

# WEST WEEKEND

AUGUST 19-20 2017

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girls see themselves

## AUSTEN ENVY

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DREWE  
BLAMES  
IT ALL ON  
COLIN FIRTH

## SLICE OF HEAVEN

Stefano Manfredi  
shares secrets to  
the perfect pizza

## rob broadfield

THERE'S STILL LIFE  
ON THE TERRACE

# EWEN LESLIE

The Freo actor on working with Nicole  
and his biggest role yet.

*plus »*

SABRINA HAHN'S  
EVERLASTING LOVE

The Weekend West

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COVER EWEN LESLIE  
 PICTURE EAMON GALLAGHER

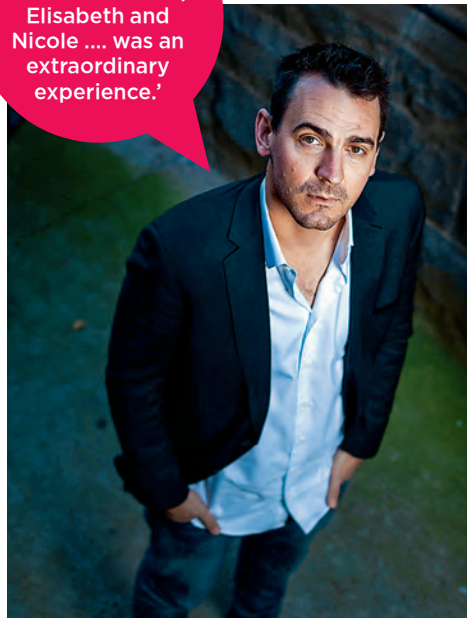
QUIZ ANSWERS (FROM PAGE 22)  
 1. Denmark, Germany 2. Goran Ivanišević 3. PT 73 4. Orange juice 5. Capital Hill 6. Harry Secombe 7. Blue, yellow, red 8. Justin Timberlake 9. Rome 1960 10. Kevin Michel 11. Raymond Chandler 12. New South Wales 13. Portuguese 14. Moonlight 15. Four 16. 1950s 17. Brian Lara 18. Mouse 19. Switzerland 20. Royal Bluebell



*From the editor*

*Ah Melbourne, what's not to love? OK, maybe the weather. But then I happened to enjoy unusually sunny winter days when I made a flying visit there last week, so who's complaining. Every time I turned a corner I was reminded what I miss about this most liveable of cities. The quirky arcades, the eclectic choice of shows and exhibitions, the endless culinary offerings, the stunning heritage buildings. There was something rather magical about sitting in one of those grand old dames, the recently refurbished Forum, waiting for the photographer to finish training his lens on award-winning actor Ewen Leslie. Why did I ever leave, I asked myself. (Yes, I momentarily forgot the paucity of decent beaches and the distance from family, among other things – nostalgia will do that to you.) But as I chatted to the amiable WAAPA graduate, it occurred to me that no matter where we live, there are compromises to make. Ewen left Freo when he was 20, and has largely called Sydney home since then. Now living in Melbourne after his partner accepted a producing gig, he's been flying back and forth wherever the work takes him, journeys made that bit harder since becoming a father. Home is not so much about place as it is about the people around you, so while it's good to get away, it's always great to come back to where you belong.*

*'To find myself on set with Jane, Elisabeth and Nicole .... was an extraordinary experience.'*



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August 19, 2017

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Ewen Leslie has been stealing scenes for more than a decade but the Freo actor has found his most important role off the stage.

WORDS JULIE HOSKING  
PICTURE EAMON GALLAGHER

# Playing for keeps

**E**wen Leslie was panicking. The end of school was rapidly approaching and his dad had issued him with an ultimatum: pass Year 12 or you will have to repeat it.

So the 17-year-old John Curtin student started looking at his diminishing options. “I thought ‘Acting, drama school, NIDA’, and then realised I’d missed the auditions. I always thought WAAPA was in Melbourne – I’d never pulled apart the whole West Australian Academy of Performing Arts,” he recalls with a rueful laugh.

“I still had time, so instead of going to schoolies on Rottneest I stayed back and auditioned for WAAPA. I got a callback but then didn’t get in. Then some guy went to NIDA so I got offered his place and I went straight through from high school.” Lucky you skipped schoolies week then? “Looking back, I’m fine with that choice – I reckon I made the right one!”

