

PAUL HOGAN

To his surprise, he became the best-known Aussie in the world. He loved it, yet none of this changed what was really important to Paul Hogan, as he explains to DAVID LESER.

It still boggles the mind – and tickles the fancy – more than 30 years later, to hear the story of how this man, this icon of working-class Australian machismo, conquered the world by making us all laugh. Just imagine it were you. You're married with five kids and hardly a penny to your name. You've left school way too early and you're onto your 40th job – this time as a rigger on the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

You're sitting at morning tea with your mates, 120 metres above the city floor, talking about a talent show on television called *New Faces* and you decide that, just like with *Australian Idol* today, there's a fair bit of mediocrity around – from both the contestants and the celebrity judges.

What particularly sticks in your craw, though, is the way the judges

this *New Faces* show, and because you don't want to sit around for 12 months waiting to get on, you're going to embellish a little by sending the program managers a letter introducing yourself as a "tap dancing knife thrower from Lightning Ridge". You're also going to mention that you're a former shearer and trapeze artist who happens to be working on the Harbour Bridge.

Three days later ... Hallelujah! You're on the show, but instead of throwing knives or doing any tap dancing, you're tearing strips off the judges, advising them on how they could improve their act. The judges are not particularly amused, but the audience loves it, as does the producer, Desmond Tester. He invites you on again, and this time you front up as a "shovel player" – a guy banging two shovels together.

The accidental factor

seem to take delight in humiliating some of the young kids on the show. Downright cruel you reckon. It gets you thinking about how satisfying it would be to give the judges some of their own back. And so with a suck on a Winfield blue and a laconic aside, you tell your mates exactly that. You say, "It'd be nice if one of the Christians got up and bit the lions for a change." Your mates laugh, and then dare you to do it.

Now the thing is you've never been on stage before, and never even hankered for the spotlight. What you know is that you're a pretty good heckler and that you can provide a comedic twist to almost anything.

It's at this point you make a fateful choice. You decide – at the age of 30, mind you – that you're going to go on

The audience falls about. So, too, does Desmond. You win the heat and Desmond tells his people to make sure you come back. "Doesn't matter what he wants to do," he says. "It'll be different to anything else we've got on here."

You're now in the national finals of *New Faces*, and on this occasion you enter as a "thunderbox" player, which is slang for an old army toilet. No one working on the show has the remotest idea what you're talking about, especially when you tell them that all you'll need on the night is a tea-chest. "You also tell them you won't be needing to rehearse. I can only play the thunderbox once," you say.

They think you're unhinged, but they ask you whether you'd like the band to back you. You shrug your ▶



Paul Hogan, 64, has come a long way from being a rigger on his former workplace, the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON CAPOBIANCO. STYLED BY JANE DE TELIGA. PAUL WEARS AN R.M. WILLIAMS SHIRT.

shoulders. "Yeah, why not?" And so the night comes and as the band goes into full accompaniment mode, you run across the stage and drive your head through the tea-chest. Then you pull your head out, talk for a couple of minutes and walk off. The audience is on the floor and you end up coming second, just behind the cello player.

That, of course, is only the beginning. Within a few months, you're spotted by the brilliant young producer with Channel Nine, John Cornell, who has seen you interviewed on Channel Nine's

Americans start arriving here in droves.

Then, in 1986, you release your first feature film about an Australian crocodile hunter, Mick Dundee, an open-hearted bumpkin who arrives in New York sporting a smile and a knife the size of a mini cutlass. Suddenly, you're walking on water, although you liken it to winning the 100-metre Olympics sprint, unheralded and in bare feet.

At the London premiere, you find yourself sitting between Prince Charles (whom you call Charlie) and Princess Diana (whom you call Di). Di's got her

And so you find yourself set for life ... except for one thing. You discover there's a flip side to fame, especially when your first marriage breaks up and you end up with the much younger leading lady from your movie. Now the jackals of the press want you for breakfast, accusing you of betrayal and insinuating that the woman you love is a "mid-life crisis" wife.

