



CROWE'S NEST

A genius on screen, but maligned for loutish behaviour off it, **RUSSELL CROWE** is a man who looks back in anger, but mellows when it comes to wife Danielle and his soon-to-be-born son, writes DAVID LESER.

So, here he is. Russell Crowe. Beyond the hype and the headlines, coiled tightly in his seat, head buried in his hands, occasionally laughing like a little boy, but talking, always talking, and then occasionally looking up at you with those eyes of his, those famous steel blue arrowheads that might easily pass for weapons of war.

This is the man some people like to call the drunken lout, the foul-tempered prat, the insecure punk who leaves vapour trails of enmity in his wake, but who also brings to the screen such boiling, watchable genius that he is now regarded as one of the world's finest actors.

If truth be known, it's a slightly surreal feeling being in his presence. One part of you is programmed not to see the real person at all, rather just the characters he's brought to life for our entertainment: the neo-Nazi skinhead (*Romper Stomper*), the gay plumber (*The Sum of Us*), the brutal cop (*LA Confidential*), the hulking whistleblower (*The Insider*), the Roman general (*Gladiator*), the SAS soldier (*Proof of Life*), the brilliant, schizophrenic maths professor (*A Beautiful Mind*), and now, in his most recent incarnation, the British 18th century sea captain (*Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*).

And while part of you is going through this rollcall of stellar performances, another part of you is trying to figure out whether

the brooding, unshaven figure in a tracksuit in front of you bears any resemblance to the alpha male who seems to fight his way so regularly out of the front pages of the world's newspapers.

It's a difficult call. We often believe what we read, and yet here he is in the flesh giving you all the reasons why it's as crazy to believe these stories as it is to believe that he is, well, Maximus himself.

"Do I feel I need to explain myself at any stage?" he asks rhetorically and with a world-weary sigh, a few minutes into our interview in a Sydney hotel room. "Well, this is the explanation, folks. I'm an actor. I play roles. You go to the cinema, you pay your money. The more effort I put in ... basic principles of mathematics, possibly even gravity ... you have a better experience in the cinema.

"And all I'm doing is telling a story. I'm not going to take that character off the screen and walk up and down the street as that character. So, to meet me, you may experience some disappointment. There's nothing I can do about that. You can't expect me to apologise if other people take that character more seriously than the person performing it."

So that clears that up. Russell Crowe, 39, is not, repeat *not*, any of his characters, although everything he has ever experienced in his life has informed

those characters, gay plumber included. "There's part of me that *is* a gay plumber," he says with deadpan delivery. "I love laying pipe ... Excuse me, bad gag, not for the *The Women's Weekly*."

Okay, but what about the rest? What about the man behind the characters, the one who allegedly starts a brawl outside a Coffs Harbour hotel four years ago, where he is seen on four separate video cameras verbally abusing two young women, biting a club patron on the neck and throwing a punch at his brother? Did the cameras lie? Did his accusers?

And then there's the incident at the BAFTA awards ceremony night in London in February 2002, where he reportedly pinned a television executive against a wall because he had the audacity to cut 50 seconds from his best actor (for *Gladiator*) acceptance speech? True, he later apologised to the executive, but was it genuine remorse or was it the behaviour of a man who realised he might have just blown his chance for a second consecutive Oscar (for *A Beautiful Mind*)?

And then there is the scuffle in the London restaurant in November of that year, when he ►

Russell Crowe, 39, a consummate actor and a man who is often misunderstood.

apparently hurled a racial taunt at the New Zealand Warriors football club owner, Eric Watson, before punching him twice in the face. (Watson retaliated by knocking Crowe to the ground with a well aimed jab.)

Are these incidents the mark of the man, or are they more the occasional mind explosions of a fiercely intelligent, highly ambitious, but sometimes deeply insecure, individual still coming to terms with his mega celebrity status?

Well, to try and find out all one can really do is keep an open mind, ask the questions and hope like hell the interview doesn't end before it begins.

