

# WEST WEEKEND

FEBRUARY 04-05 2017

## KEEP IT SPARKY

Roald Dahl's  
advice for kids  
big and small

## MIDDLE GROUND

Rob Broadfield laps  
up a lovely locale

## LADY IN RED

BE BOLD &  
BEAUTIFUL

# JOSH LAWSON

The US-based actor steps into some rather  
big boots as a genuine Aussie icon.

*plus »*

COOL AS A  
CUCUMBER

The Weekend West



# Moment Of strewth

Josh Lawson has a bigger profile in the US than his home country. But that's about to change, writes **Julie Hosking**.

**T**hat voice. Distinctive. Unforgettable. A voice that greeted Australians for 11 years with a signature “G’day viewers.” That helped put Australia on the map, persuading the Poms to drink an ice-cold Fosters and encouraging the Yanks to put another shrimp on the barbie. And the voice behind one of the most quoted lines in cinema: “That’s not a knife ... *this* is a knife.”

It’s also a voice that drove Josh Lawson to distraction. The Brisbane-born actor, writer and director was chosen to step into the enormous work boots of one Paul Hogan for Hoges the miniseries, and he’s the first to admit it was one daunting assignment. Nailing that voice was just part of the homework.

“His voice is actually a lot deeper than mine; it sits in a totally different part of my vocal range,” Josh says. “But I listened to it, I mean I can’t tell you how many hours I listened to Paul Hogan – to the point of madness, to the point his voice was like a running soundtrack to my life.”

If he doubted himself while filming the miniseries in Brisbane last year, Josh did receive a few welcome reassurances that he was on the right track.

“One of the sound guys, he worked on some of the old Paul Hogan shows early on and he went up to me and said ‘mate, I can’t tell you apart in the sound, you sound just like him’.” The other affirmation came from someone even closer to the 77-year-old Aussie icon. “His granddaughter Mylee works for Channel Seven studios in Brisbane and she came on set one day and watched me do this thing and afterwards came up to me and said ‘holey moley, you sound just like Pop’. I thought, ‘well that’s good’.”

At 35, Josh is too young to have grown up watching Hoges, the lovable larrikin who famously worked as a rigger on the Sydney Harbour Bridge before wangling his way onto a talent show merely to prove to his workmates he could show up the judges who made sport of ridiculing contestants. His brand of straight-talking humour was an instant hit, and at the grand old age of 32 the struggling father of five was suddenly an overnight success.

The Paul Hogan Show, which he wrote and produced and also starred his manager and life-long friend John "Strop" Cornell, ran from 1973 to 1984 and though it may look and sound very much of its time now, some of the sketches will still make Australians of a certain vintage laugh out loud (google "Paul Hogan on kids sandwiches" for starters).

He parlayed his profile into a series of advertisements for cigarettes (which he later walked away from because of the growing evidence of links to cancer); beer (winning over warm-beer-loving Poms with lines such as "strewth, have you seen the strides on that") and, perhaps most importantly, for Australia itself – spruiking our laid-back lifestyle to slightly incredulous Americans (something he did for free).

Hogan won a Golden Globe, was nominated for an Oscar (both for Crocodile Dundee) and was named Australian of the Year among many other

**'He was a total trailblazer, they'd never seen anyone like him.'**

accolades. His contribution to the local industry was recently recognised by the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts with the Longford Lyell Award; in his acceptance speech, he joked he was a "one-hit wonder ... but what a hit".

Having previously criticised AACTA for not giving comedy its due – as if it were somehow easier to do than drama – Josh is chuffed to see a man who's made his name making us laugh given the industry's highest honour.

"But even he sort of diminished it, didn't he? 'I'm not an actor, I only play one character'," Josh says. "'But Paul', you want to say, 'what you have accomplished is so colossal', that's so classically Paul Hogan, to play down his achievements."

With 1986's all-conquering Crocodile Dundee, he paved the way for so many who would head to America after him, including the man who brings his story to the small screen. "He was a total trailblazer, they'd never seen anybody like him," Josh says. "I mean he must have looked like an alien to them back then because he was so Australian and so unashamedly Aussie but in a lot of ways such a leading man. He was handsome and charming and funny so in a way, it's sort of no great surprise that he was as big as he was. I suppose what is a surprise is there was no ... he never wanted to do it as a kid, he fell into it."

