

ERIC INC.

WHILE HE MAY BE MODEST ABOUT IT, MOST PEOPLE SEE ERIC BANA'S CAREER TRAJECTORY OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS AS BEING NOTHING SHORT OF PHENOMENAL. BUT HE SAYS HE HASN'T REACHED HIS LIMIT YET

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PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD BAILEY

flying the Bana...

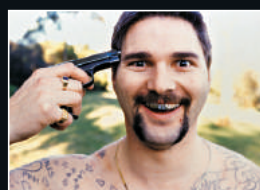
1997

After writing and starring in his short-lived TV shows, *Eric* and *The Eric Bana Show Live*, Bana makes his big-screen debut playing a kickboxing accountant, Con, in *The Castle*.



2000

Wins an AFI Award for his starring role as notorious criminal Mark 'Chopper' Read in *Chopper*.



2003

Stars in his first Hollywood leading role, in *Hulk*, the movie version of the Marvel comic book series *The Incredible Hulk*.



2004 Co-stars with Brad Pitt, Orlando Bloom and Peter O'Toole in the epic movie *Troy*, playing Hector, Prince of Troy. Director Wolfgang Petersen says it's Bana's devotion to his family that won him the 'noble' role.

2005

Leads a stellar cast, including Geoffrey Rush and Daniel Craig, in *Munich*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, the film is based on the aftermath of the 1972 Olympics.



2007

Co-stars with Franka Potente in Richard Roxburgh's directorial debut, *Romulus, My Father*, the film version of Raimond Gaita's acclaimed memoir.



For Eric Bana, 1997 was a bittersweet year. Personally, he was on a high, having married the love of his life, Rebecca Gleeson. Professionally? Things could have been better. OK, so he had just made his film debut in the hugely successful *The Castle*. But Bana, then better known as a comedian than as an actor, felt he was at a career crossroads.

Frustrated at the less than stellar success of his two eponymous TV shows, he walked away from the Seven Network at the end of the year. "I don't know what I'm going to do," he said at the time. "The last 12 months I've been in situations where, mentally, I've gone through stuff that someone my age probably shouldn't have to."

But Bana, famous for his TV characters, including the mullet-haired Poida, had a plan. He'd secretly auditioned for the lead in a film about the life of notorious Melbourne criminal Mark 'Chopper' Read, and was willing to sacrifice his TV career to further his acting ambitions. "I had a lot to gain and nothing to lose. I had a kind of blind faith that I could do it."

He was right. His remarkable performance in 2000's *Chopper* gained him an AFI Award for Best Actor – among other gongs – and a ticket to Hollywood. *Chopper* led to Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*, and before he knew it Bana was hanging out in Malta with Brad Pitt on the epic *Troy*. It was quite a journey for the boy from Melbourne's Tullamarine. "Yes, I can't complain," grins the 39-year-old now.

That said, the man who went on to work with Hollywood greats such as director Steven Spielberg, and veteran actors Robert Duvall and Peter O'Toole, says he still needs another big break. "Yes, *Chopper* was a big break, as were *Black Hawk Down*, *Troy* and *Hulk*. But there's probably room for other ones. Even though I get some great jobs with great directors, I'm still not so well known to the worldwide viewing audience by name and face."

Bana refuses to say luck has had anything to do

with his success so far. "I get a bit tired of people insinuating that the breaks I've had have been down to luck. I wouldn't have been given those breaks if the quality of the work wasn't what it was."

We're talking near Bana's home in Melbourne, where he's enjoying an extended break after finishing work on *The Other Boleyn Girl* in London. When I discover our birthdays are only a few days apart, we discuss our Leo traits. "I'm a little bit stubborn," he admits, "and I have a very well kept-in-check temper. And I don't like being told what to do. I'll run a mile before being dictated to for the sake of being dictated to."