Do you ever recognise yourself in the stories that are written about you, I venture at the outset?

"Very seldom," Russell replies, taking a deep drag on a cigarette. "Every now and then someone will print a complete quote which will make me laugh, when I think about it ... fun to actually say that ... my sense of humour can be a little sharp at times and it's possibly most sharp when I talk about myself in terms of my self-deprecating sense of humour.

"Somebody asked me about playing the role of a captain [in *Master and Commander*] and I said, 'It's going to be very difficult to walk away from 70 or 80 [cast and crew members] saying, 'Good morning, Sir'. And that gets played out as some kind of giant egotist and that's not the reality of where it was coming from."

What about incidents such as the one in the London restaurant? I ask shortly afterwards. "I haven't mentioned that."

No, I know ...? "And I'm not going to. I'm not going to answer your question."

said that, I'm not a malicious person. I don't view life with a great deal of negativity. I don't think anybody owes me anything ...

"But if you've got photographers up your arse most days of the week of your life, what are you supposed to do? [Does it mean] I can't have a negative conversation with a cab driver, for example, because he might ring a newspaper and tell on me? If [he's] a s**t, f***ing driver and [he's] driving me around in a cab I'm going to tell [him]."

"I can [be having] a conversation with somebody that I've known 20 years ago and they can be recounting a story of something we supposedly did together, and I can be sitting there and their memory splits off from reality and they start relating things to me that they would have told at dinner parties over and over again.

"And as things have progressed in my career or whatever, they've added a little bit of information here or there to spice it up. And I'd be sitting there listening to it going, 'I'm actually here now, this isn't the dinner party. This is you and me, right, and now it's very funny that you've related that [story] ... but it didn't happen [like that]'."

"So you get a lot of that. And oddly enough, I get it from my own family. Every now and then I will catch my brother [Terry] telling a story and [I'll say to him], 'You know you just told that story. That was you'. And [he'll reply], 'Yeah ... but it's much more fun if I say it's *you*'."

"[So] if you're telling a story about a situation that has happened in my life ... for a start, you can't tell it from the perspective [of me] if it's something that's happened to me ... because you're *not* me."

a kookaburra visiting him before his grandfather's death 14 years ago, he responds warily.

"You're writing for *The Australian Women's Weekly*, right? Well ... the medium of that kind of magazine will not allow you to express the fact that you may believe there is something outside this human existence that you don't understand, and you won't be able to understand, but you're getting clues to."

"[You might] have great intentions of treating this as a serious subject matter ... but by the time it's in a British tabloid [it looks like] I talk to birds."

Russell eventually relents on this point when I insist that his comments will be recorded faithfully and fairly.

"Okay, well, I'll tell you exactly the situation. I'm in my apartment in Woollahra [in 1989] ... and I was in the kitchen and I had the window open. Five storeys up and a kookaburra just landed on the windowsill. I looked at it and it looked at me. We were this far apart. That had never happened to me before and it wasn't scared of me. I felt it had something to communicate to me, so I just looked at it for a second and I knew that my grandfather [Stan Wemyss] was dead. I just knew it right then."

It was a visitation? "Yeah ... and when that thought had come into my mind, the phone rang and it was my mother – probably 10 or 15 minutes later – I said to her, 'Is Stan dead?' And she said, 'Yes'."

For Russell this was evidence of life's deeper mysteries communicating themselves to him in subtle, but powerful ways. Only trouble is, how do you talk about these things without being misconstrued?

"Whatever I say ... the fact that I am open about these things makes me such an easy target," he says.

"We could muse for hours, but all I'm doing is digging a deeper hole. Forgive me for being a little overprotective, but the thing is, right here I am saying I am overprotective and I'm telling you that these subject matters are not good subject matters for me to talk to you about in an interview because of the target [that I become]."