Of course it wasn't all beer and barbies. There was the storm over Hoges' split from Noeline, the mother of five of his six children, after

falling in love with his much younger Crocodile Dundee co-star Linda Kozlowski, and the much-publicised battles with the tax department. But while the flaws are there for all to see, Josh's portrayal is overwhelmingly a sympathetic one.

"I think he's such a family man, family means so much, so there's no question that his parents had a major influence on him, and we try and touch on this in the film, to look at what his family means to him, not just his parents, but his children and his wives."

Like Hoges, Josh didn't come from an entertainment background. One of five brothers (older brother Ben is also an actor), the NIDA graduate had a typical Aussie childhood. "My parents had nothing to do with it but they were just very supportive," he says. "They were as confused as anyone about me doing, going into that but they never said no, they said sure, if that's what you want. So I'm grateful to them for letting us do it because as it turns out we've made a living out of it, which is really all I could have ever asked for."

He may not be a household name in this country – although he was briefly a gossip mag favourite when his Anything For Ben? co-star Rachael Taylor found



**G'day mate:** Josh plays the rigger who became an unlikely star in Hoges: The Paul Hogan Story. MAIN PICTURE NICK WILSON

love with him post the dramas of Matthew Newton (they split in 2012) – but Josh has indeed made a very nice living out of his chosen career. He trod the well-worn path of soaps, including Home and Away and All Saints, and won many fans with his comic timing on the popular comedy show Thank God You're Here.

He's lived in the US off and on for the past nine years, winning roles in films such as Anchorman 2 and The Campaign, while writing and directing his own material, including the critically acclaimed The Little Death, a comedy about sex that went straight to video before becoming one of the most pirated movies of 2015. It was in the US where he had his big breakthrough, a starring role in the TV series House of Lies, playing a manipulative management consultant opposite Don Cheadle ("one of my favourite actors and one of my favourite people"). While it wrapped last year after five seasons, Josh has hardly been lying around doing nothing.

Aside from filming Hoges, he's been working on other projects back in the US, including Tim Minchin's animated film Larrikins – "I'm so grateful to be a part of that, Tim is obviously an intellect that is pretty dizzying" – and recently finished directing the half-hour series »

« Cassandra French's *Finishing School*. Whether it's picked up for a longer run all depends on the fickle hand of ratings – "they say they're optimistic but they always say that" – but it clearly appeals to Josh's comic sensibilities. Adapted by Eric Garcia from his book of the same name, it's a black comedy about a young woman who keeps men in her basement to teach them how to be better people.

"On paper it could seem really dark, but it's all about the tone, and who you cast and how you shoot it," Josh says. The now seasoned performer was also thrilled to be working with exciting young actors who he thinks have a big future ahead of them.

There are also various projects "in development", a process he likens to "pushing that rock up the hill and eventually you'll get to the top and then it falls back down and you've got to start again".

Like most in his industry, Josh has seen plenty of highs and lows. How does he keep himself going in such a surreal universe? "It's a really good question. And the honest answer is I struggle with it quite a bit. I mean I do get really low over there, I think a lot of actors do, a lot of creators do," he says. "The best thing you can do is find a good support group of friends because friendships can really be the great medicator, when things start to get too much to be able to share..."

"You know, my mum always said 'A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved, a joy shared is a joy doubled' and to be able to share that experience with someone else is so beautiful. I've got to say part of what I love about coming back home, particularly to Brisbane, is seeing my old school friends because they knew me when I was just a pimply-faced little squirt who didn't know his arse from his elbow" – he's sounding more like Hogan now – "and no matter what success I've had, or failure, they don't care. They're the same, I'm the same, they don't care about anything other than let's just catch up, have a beer, and talk about old times. And that's like chicken soup for the soul for me."

His great friendships with others in the Australian industry, including *Have You Been Paying Attention* regular Ed Kavalee (who pops up in *Hoges*) and comedian Troy Kinne, also keep him honest. The latter is a regular sounding board, particularly for his writing.