The man born Eric Banadinovich is charm personified, but his fairly intense demeanour – at least when he's talking about work – seems to have more in common with his dramatic roles than his early comic creations. Not having seen any of Bana's stand-up, I can't picture him telling jokes on stage. How did a man who loathes being the centre of attention end up being a stand-up comedian? "It's a really good question," he ponders. "When I'm with strangers, I'm usually the one skulking in the corner. I don't turn into a clown unless I'm with really close friends and I've had a drink."

"But I wanted to be an actor and the stand-up thing was suggested by some friends. At first, I was like, 'You're kidding me – I don't mind being an idiot among you guys, but I'm not sure I want to be an idiot in front of a bunch of strangers.'"

"Then a friend took me to a comedy venue and I realised it could be a stepping stone into acting – a really practical acting school. I wasn't interested in going to drama classes or anything like that. And it wasn't as if I had a great choice of career paths. There were always the trolleys at Coles..." he laughs. (Yes, as a teenager, Bana collected trolleys at the supermarket in order to save up for his first car.)

Talking of cars, the young Bana, son of Croatian and German migrants, could have ended up as a

rally driver or a mechanic. He's a self-confessed revhead ("cars have always been my number one passion – it's in my DNA," he grins) and he still has the car he bought when he was 15. The '74 XB Ford coupe is his pride and joy and had just undergone a two-year restoration when Bana raced it in the Targa Tasmania road rally in April. It was his second time in the gruelling road race and Bana was lucky to escape injury when he crashed into a tree.

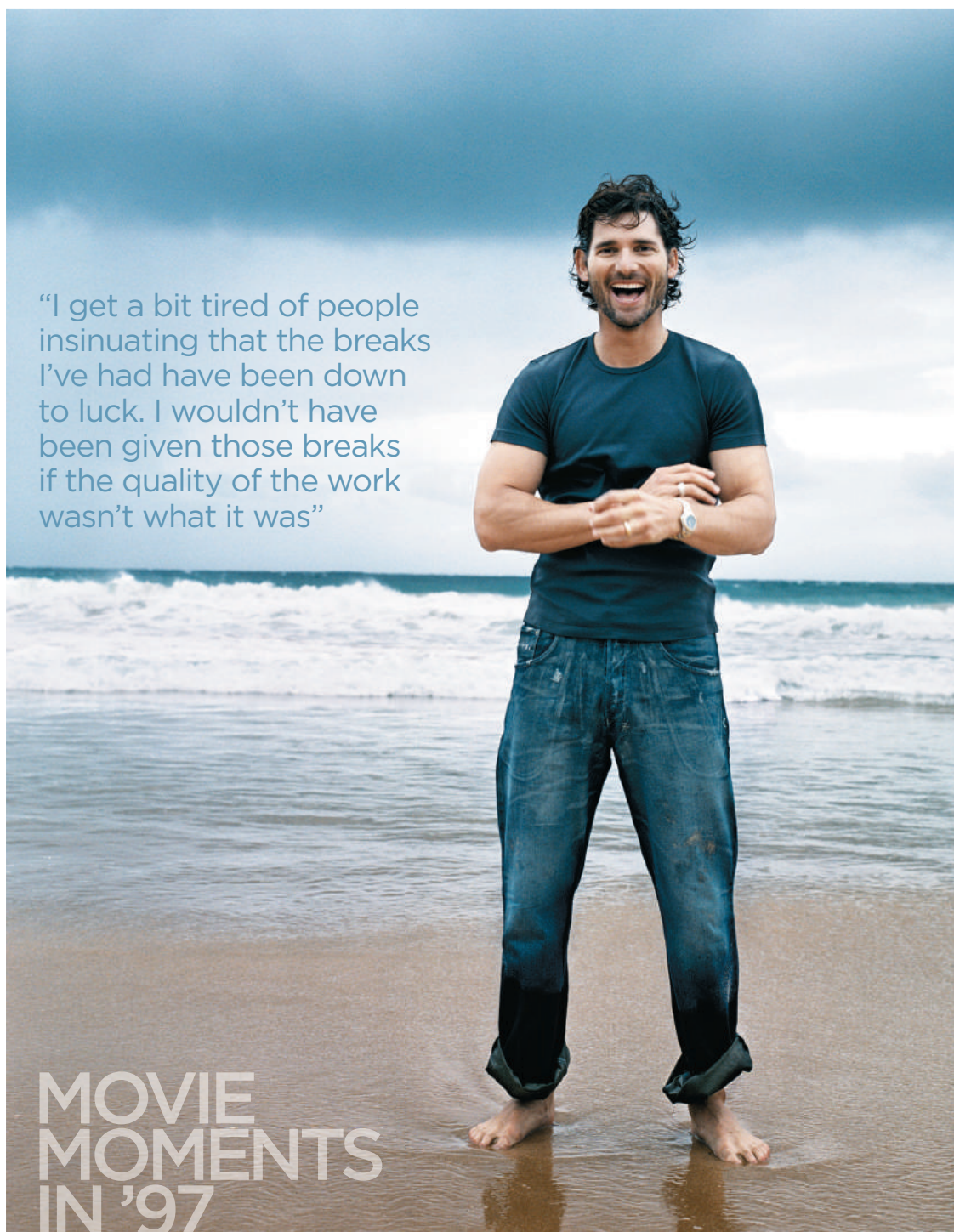
Now that he's a husband and father (to son Klaus, seven, and daughter Sophia, five), he admits that the risk of taking part in rallies, particularly since the death of Peter Brock ("it was a massive shock"), worries him. "I do think about it a lot," he says. "I don't do as many rallies as I probably would if I was single. You have to recognise what your abilities are and drive within them. That said, we're still on the edge and drive that car extremely hard."