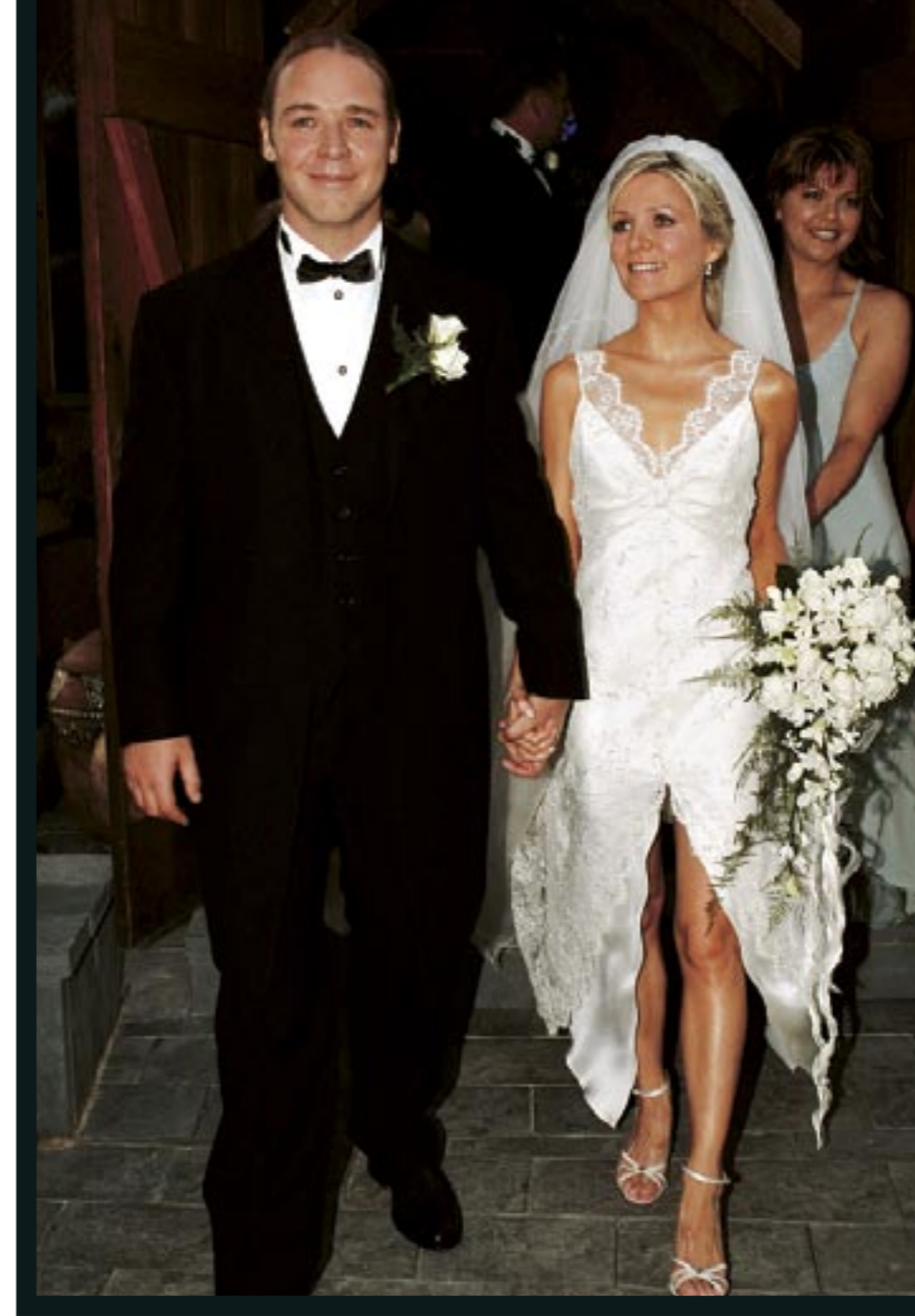
"But I haven't stopped talking. And that, mate, is the problem. If there's a problem, that's where it is – my willingness to give my opinion and my willingness to respond in any kind of situation with what I feel at the time.