With a slew of acclaimed performances on stage and screen that have earned him two Helpmann Awards and AFI and AACTA nominations, plus scene-stealing performances opposite some of the best in the business, it would be hard for his 37-year-old self to argue otherwise. Even if he did have a less than auspicious start.

It’s an unusually warm winter’s day in Melbourne when I meet Ewen inside the magnificent Forum building. His latest film *The Butterfly Tree*, in which he stars opposite fellow West Aussie Melissa George, will have its world premiere the following evening here as part of the 2017 Melbourne International Film Festival.

We perch on one of the divans outside the first floor candy bar, sipping coffee from a novice barista. Only in Melbourne would they apologise in advance for the brew, offering to whip up another if it’s not up to scratch. “It’s awesome,” Ewen assures the nervous young man.

Less than a week earlier Ewen had sat in the Forum with director Jane Campion to watch all six episodes of *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, which picks up the story of Detective Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss) four years on from the award-winning original series.

“I showed up quite nervous and within the first five minutes I instantly relaxed,” Ewen says. “And not because I saw myself and thought ‘oh great’. It was because the scripts were always so good and to see something so beautifully realised ... I think (co-director) Ariel Kleiman and Jane have done such an amazing job with it. And to watch it with an audience was great. It was like people reading a novel that you’re a part of but they put the book down every couple of hours and people come up to you and talk about the story and where it was going; it was a really fun experience.”

*‘He’s glowing blue so I don’t know if he’s going to be stoked.’*

Fun is probably not a word most would use to describe this gripping series. Like its predecessor, it’s dark and disturbing. Robin has moved back to Sydney from New Zealand, where she busted a paedophile ring, to deal with other demons. Mary, the daughter she gave up for adoption after she was gang-raped at 16, lives in the Emerald City with her adopted parents Pyke and Julia, though to say this family is dysfunctional would be putting it mildly. Julia has just left Pyke for a woman and 17-year-old Mary is smitten with an older man no parent would wish for their daughter. Ewen is Pyke to Nicole Kidman’s Julia, while Campion’s daughter Alice Englert plays Mary.

Even a cursory glance at Ewen’s CV shows he is no stranger to sharing the spotlight with big names – his first professional stage role was for the late Philip Seymour Hoffman – but he admits to being a little intimidated with the female star wattage. “To find myself on a set with Jane, Elisabeth and Nicole, I mean three women at the top of their game was an extraordinary experience,” he says. “I’ve had some great opportunities but, look, meeting Nicole I was quite intimidated. I’ve seen so much of her work, I was a fan, so I was a little starstruck at first. But she’s so open and warm and generous with herself that you kind of have to get over it very quickly. And we’re playing a married couple so you’ve just got to get over it.”

Ewen, who looks years younger than Pyke having shed the character’s impressive beard, says the Sydney shoot couldn’t have come at a better time for he and partner, film producer Nicole O’Donohue (*Griff the Invisible*, *The Daughter*). “The best thing about it was when I got the job we were pregnant and he was due in a month’s time,” he says. “Obviously financially you go ‘Oh great, I’ve got a job for the first four months of his life’, but also we lived in Bondi and it was all shooting in the eastern suburbs. It was one of those situations where a year ago I’d be going ‘Oh, it’s a shame it’s not in New Zealand’ and instead it was ‘Thank God we’re not going to New Zealand!’”

Elliot, now 18 months old, also makes his screen debut in *Top of the Lake*. “In the first ep, there’s this dream sequence with all these babies and he’s in it, which is kind of nice. But he’s glowing blue so I don’t know if he’s going to be stoked when he eventually sees it,” he says with another laugh. “It will be more like ‘Where’s my money, what happened to the royalties’. Well, they all went on babysitters, kid!”

Fatherhood, Ewen says several times, is the best thing he’s ever done, even if it does make him wonder what on earth he was doing with his time before Elliot came along.

After filming wrapped on *Top of the Lake* last year, he went straight into *The Butterfly Tree*, which meant relocating the family to Mt Tambourine in Queensland for six weeks. The little family moved to Melbourne in February after Nicole, who he met while they were both »

# feature

**Role with it**  
Ewen with Nicole Kidman in *Top of the Lake*; in *The Butterfly Tree*; with partner Nicole O'Donoghue.

