

Ledger had only recently been in London where he’d been filming *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, directed by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame. Prior to that he’d been wrestling with the “psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic” Joker in the new Batman film, *The Dark Knight*. By all accounts he’d been buckling under the weight of stress and insomnia.

“Last week I probably slept an average of two hours a night,” he told the *New York Times*. “I couldn’t stop thinking. My body was exhausted and my mind was still going.”

When Ledger’s body was found face down on the bed in his rented Soho apartment last week, there were reportedly prescription drugs, including sleeping pills, by his bed. Apparently he had booked a massage for later that day when his housekeeper discovered him unconscious.

Like many gifted artists, Ledger was a highly complex and deeply sensitive man. As Larry Williams, the father of Ledger’s former partner, Michelle, said, quoting the English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson: “He burned the candle at both ends, so his years were few.

“But, oh, what a beautiful flame he made.”

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