It doesn't help either that the films that follow on from your first are – to put it kindly – less than resounding successes. You've become tabloid target practice. You're pilloried for the glitzy

We became almost instant blood brothers and we

new program *A Current Affair*.

"He was being interviewed by Tony Ward under the Harbour Bridge," John recalls now, "and he said to him during the interview 'you better do some push-ups while I talk to the viewers'. So he put his foot on Tony's back and proceeded to talk very quickly because he saw a train coming and he didn't know in those days that you could stop and start interviews. He thought the train would mess the interview up. It was hilarious. He was treating a reporter with no respect at all, and I just loved it."

On the strength of this performance, John Cornell decides there and then that you're the one to do a weekly three-minute commentary on *A Current Affair*, a sort of man-on-the-street send-up of the news. He also decides that, in you, he's found a soul mate for life. "We became almost instant blood brothers," John says, "and we remain so to this day. We existed on a handshake [through a 20-year business relationship], which has stood the test of time."

Within a few months you're causing traffic jams on the Harbour Bridge, because you're now a mini national celebrity with a conspicuous – although often hard-to-spot – day job. You're famous and poor, but within a year you're going to be more famous and less poor. That's because, after *A Current Affair*, you're given your own show, which, over the next nine years, is to become a phenomenon in Australian comedy.

But, again, there's more. By 1981, you're selling Foster's beer to the Brits and, three years later, selling Australia to the Americans. And what happens? Foster's ends up becoming the second biggest selling beer in the UK and



Stars of *The Paul Hogan Show*, Paul Hogan (front), John Cornell as Strop and Delvene Delaney, in the mid-'70s.

knees up on the seat in front of her and she's "laughing like a drain". In America, queues are forming around the block to get into the cinemas. You're on talk shows across the nation. Throughout Scandinavia, Germany, France, South America, South Africa, Israel, Japan ... you've become a number one smash hit. Not to mention rich beyond your wildest dreams. At one stage, your little film becomes one of the 10 highest grossing movies ever made and, together with its sequel, ends up earning a staggering \$1 billion.

With your larrikin, slightly patriotic humour you've become the most famous Australian on earth. As John Cornell will put it years later, "You made it cool to be working-class."

house you build in Byron Bay, for the name you give your new child, for the outdated stereotypes you perpetuate about Australia, for your alleged facelift, for the food you feed your dog ... It's known throughout the country as lopping the poppy, but you insist you're no tall poppy. You're an ironbark tree.

Little wonder though that, until recently, you'd choose to live in America. Little wonder that you'd become wary about coming home, that you'd guard your privacy jealously and that you'd only give interviews when you had something to say.

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Paul Hogan walks into the Sydney hotel suite looking like ... well ... Mick Dundee and the Winfield Man rolled into one. He's tanned and lean in his cargo pants and trainers, and there's a packet of Winfield in the top pocket of his hemp shirt. Despite thinning hair and a road map of lines (that's right, not a facelift in sight!) he's not a bad specimen for a man who'll be turning 65 later this year.

He holds out a firm right hand and fixes his interviewer with those famous Pacific blue eyes of his. "G'day," he says, just before lighting up a cigarette and then proceeding to suck the life out of it. "Used to get these for free," he says mischievously, in reference to when he was paid to do ads for Winfield. "Got to pay for them meself now."

Paul Hogan, as it turns out, is a gracious interviewee. Although here to promote his latest film, *Strange Bedfellows* with Michael Caton, he is happy to survey the arc of an extraordinary life, even if it means returning to one of his least favourite subjects – the media's obsession with his marriage to American actor ▶

remain so to this day. We existed on a handshake.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON CAPABIANCA. NEWSPIX.

Linda Kozlowski in 1990. (This followed his divorce a year earlier from his wife of 28 years, Noelene Hogan.)