« working behind the bar in the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Woolloomooloo 15 years ago, was offered a gig co-producing the seventh series of *Offspring* and Ten's new show *Sisters*.

Ewen has spent the past few months flying back and forth at weekends when the schedule permitted, first from Brisbane, where he was shooting *Safe Harbour* for SBS, and then Sydney, where he was working on *Fighting Season* for Foxtel. Both series are due out next year. Right now, he's enjoying a dry spell.

"At the moment I'm housebound being a dad," he says. "When we moved I jokingly said 'Well if one thing's for certain I'm not going to be working in Melbourne' and that's exactly what's happened! But this is the best thing I've ever done. And it kind of informs your life so much even professionally."

Aside from suddenly being responsible for another human being, the biggest impact is on time – or finding time. "Time kind of becomes a bit of currency doesn't it? The tricky thing for us because we're working at the same time, is negotiating that, and even last year with getting *The Butterfly Tree*, it was this conversation of 'Look, I've been offered this thing, I'd like to do it, can I do it and how do we do it'. Because I'm not just all of a sudden going to be away from my family for six weeks."

With Nicole's family in Nowra, on the NSW south coast, and his own in Fremantle, the couple have had to rely on babysitters or nannies, though parents have been called upon to help out for a few weeks here and there.

The proud dad had not long returned from a flying visit to Perth for his sister Annie's 30th birthday. "I took Elliot; it was the first time he'd been away without his mum – we survived!"

The eldest of three (he also has a younger brother Jamie) loves going back to Freo – he's a Dockers supporter, for the record – to spend time with family and friends. His parents are both retired; dad Norman was a photography lecturer at Edith Cowan, while his mum Susan worked as a social worker before moving into the mining industry. "My family still live in our family house ... it's an awesome spot, it's so great to go back and be in the house I grew up in."

It was Susan who saw the ad in the paper for children's TV series *Ship to Shore* and suggested the then 13-year-old audition, though his interest had initially been behind the camera. "I used to borrow my dad's camera and make films, you know homemade horror action films – they were terrible," he says. "I always loved film and TV and I think put on a couple of plays in primary school. I did a production of *Batman* that was, uh, terrible."

Ewen won a scholarship to John Curtin College of the Arts but when he got into *Ship to Shore*, Years eight and nine were pretty much a write-off. "I did Distance Education on set but to be honest, f..., you're on a set like a playground and then you get put on a bus and told to learn algebra – it didn't really



happen," he says. "So the move back to high school in Year 10 was not a smooth one. I wagged a lot of school and drove my parents crazy. I got kicked out of the theatre scholarship."

Towards the end of the year, everything changed. "I did a big scene from David Williamson's play *The Removalists* and I fell in love with it, with theatre I suppose."

It was a revelation because though Ewen remains grateful for the experience, he didn't really enjoy making *Ship to Shore*. "I found it pretty boring, it was a lot of standing around. And I wasn't very good in the show. I remember in the second series there was an episode that was centred on me and I watched it with my dad and afterwards he went 'Yeah ...' If your own dad can't tell you it was good."

He laughs.

It was the stage that ignited the budding actor's passion but first Ewen had to put his tail between his legs and go to see the head of the program to ask to be readmitted. "I got put on probation for a month and was allowed back in."

Then came his sliding doors moment and admission to WAAPA. "I loved drama school – the great thing about it was I was still living at home. If I'd gone to NIDA I don't think I would have lasted," he says candidly. "At the time I was the youngest to get in (to WAAPA), I was 17 ... I think a lot of people had gone to NIDA and flunked out, so they wanted you to have a bit of life experience but, because of *Ship to Shore*, they were a bit more into it. And also I was living at home. At the end of the day I still got to go home to home-cooked meals and hang out with my friends from Freo."

Life post graduation was another story. While he was picked up by one of Sydney's top agents, Ewen didn't work in the industry for four years, something with the benefit of hindsight he says was probably the best thing that could have happened to him.



"At the time it sucked, totally," he says of those barren years in the early 2000s when he shared a house with fellow Perth actors Toby Schmitz and Travis Cotton. "I was going to heaps of auditions but I just don't think I was ready. And it took me a few years to find my feet in Sydney."