Russell has delivered these remarks about an hour into what will end up being a three-hour conversation. During this time, we will find ourselves discussing everything from his latest Peter Weir-directed film to various aspects of male friendship, love, ambition, the importance of family and the role of culture and spirituality in one's life.

Each topic holds its own fascination – and its own potential for misunderstanding. And Russell has been hard-wired to expect the latter, especially from journalists. When I ask him, for example, to confirm a story that I'd heard about

"All I can say, mate, is that people are far more aware of me when I go into a room than I've ever been aware of myself. If I'm in a restaurant, I'm usually there to eat. Very simple. If I'm walking down the street, I'm probably going somewhere. Things get applied to who you are and what your intentions are. How are you supposed to combat that? How are you supposed to combat people being able to print things with impunity and say whatever the hell it is they want to say about you.

"Now, I'm no choirboy ... but having



Russell and Danielle Spencer after their wedding on April 7 this year.

he was 16, he'd adopted the stage name Russ Le Roq and penned his first single, *I Wanna Be Like Marlon Brando*. It was a spectacular flop.

"I actually have two or three of the worst recordings in the history of the New Zealand music industry," he said in another typically self-deprecating aside. "So I've got that whole bottom end covered."

Although he had significant success in musicals such as *Grease* and *The Rocky Horror Show*, it wasn't until he was 25 that he landed his first lead role in a film, *The Crossing*, playing opposite the woman he would later marry, Danielle Spencer.

"[That's] a 19-year apprenticeship," he tells me now, "and 19 years of 'No mate, you're not good enough. Don't like your hairdo. You're the wrong height.' None of the things that are relevant to the character or the possibility of playing characters."

This smouldering anger at being passed over for nearly two decades is an important clue to understanding Russell Crowe, as is the fact that – by his own admission – he often felt misunderstood while growing up. At school he won prizes for English and history, but they never seemed to count for much when compared to his alleged behaviour.

"Being unfairly accused ... dates all the way back to primary school," he says. "There was an incident that happened at [Sydney's] Vaucluse Public, which had nothing to do with me, but I was blamed for. And I remember being punished for it and it turned me and my attitudes towards headmasters and teachers."

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IS – MY WILLINGNESS TO GIVE MY OPINION of situation with what I feel at the time.

That's where the problem lies. I'm not faking it and I don't put it with a pretty bow because somebody else needs it that way."



RUSSELL CROWE'S AMBITION to be an actor was palpable even as a young boy. As he once commented, "I would look at the 28-year-old guy playing the war veteran in a film and tell my parents, 'I don't know why the director doesn't see me in that role. I might be a little short, but I can do it.'"

He knew instinctively he was born for

showbusiness. His maternal grandfather, Stan Wemyss, had been an award-winning cinematographer during World War II and his parents, Alex and Jocelyn, were, for much of his early years, set caterers in film and television.

Born in New Zealand in 1964, Crowe moved with his family to Australia in 1970, where, at the age of six, he scored his first acting job in the Australian television series *Spyforce*. At 12, he appeared in *The Young Doctors*. In the interim, he acquired the first of many guitars, thus giving expression to his other great passion – music. By the time

The official school history of his old Mt Roskill Grammar School in Auckland is a case in point. "If I hadn't gone on to do what I do ... [nobody at that school] would remember me from a bar of soap. But they're telling a story – and this is in the official history of the school – where I'd become so unpopular with the junior school that at one fundraising meeting it was voted that I should be chained up and led around the school doing a series of unpleasant tasks in front of a baying crowd.

"[And I'm thinking], 'What f***ing planet are you on. It never f***ing happened ▶"



I'D MOVE TO LOS ANGELES IF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND were swallowed up by a huge tidal wave, if there was a bubonic plague in Europe."