"After I got divorced the second time [he and Noelene had divorced in 1983 and then remarried a couple of years later], I suddenly became some sort of pariah," he says now. "And I thought, 'Well, we'll put up with that for about 12 months and then something else will take over'.

"Because I'd been over in LA, where they've got Michael Jackson and Madonna ... I mean I was a nobody. I didn't do anything there. I had no paparazzi, no problems ... Then I'd come home and there'd be sort of guys up on the hill at Byron and there would be photos of us by the pool, or we'd go to the beach and there'd be photos of us at the beach. Why? We're not doing anything.

"You see I was cool until I got divorced ... [but] how do you pick sides or form judgments when a marriage doesn't work? How stupid can you be? I don't and so I don't really understand anyone else doing it."

So given all the screaming headlines, it was hardly surprising that Linda was less than enthusiastic about Australia. "She'd come back here and all she ever heard about was the divorce that happened years ago," Paul says.

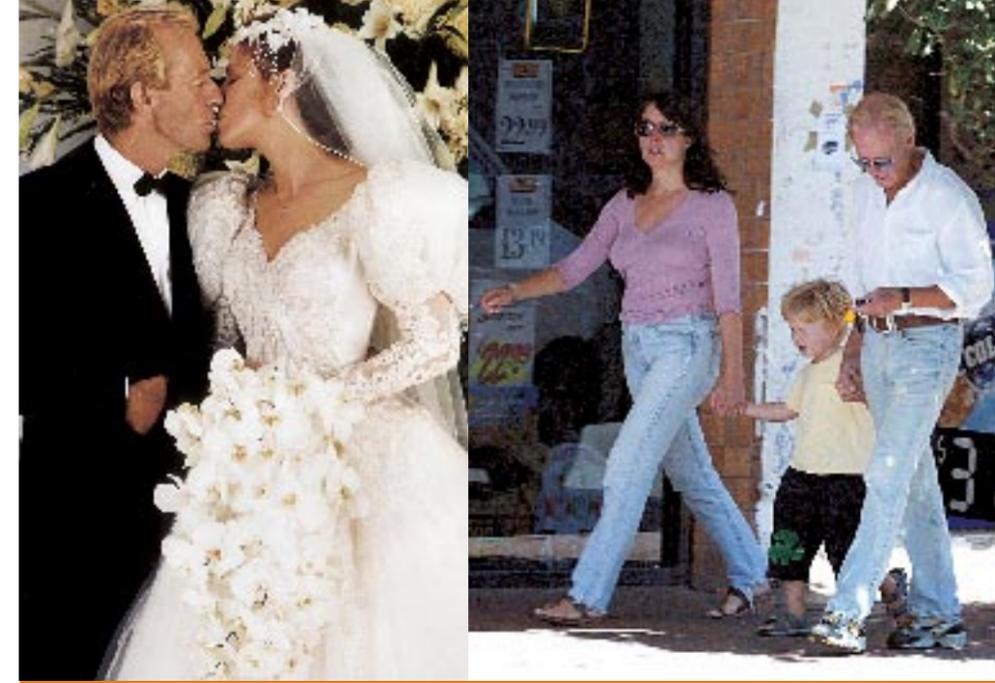
"She's thinking, 'I'm married. I've got a child. We've been together for nearly 16 years, and I still have to come back here and be the other woman ...' And she didn't understand it. She didn't do anything. I

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did. And it's sort of no one's business."

And it wasn't just the prurience of it all, it was the fabrications that went with it. Paul recalls a time in England – around the release of *Crocodile Dundee II* – when the London tabloids reported that he and Linda had raised hell in a local restaurant. "[Apparently] I started throwing things and swearing and Linda walked out 'cause we couldn't get our table. We read this and we were in Wales at the time, but it was embarrassing because you think a lot of people will read it and think it's true. [As they did in Australia.]