Bana relishes just being one of the boys when he's in a rally. "I get so much enjoyment out of it," he enthuses. "I've met some of my closest friends through racing. It's a great leveller. You can go to a race meeting and there'll be a multi-millionaire private collector and a mechanic, but everyone's an equal – they just share the same love."

He may be a movie star who counts Pitt as a friend, but he's not seduced by the glamour of Hollywood. "I act, that's my job," he insists. "I tend not to attend anything that has the word 'celebrity' attached to it. There's the odd thing that Rebecca and I will go to, but it's weird; I don't really feel part of that world. I don't have much to do with it."

"I'm fortunate to work with great people and be in great films, and there's attention that comes from that, but I don't create attention in my private life. I try to be as invisible as humanly possible – which is sometimes difficult, given my job," he admits.

For the most part, he can slip under the radar in his hometown. "If I'm with my family, people tend to leave me alone, which I appreciate." He quips >



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MOVIE MOMENTS IN '97

While Eric Bana was breaking out of TV sketch comedy with his film debut in *The Castle*, his fellow Aussies were also making their mark in some of the best films of the year. Here are some of them.

When Susan Sarandon revealed the Oscar winner for Best Actor in 1997, a then little-known man with an intriguingly rubbery face became only the second Australian to win the coveted statue since Peter Finch had won it posthumously in 1976, for the seminal film *Network*.

In doing so, stage actor Geoffrey Rush beat then two-time Oscar nominee Tom Cruise. The moment was swimming in symbolism. Rush, the star of an obscure, locally made independent film, *Shine*, outshone a Hollywood heavyweight who had starred in *Jerry Maguire*, the only major studio film to be nominated for an Oscar that year.

Once on stage in front of the biggest names in the film industry,

Queensland-born Rush proceeded to “thank every Australian actor and theatre colleague I’ve ever worked with”.

Suddenly, the island nation down under was in the spotlight and would soon be dubbed ‘Aussiewood’. Rush’s victory marked the start of a great year for Australians in film.

Rachel Griffiths played the bridesmaid to Cameron Diaz in one of the biggest box office hits of the year, *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, which was directed by another Aussie, JP Hogan.

Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce, both well-known for their film and TV work in the country they called home, also made their mark on Hollywood playing the good cop-bad cop routine in the gritty *LA Confidential*. And veteran actor Jack Thompson played a corpulent southern lawyer in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, based

on the best-seller by American journalist John Berendt.