And when the elusive big break did come, in 2005, it certainly didn't look like one. "The first thing I got was *Jewboy* and my agent said 'Look, it's an SBS 52-minute film, not many people will see it, it's not going to get into festivals but we can send it out' (as a kind of calling card)," he recalls. "Then it got into Cannes and Sundance and all these places and so many people in the industry saw it, so it turned out to be a good thing. I would have said yes to anything at that point to be honest but it was just lucky it was a really good script and a really good filmmaker and really good people. In retrospect, I'm glad I had that period of not working at all because it meant when it did come around I appreciated it. And I still do."

After *Jewboy* he did a bit of television before landing an audition for the Sydney Theatre Company for *Rifleman*, which Seymour Hoffman was directing. "I thought 'Well I've already won because I'll meet

*'I'm glad I had that period of not working at all.'*



him for 15 minutes and he has to watch me,' he says, revealing an attitude he also took to his nerve-racking audition for Jane Campion seven years later. "And then I got a call two weeks later to say I had the job. My first theatre job was with him and Hugo Weaving ... it was just a great experience of being on that stage and watching all these people work."

In another "right place, right time" moment, he was offered a 12-month contract with the STC when someone else pulled out. "I asked Hugo, I idolise him, and he said you should do it because you'll find that the theatre informs the film and the film informs the theatre. On day one, Philip Seymour Hoffman says 'Theatre is my church' and I thought 'Well, if I want to be as good as these guys, if I want to be as brave and bold as them'... I did that job for a year and ended up doing *The War of the Roses* (with Cate Blanchett), which I went back to Perth with."

It was also the role for which he won his first Helpmann in 2008, for best supporting actor, followed by a best actor nod for his tour-de-force in the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of *Richard III*, leading some critics to hail him as one of finest actors of his generation.

While his theatrical credentials are beyond question, Ewen has more recently gained notice for stand-out performances on screen, including two as journalists (Matt Peacock in *Devil's Dust*, about asbestos campaigner Bernie Banton, and Keith Murdoch in *Deadline Gallipoli*). He has a soft spot for *The Daughter*, Simon Stone's 2015 take on Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, and not just because it was produced by his partner. "I loved it. We were all living in a little town in NSW, like a little travelling circus, and having so much fun. Then I watched the film and it was very harrowing!"

Nominated for multiple AACTAs including best film and best actor in 2016, *The Daughter* was also a finalist for Australia's richest film prize at CinefestOz the previous year. He returns to the South West's

growing film festival next week as part of the jury panel for the same prize. *The Butterfly Tree*, in which Ewen plays a single father smitten by an enigmatic newcomer, will also be screened during the festival. "It was my final 'Do you mind if I go and do this thing'," he says. "There's a lot of negotiating these days 'I need to do this at this time, how do we make this work'. But she's (Nicole) great and it has been great for her this year to be going back to work, full-time TV producing is full on."

As we head down into busy Flinders Street for the photographer to set up a few more shots, talk turns to kids' names. "It's funny when you get down to names and you're like 'Look I'm into Elliot if it's one t and two l's but if it's two t's I'm not!' He was unnamed for a month. And then you go down that wormhole into popularity lists ... We thought we were having a girl based on absolutely nothing so we had a lot of good girl's names and very few boy's names. I find it quite funny with your partner, too. I mean we've been together for 15 years but then she's suggesting names and you're going 'Really, you like *that* name?'"

Elliot with two l's and one t is at day care today, thanks to some spotting from actor mate Dan Wyllie. "His partner is directing the show my partner is producing down here, so we're two unemployed dads, though he's about to do (TV series) *Romper Stomper*," Ewen says. "His daughter was at this great day care in Collingwood so he got us in there."

Which perhaps explains why a certain Melbourne publication recently referred to him as "Collingwood actor".

"My dad saw that and he was like 'What! We'd been in Collingwood for about a month, I think it just fit the story, but Dad wasn't impressed with that at all.' I should think not. 🙄"

**Top of the Lake: China Girl starts on BBC on Foxtel tomorrow; Ewen is at CinefestOz next weekend, see cinefestoz.com.**

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