"But anyone who knows me knows that I go into a restaurant and hope that no one will take any notice of me. I don't want to sit there and eat with people looking at me. I've never, ever tried to draw attention to myself. When it's straight out lies and embarrassing and tacky [I don't like that], 'cause I always felt like I was a bit of an ambassador ... and I was.



Above, left: Paul and Linda Kozlowski marry in Byron Bay, NSW, on May 5, 1990, which Paul says turned him into a pariah in Australia. Right: Linda, Paul and their son, Chance, 4, in March 2003.

"Now I've been surpassed, but [in the mid-'80s to early '90s] I was about the best known, about the only known, Australian throughout the world. If you had a contest and said: 'Name an Australian?' they would go, 'Crocodile Dundee', and then they would struggle to think of the next one. Maybe Greg Norman or something, but that was about it.

"So whether I wanted to or not, I was sort of saddled with being an ambassador ... and I didn't want stories of me being a drunken egomaniac in restaurants,

thought of myself as a comedy writer who got lucky enough to perform his own material."

The second reason is plain old gratitude. Having been launched into the hyper-reality of movie stardom by the success of *Crocodile Dundee*, Paul Hogan is today filled with a refreshingly simple and abiding sense of his own good fortune. He still can't quite believe it.

"I don't deserve to be as successful as I've been," he says with a sheepish grin. "I didn't earn it. I sort of got lucky. I was

throwing things and drawing attention to myself. That's not what I'm like and I didn't want anyone thinking that's what Australians are like. That was the only time it really bugged me. It was like, 'Jesus, don't make things up.' "

On the other hand, copping a roasting for a decade of box office and critical failures, (*Lightning Jack*, *Almost an Angel*, *Flipper* and *Crocodile Dundee in Los Angeles*), is, to him, "water off a duck's back".

"It's never worried me in the slightest," he says, "criticism of what I do. I might get offended when they talk about my personal life and it's not true ... but only offended. I never boil over or dwell on it."

And the reason for that is twofold. Paul has never aspired to being an actor. "The switch to movies didn't mean I wanted to be a movie star or an actor," he says. "I don't like being an actor. I always

in the right place at the right time. That's why people annoy me when they get into entertainment, which is the most hugely overpaid gig of all time.

"Their job is to entertain people and they take themselves so seriously. They get cut to the quick when someone criticises what they've done. That's the whole point. When you get up on stage and you sing or tell a joke, people are allowed to go, 'Oh he sucks', or 'She's terrible', because you're only there to entertain them. Even if they hate you, you're entertaining them in a vague sort of way.

"A lot of people [in the entertainment business] don't think they're lucky. They think they're gifted. Yeah, they're a bit gifted, but so are a lot of other people who've never had the opportunity or the inclination or the luck to crack it in the same way.

"So with me, if some guy writes, ►



A scene from Paul's new film, *Strange Bedfellows*, with his co-star and friend, Australian actor Michael Caton.

Bel Air Hotel [in Los Angeles] and this guy comes and taps on the window. He says, 'Sorry to trouble you, I've got this movie script, love you to have a look at it.' I said, 'Oh yeah, no trouble.'

"It was George Harrison ... and he went off saying, 'Lovely to meet you.' And I thought: 'A Beatle? A Beatle was nervous about approaching me?' I sort of got hysterical ... I'm sitting in the car and one of the Beatles is nervous about approaching me and I thought, 'How silly can you get?'"

Another thrill, perhaps more childish than the former two, was finding his way onto *Beavis and Butthead* and *The Flintstones*. "Barney came in with a hat on," says Paul now, and he's calling himself 'CROCODILE BARNEEE'. Oh cool ... I've made *The Flintstones* and I've made *Beavis and Butthead*. I can retire now."

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Paul Hogan has returned home, back to the lush green hills behind Byron Bay, and to the "realness" of the Australian community he left behind when international fame came calling nearly 20 years ago.

have a passion about [putting on a plummy accent] MY CRAFT. Polishing the craft.

