

# Russell Crowe

## THE HIGHS

## & LOWS OF

## FAME

20 YEARS AFTER *GLADIATOR*, THE STAR REFLECTS ON WHAT HE'S LEARNED—AND WHY HE'S HAPPIEST ON HIS FARM IN AUSTRALIA

By NIGEL SMITH

**W**hen Russell Crowe played a Roman general in the historical epic *Gladiator* in 2000, he instantly went from actor on the rise to worldwide superstar. An Oscar, fame and fortune and countless movie offers followed, including a starring role in the following year's Best Picture, *A Beautiful Mind*. But an altercation in 2005 in which he threw a telephone at a hotel concierge in New York City escalated his reputation for being volatile. He later told David Letterman the incident was "possibly the most shameful situation that I've ever gotten myself in" and also told Charlie Rose it "indelibly changed me." He retreated from the spotlight, moving back to Australia to raise his two young sons with his then-wife, Danielle Spencer, while also playing in bands and co-owning a Sydney rugby team. But Crowe, 56, never lost his passion for acting, continuing to challenge himself with roles ranging from the musical drama *Les Misérables* in 2012 to action comedies like *The Nice Guys* in 2016. "I don't get into any kind of singular groove," he says of how he

chooses his parts. "I look at the material I'm given, and I go from there."

Fresh off a resurgent year that included a Golden Globe win this January for his portrayal of media magnate Roger Ailes in Showtime's *The Loudest Voice*, he's now playing an unstable man whose intense road rage turns murderous in the thriller *Unhinged*. It's one of the first films to debut in theaters since the coronavirus pandemic began. He initially turned down the role but says "it wouldn't go away" after he read the script. His character's anger "is something that's unleashed really across society," he says. Plus, as he slyly puts it: "When you're playing a super bad guy, you have a little bit more fun."



**These days Crowe is more of a reflective, wry Hollywood veteran than an angry young man—and he**







## BEFORE HE WAS FAMOUS



### Doing the Time Warp

At 24, Crowe played Eddie and Dr. Everett Scott in a New Zealand production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

### Soapy Start

Crowe (with Jason Donovan) had a turn in the long-running Australian soap *Neighbors* in 1987.



### Rock Rebel

As a teen Crowe performed in a band under the name Russ le Roq. One single was titled "I Just Wanna Be Like Marlon Brando."

has a hard-won perspective on the ups and downs of his remarkable career. Born in New Zealand and raised mostly in Australia by parents who worked as caterers on film sets, he was bitten by the acting bug by preschool. "You have to understand, I've had a very different journey than a lot of people

**'[GLADIATOR] TOOK FAME TO THE OTHER PLACE, WHERE YOU ARE NO LONGER YOU ANYMORE'**

have," he says. "I got experience very young as an actor." He started when he was just 6, appearing in the Australian TV series *Spyforce*. After returning to New Zealand for high school when he was 14, Crowe set his sights on a music career, singing and playing guitar under the stage name Russ le Roq and releasing several singles,

none of which hit the charts. Soon he went back to his first love. "I'd reached a certain level of fame at the age of 21 in New Zealand," Crowe recalls, "and wasn't really happy with what I'd achieved at that point. So I left all that behind, and I went to Australia, ostensibly to focus on one thing—acting."

After success on the long-running Australian soap *Neighbors* and in the country's film scene, he set out to conquer Hollywood. "When I went to L.A., it's kind of like I knew the drill," he says. "I think I was a bit more sure-footed than other people might be because of the experience that I

had." Despite his initial confidence, Crowe says it actually ended up taking a while to adjust to life there. He says he "came to an understanding of Los Angeles" after he garnered acclaim for 1995's *The Quick and the Dead* and 1997's *L.A. Confidential*. "When I first went there, I found it quite unsettling," he says. "There's definitely darkness there." Learning to navigate the city for his meetings was also confusing. "It doesn't operate like a city like London or New York. It's this big spread. It was scary," he says. "Then I began to understand L.A. from a different point of view. [The city] has the capacity to keep opening its wings and taking in dreamers and people that want to have a creative life. It's amazing for that. You cannot know L.A. properly unless you're willing to spend time there. Then you understand how it works. And it works beautifully."

**That is, of course, until it doesn't.** Crowe experienced fame in all its facets. "Being famous was fun," he recalls of the period in between making *L.A. Confi-*

## HIS HOLLYWOOD EVOLUTION



**Gladiator**  
Crowe played Maximus, an enslaved fighter who avenges the murder of his family. He says the fame that followed the 2000 hit was "stratospheric."



### Oscar Gold

The three-time nominee took home Best Actor for *Gladiator*—and celebrated with Julia Roberts, who won Best Actress for *Erin Brockovich*.

**Unhinged**  
"It's tricky to play someone... with this lack of humanity," Crowe says of his villainous *Unhinged* character, who goes on a rampage after a road-rage incident.







away with America's sweetheart. Though the relationship quickly fizzled out and he married actress and singer Spencer in 2003, his temper continued to land him in the headlines—culminating in the phone-throwing incident, for which he pleaded guilty to second-degree assault. He apologetically explained he'd been frustrated that he wasn't able to make a phone call to his wife in Australia. It was "a combination of jet lag, loneliness and adrenaline," he later told the U.K.'s *Daily Telegraph*. All you can do, he says now, is grow and move on: "All of these things, it's all about what you learn."

Today Crowe isn't worried so much about his public image as he is with just getting a good night's sleep. Now divorced from Spencer, 51, he has owned a working cattle farm in the Australian village of Nana Glen since his 30s. He says he's "been in the bush since December. It's the longest time I've spent at home on my farm since before I got married and had babies." He's relishing being in nature. "When I'm here, I like to shape my day around how the farm itself is working," he says. "I like to be in bed just after dark, and I like to be up before the sun. [When I'm acting], I have a very people-centered job, and while there are still people here, the space has been very big for me—I can tell you that straight up." He also loves spending time with his kids—sons Charles, 17, and Tennyson, 14. "From the time I had my first son in the hospital and cut his umbilical cord, the biggest word that comes to me is the privilege of it," Crowe says.

"You get to see this fascinating journey from a little baby into a toddler who can start to form words and ideas... and then up to very expressive, imaginative, intelligent children who keep me on my toes completely. You're never going to experience any other love that is the same depth as the love of a parent. It's the thing that gives me the greatest joy. There's having my kids, and then anything else that might be second is a long way behind." ●

**Friendly Exes**  
Crowe and Australian actress Danielle Spencer married in 2003, separated in 2012 and divorced in 2018. They have two sons.



*dential* and *Gladiator*. "It didn't come with any real pressure. It just meant that if you'd go in a restaurant, the maître d' was pleased to see you. If you were booking into a hotel, you got an upgrade if there was one available. Being famous was easy at that point." Crowe says his perspective changed after *Gladiator*. "That sort of took fame to the other place, where you are no longer you anymore," he says. "I went through that period thinking that I was making the right decision in not being so available [to the public] and being humble in the face of that fame. But that's just not the way it was taken."

A romance with his *Proof of Life* costar Meg Ryan amid her divorce from Dennis Quaid in 2000 made him a tabloid fixture, painted as the rogue who ran