Back home, a then relatively unknown NIDA graduate with ethereal looks, Cate Blanchett, landed her film break in three films: Bruce Beresford’s *Paradise Road*, the quirky *Thank God He Met Lizzie* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, co-starring British actor Ralph Fiennes.

At the AFI Awards, Blanchett won a Best Supporting Actress for *Lizzie* - her first major award. Richard Roxburgh picked up the Best Actor gong for *Doing Time for Patsy Cline*, while director Bill Bennett won for *Kiss or Kill*, which was also crowned Best Film.

Despite being arguably the biggest box office earner of '97, taking more than \$10 million, *The Castle* picked up just one AFI Award - for Best Original Screenplay, which was written by Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner, Jane Kennedy and Rob Sitch. **SANDRA LEE**

that unlike Pitt, who can’t scratch his nose without the paparazzi taking photos, Bana could “slip out and get a pint of milk naked and be OK”.

When we meet, Bana is preparing to head to the US to film *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, co-starring Rachel McAdams. As always, his family will accompany him. “I only really do short trips overseas by myself. We’ve been pretty careful about that.”

He admits it would be easier if they moved overseas. “But it’s a lifestyle decision, and a kids’ education and family and friends decision. If we were living overseas, we’d spend our whole time planning trips home.

“But yes, there’s a lot [about living in Melbourne] that’s extremely impractical. Every six months, we sit down and look ahead at the next six months and work out how we’re going to deal with it. We try not to think too far ahead, otherwise you just panic over stuff you have no control over. In three years, I might not be able to get a job, so there’s no point in worrying about what I’m going to do when my son is in grade five.”

Bana says he was lucky to marry someone who could cope with the pressure. “Rebecca and I could never have envisaged how my career and our lives would pan out, but I’ve ended up with someone who couldn’t have been more comfortable with all those changes. We’ve been exposed to some stuff that would test anyone and we got through it with a lot of hard work, and because we’re extremely compatible and adore each other. We go to great efforts to protect things.”

He’s proud that 2007 has seen the couple celebrating their 10th wedding anniversary. “Unfortunately, that’s proving to be a long time in Hollywood,” he muses.

Stephen Curry, who hit it off with Bana when the pair co-starred in *The Castle*, says success couldn’t have happened to a better guy. “Eric is extremely talented but extremely humble. The fact he’s remained the bloke he’s always been, despite his success, is inspiring, too.”

Bana will next be seen on the big screen in 2008 with Scarlett Johansson and Natalie Portman in the aforementioned *The Other Boleyn Girl*. (“They were brilliant, such a tonne of energy,” he says of his co-stars.) He plays Henry VIII. “I just read the script and thought, I love this guy. His behaviour is extraordinarily bad, but I could understand him. I thought he would be a huge challenge to play.”

He also enjoyed working in Australia again last year, on Richard Roxburgh’s *Romulus, My Father*, although he admits, “In some ways, it’s harder because there are more distractions here. The bonus, of course, is that I can go to the footy.” (Bana is a passionate St Kilda fan.)

He’d like to follow in Roxburgh’s footsteps and direct, but not until his children are older. “I’m under no illusions as to what it entails. Acting is one thing, but directing means surrendering your life entirely for a couple of years. Richard had just had a baby when he was making *Romulus* so he timed it perfectly,” he laughs.

Our time is drawing to a close, and Bana is eager to spend this sunny afternoon with his family. He says he always wanted kids, while joking that he “didn’t spend his late teens dreaming about fatherhood”.

“But I knew that, if the right person came along, it was something I’d like to do. I wouldn’t have done it for the hell of it, that’s for sure. It’s the best and the toughest job in the world. But it’s great because it puts everything into perspective.” **SM**

Revisit Bana circa '97 at www.youtube.com. Type in ‘Eric Bana Full Frontal’ for a dose of Poida.