"But it's fabulous [fathering again]. Because I've got all the time in the world. I don't work. Well, I do work occasionally, when I feel like it. Not very often ... so the only thing I think is: 'It's not fair'. When I had my first kids I was going to work all the time. And I had to try and make some kind of life for myself ... so they came second to it.

"I missed out on that age between 18 months and seven. You want to be with them every day, the things that come out of their mouths. That's the highlight of my life. I take him [Chance] to school or pick him up. And then we play together.

"He's my constant companion ... I cherish the moments of his childhood because the other kids ... I sort of blinked and turned around and there they were – lumping teenagers. The blink of an eye, it goes so quick.

"And now I sort of try and slow it down and enjoy the sweetness and innocence and naivety of a little kid. It's just wonderful. When they say the funniest little thing so seriously, it's like, 'Please don't get older.'"

It's now more than 30 years ago that Paul Hogan burst into our living rooms with his riotous, irreverent brand of humour. In the intervening years he has written hundreds of comedy sketches for

'This guy sucks', I'd think, 'Oh yeah, I do sometimes. I thought I was getting away with it.'

Which is not to say that Paul Hogan isn't like most mere mortals. He has loved, for instance, the opportunities fame and wealth have bestowed on him – owning sumptuous homes around the world, living in a manner beyond most people's dreams (not bad for a former union organiser), and meeting some of the brightest stars in the Hollywood firmament.

It's just that in doing so, he appears

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to have acquired not a skerrick of hubris or self-importance. When he talks about meeting Hollywood stars, he does so with a genuine sense of modesty, at times incredulity.

"I never got seduced by the glitz and glamour of Hollywood," he says, "but I loved seeing movie stars and talking to them. I met Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Keanu Reeves, Dustin Hoffman, Bob Dylan, Rod Stewart ... I could drop names for hours.

"I know them and they know who I am and we've said hello and exchanged pleasantries, and I get a kick out of that. I don't ask them for their autograph, but I almost do."

Amongst his greatest thrills was meeting Bob Dylan backstage at the 2001 Golden Globe awards. "He just comes up to me and says [putting on a Dylan accent]: 'Hey ... Crocodile Dundee. Very cool.'"

And the late George Harrison. "I was getting into my car in the parking lot of the

His wife still has no affection for the Australian media, but to Australians in general, she is well-disposed.

He says there was always the intention after the birth of their son, Chance, five years ago, to return to Australia so that he would get his schooling here. "I wanted him to grow up Aussiefied, 'cause Americans are a little strange," he says, only half-jokingly.

For a man who has described himself more than once as being cold, it is compelling, therefore, to hear him talk about the joys of fatherhood. "Yeah ... it's not a good thing [to be cold]. Cold is someone who doesn't love anything or anybody," he says. "That's not true [of me]. I'm not a passionate sort of person. I don't really get passionate about anything."

But you're passionate about Chance? "That's just love. I loved all my kids and I loved being with them, and I had a great time with them growing up and I still have a great time. But that's as near as I come to passion, I guess. I mean I don't

television and eight movie scripts. Sure, some of the movies didn't work, but most of the comedy sketches did. And now, for the first time in his life, he's in somebody else's movie, playing a bloke who's pretending to be gay.

Strange Bedfellows is a harmless, feel-good film, at once funny, unpretentious and slightly out of time and fashion, just like the man who plays the leading roles. "I reckon you would go a long way to find someone with his qualities," says his friend Delvene Delaney. "And those qualities are honesty, integrity and humour. He has copped a lot of flak ... but he's got a lot of class."

Her husband, John Cornell, couldn't agree more. "With Hoges," he says, "you think back to the old things. You would have liked to have had him in the trenches with you, because he would have kept your spirits up and never let you down." **W**

Strange Bedfellows opens in cinemas nationally on April 22.