"Every writer needs someone to do that. My first port of call is Troy; he and I collaborate from time to time but he's also the one guy I share a very similar sensibility with," he says. "He won't pull any punches

## 'That's like chicken soup for the soul.'

... but he does it in a way that doesn't crush me because you know when you're a writer and you send off something first up you're very vulnerable, you're super, super raw. If you send it to the wrong person they can crush you in a sentence: 'I read your thing, it was crap!' and you're like 'oh god, life is not worth living'. There is a skill in being able to read and give notes and Troy is very good at that. We now just have that dynamic and vice versa, whatever he writes he'll



**Spice of life:** (clockwise from top left) Josh in *Any Questions for Ben?*; in *The Little Death*; and with the cast of *House of Lies*.

send it to me – and anything he's written that's good I steal it and put it in my script!"

He might be based in Los Angeles – "a schizophrenic, velvet-roped madhouse" – but Josh likes to work in Australia as much as possible, not the least because of the time he gets to spend with friends and family. When we speak, he's down in Sydney for the day to do some promotion before heading back to Brisbane to spend Christmas with his parents and one of his brothers.

"The rest of us are a bit dispersed around the world. So it will be Jordan and I, we'll share our time between Mum and Dad. Ben's over in LA with me, Jordan's in Sydney, Dave's in Melbourne and Matt's in Adelaide so we're all over the map. It's always nice when we can get together; it doesn't happen nearly often enough."

On Father's Day last year he posted a fabulous photo of his dad reading to the boys as kids, all in the lounge room in PJs in a scene reminiscent of so many families around the country. "And they would have been hand-me-downs, too, I was wearing Ben's stuff. It's so quintessentially Aussie, isn't it?"

It's Australians, too, who he believes are some of his best collaborators. "Ed Kavalee, Adam Zwar, Troy Kinne, Heidi Regan is a really terrific stand-up and writer who works out of London at the moment. You know, I love working with Australians and I think that I will always do that," he says. "There's a weird wall between Aussies and Americans sometimes when it comes to comedy – Aussies always make me laugh a bit harder." And get the joke a bit quicker? "Yeah," he

says with a laugh. "I hope Americans don't get offended by that but I don't think they'll get it."

He's particularly torn about his adopted home at the moment, his disbelief at the election of Donald Trump evident to Twitter followers (he urged any who voted for Trump to unfollow him). "Basically a con artist hoodwinked a lot of people. And those people are about to find out they bought a s...load of snake oil," he tweeted the day of Trump's election. "I better get back there before ... he kicks out all foreigners," he tells me, in what seems like an eerily prescient comment right now.

Josh may not have that distinctive drawl that helped make *Hoges* so successful – hard to believe he had to fight to stop Mick Dundee from being dubbed with an American accent – but he's still very much an Aussie. "I want to end up here, I don't want to live there forever," he says. "I think for me because I'm producing, and writing and creating a lot of stuff and directing some stuff, it makes a bit more sense for me to be there now because that's where those decisions get made. But I do kind of imagine I'll end up back here before too long."

One thing's for sure, when *Hoges* premieres next week, Josh won't be frantically scouring the internet for every bit of feedback. He'll be lying low. "I will go into a bunker because that's just me. I don't think for me and my personality, it's healthy to be exposed to what will happen – good or bad," he says. "Even if it's good, it's not healthy for me to feed off that positive encouragement. And if it's bad, it's not healthy for me to be bruised by it because it doesn't change anything either way."

Which is not to say that he doesn't care. He cares a lot, but there's nothing he can do about it now. I remind him that when Hogan heard they were making a miniseries about his life he quipped he'd wished they had waited until he was dead.

"He did say that. Oh my god, I don't even want to think about it. I don't know what it would be like to watch someone play you on screen; it would be so weird," he says. "I can just only hope I tell his story in a way that doesn't make him proud – I don't want him to be proud of me – I just want to protect his story, I just want it to be honest, as much as you can be honest when you fictionalise a story like that. So I really want ... I hope he doesn't dislike it. That's all I can hope for." **W**

**Hoges: The Paul Hogan Story** airs on Channel Seven on February 12 and 19 at 8.30pm.