[and yet] it's in the f***ing book. It's in the history of the school.

"As Oscar Wilde said, 'Biography is evil'. People from outside somebody else's life can't describe what that person's life was."



TWO YEARS AFTER WINNING his first lead role in *The Crossing*, Russell Crowe's simmering displeasure with the world was perfectly parlayed into the role of Hando, the vicious skinhead in Geoffrey Wright's movie, *Romper Stomper*.

Although the movie was condemned by, amongst others, then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating as "morally bankrupt", the American actress, Sharon Stone, found Russell's performance so electrifying she delayed production on the film *The Quick and the Dead* in order to get him to play opposite her.

"Russell Crowe is the sexiest guy working in movies today," she declared.

He was also indisputably one of the most talented. Although never formally schooled as an actor, he made the craft look effortless, even when displaying skills for which he had no previous training.

In his latest film, Peter Weir's *Master and Commander*, Russell's character, the 18th century naval sea captain, Jack Aubrey, is the possessor of an improbable talent: he plays the violin. For that reason, Russell decided that he would take violin

instructions from his friend Richard Tognetti, the artistic director of the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

"I made a pact with myself," Russell says, "that I couldn't possibly play a man who played the violin without knowing in my heart that I could truthfully make a beautiful sound on the instrument. And there began a long dance with a very harsh mistress."

Tognetti is full of praise for what Russell accomplished. "It is hard to play the violin," he says. "It is one of the hardest things you can do ... it's like learning a Chinese dialect. And so, given that, he did an astonishing job ... especially as he'd been holding a sword all day."

Sex appeal and talent aside, what has continued to make Russell Crowe such a compelling figure – to film-makers and the movie-going public alike – is the whiff of danger that has constantly surrounded him.

It's not just the previously mentioned public brawls or the fact that he's been known to tell American producers where to shove their budgets – especially if they don't like his accent – or that in real life he charms leading ladies (Meg Ryan) away from their leading men (Dennis Quaid) – as he did a few years ago. It's that he genuinely seems the antithesis of the manufactured, overly glamourised Hollywood star.

"I'd move to Los Angeles," he once said, "if Australia and New Zealand were

swallowed up by a huge tidal wave, if there was a bubonic plague in Europe and if the continent of Africa disappeared from some Martian attack."

In that sense, he is the ultimate Antipodean Male, a man who hates pretence, bristles at authority, hides his genuine warmth and softness under a tough exterior and revels in the company of his fellow man, particularly those from his beloved South Sydney rugby league team.

Earlier this year, Russell caused an estimated \$20,000 damage (which he paid for) at the luxury W Hotel in Sydney, after he and the South Sydney first-grade team decided to play a game of football in the restaurant after dinner.

On one level, it was sheer, drunken recklessness. On another, it was probably the most astute thing anyone had done for the hapless bottom-of-the-table team

that year – get them drunk mid-week to remind them that it was, after all, only a game.

The following Saturday, the team trounced the far more fancied Melbourne Storm, after receiving an inspirational half-time talk from Crowe, which included him drinking an imaginary glass of Bookers Bourbon to their health. "My message to them was don't forget to enjoy yourself."

It's a message Russell might well have been reminding himself of in the wake of all the bad boy publicity last year.

Joy comes from the bonds of friendship. It comes from reflective time on his farm, at Nana Glen, in the hills behind Coffs Harbour. It comes from opening a new script and smelling the pages. It comes from nailing the character and from completing the film.

And it most definitely comes from "a lazy day with the wife doing whatever you want to do".

In April this year, Russell married singer/actor Danielle Spencer in a ceremony at Nana Glen. Next month will see the birth of their first child, a son, and you can actually hear the pleasure from these developments in his lilting, smoke-cured voice.

"When Danni and I came back ▶

Two-year-old Russell in New Zealand in 1966, before his family settled in Australia.

APL SERGE TOMANN



In his latest film, *Master and Commander*, Russell plays an 18th-century sea captain.

is patiently waiting to go home. Inside, Russell is still talking, still letting the light in on what it means to be Russell Crowe.

Sure there's the incredible job and the homes and the wife and the pay packet (\$20million for the last film). But there's also the rumour mill, which just keeps churning every day.

"Every f***ing day," he says, "there's 15, 20 articles or more around the world, which are just rubbish, you know. 'Russell was looking at real estate, I don't know, in Noosa Heads. Russell has bought a castle in Armidale. Russell owns shares in a winery in Tasmania.'

"What the f*** are you people talking

THERE'S A SOCIETAL THOUGHT PROCESS THAT THE ANGRY MAN IS GUILTY. I tell you what, ladies and gentleman, that's a lie."

together as adults ... when she attended the Academy Awards in 2001 ... it just felt really good. We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. She just came as my mate to go to the big do.

"But if you ever see footage of that moment, even though I'm completely gobsmacked [that I won for *Gladiator*] ... and it took me a long time to get out of my chair and everything, before I went up on stage, I turned to her and I bent down on her level, because she was sitting in the chair, and I said, 'This is because you're here'. And I gave her a kiss and then went up on stage, and made a speech ...

"I don't know about soul mate and stuff. I am my own person and I don't know what that means to somebody else who's reading it. But it feels to me that when the person you're with makes you more thoughtful, gives you an intellectual foil that is without restriction to discuss things, and allows your imagination to wander [then] this is beginning to be what I suppose soul mate means.

"But I decided I was going to marry Danni a long time ago. It's got nothing to do with England or restaurants ... I just didn't want to ask her when I thought she might have more than one answer in mind ...

"I had already been hanging out with her for quite a while by that stage, with the ring in my pocket, wondering, you know, is this the right moment? And it just so happened that I thought, 'Well, let's go

[to Darcy's restaurant in Sydney] and I'll see if that's the right moment.

"It was the end of dinner and everything was cleared up, and there was nobody else around and I just started talking about, you know, the same sort of conversation we had had many times – about how much I loved her and how much I liked being with her, and it just went from there."

As for becoming a father, Russell is determined to ensure he gets the right balance between the crazy, peripatetic demands of his working life and those of his family.

"For the next five years," he says, "I think it's a matter of working harder because I want to be the bloke who picks up my son from school. I want to drop him off in the morning and pick him up at the end of the day.

"I've got a friend whose son sometimes goes to a rural school, sometimes goes to a city school and sometimes goes correspondence, depending on what the situation is.

"But the bottom line is you've never seen a more balanced and loved child than that little fella. Really ... continuity in a kid's life has little to do with geography and far more to do with the attention of his parents."



OUTSIDE THE HOTEL, the Sydney light has faded and Russell Crowe's publicist

about? These are stories that are printed in newspapers by people calling themselves journalists."

And we wonder why Russell Crowe gets angry. Not because he's done anything wrong, he says. To the contrary, because he hasn't. He's just been constantly hounded and unfairly accused, like in the old days at school.

"There's a societal thought process that the angry man is guilty," he says. "I tell you what, ladies and gentlemen, that's a lie. That's absolute rubbish.

"The guy that can keep calm when he's been accused of all and sundry is more than likely lying to you. And if there's one thing that's guaranteed to get any truthful, decent man to stand up for himself, it's when people are accusing him of something falsely."

Russell Crowe is a complex man. He's combustible, loyal, funny, generous to a fault and possessed of a furious, roaming intelligence.

Early on in his career, he worked out that he didn't necessarily have to love his characters to play them well. He saw that loving them too much could blind him to their faults, thereby robbing them of their essential, flawed humanity.

"In my job," Russell says, "it's the faults that make it interesting."

As it does in real life, too.



Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World will be released in cinemas around Australia on December 4.



PULL-OUT QUOTES:

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