

Aussie film-maker Robert Luketic charts his fairytale rise to the top of the Tinseltown tree.

# DIRECTOR'S CUT

Robert Luketic is a man who knows a thing or two about women. He catapulted Reese Witherspoon (as the not-so-dumb blonde Elle Woods) onto Hollywood's A-list in his feature debut *Legally Blonde*, engineered screen legend Jane Fonda's comeback in his current smash *Monster-in-Law* and is set to unleash Sue Ellen, Pam and Lucy Ewing back on the soap-adoring public with his next project, the movie version of classic TV series *Dallas*.

With this calibre of material on his resumé, it's hard to believe that Robert, who grew up in Sydney's western suburbs, is still only 32-years-old.

With a success story to inspire film-makers everywhere, it was his final-year short film *Titsiana Booberini* – which he made while studying at Melbourne's VCA – that served as his express ticket to Hollywood.

"It screened at the Telluride Film Festival, which talent scouts and

'Don't talk to him, talk to me'. It was surreal. I often do film school lectures and when people ask how I did it, I just say, 'I don't know!'"

He does, however, put his success down to sheer determination and having remained focused on his goal of making a feature by the time he reached the age of 30.

"The reality is that I wasn't discovered in a soda shop", he says, "I've been doing it since I was 15. I've always had the goal and the dream and was very strategic about it. I was 27 when I did *Legally Blonde*, but back then I would have been happy if it had gone straight to video".

The film went on to gross over \$US100 million, a staggering amount for a first-time director. Not surprisingly, then came *Legally Blonde 2* – minus Robert, who doesn't mince his words when the subject comes up.

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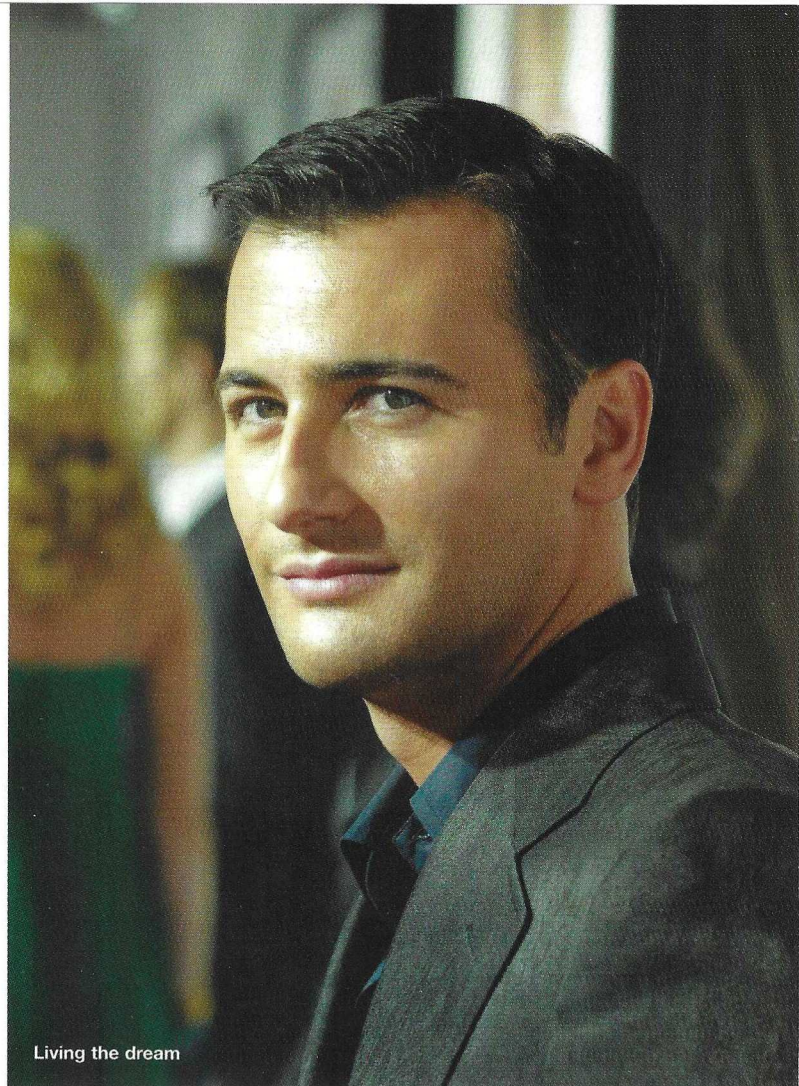
studio people attend, and from that I got invited to LA", he explains. "It was all very rapid and bizarre".

In an industry notoriously fickle for pouncing on the next big thing and unceremoniously dumping them just as quickly, it sounds like a remarkably simple story. "I was mobbed after the screening," he goes on. "I literally had people grabbing my arm saying,

about it. It became an exercise in making money and the franchise was blatantly whored."

Moving swiftly on, and after the crowd-pleasing *A Date With Tad Hamilton*, came *Monster-in-Law*.

"The word on the street was that Jane Fonda was thinking about a comeback and there was a script that she and J.Lo were interested in,"



Living the dream

says Robert. "I said yes without seeing the script just based on the notion of J.Lo and J.Fo [his pet name for Jane on set] coming together."

A long-time fan of the aerobics diva, he admits things got emotional when the cameras started rolling. "It was the first time in 15 years that film has run on this legend and there she was, in my movie! All that came out of my mouth was, 'Welcome back, Miss Fonda' and I started applauding. The whole crew stopped, Jane burst into tears and we all hugged."

And there's little doubt that she tops the list as his favourite leading lady. "If I was doing a movie where the lead role was a 13-year-old girl and she wanted it, I'd say, 'You know what, it's yours.'"

With *MIL* currently producing the all-important bums on seats, Robert next heads back to America for pre-production of *Dallas*. Details of the film are still shrouded in secrecy, but he does reveal this: "It's a huge

undertaking and it'll be a massive, all-star cast. They'll be the richest, greediest, most powerful family in America. They'll run nuclear power plants and small countries and all have their own private jets that land right outside Southfork."

All the old favourites will be back, but with new faces. "A lot of people want to be in the movie and the past two months have been extraordinary," Robert says. "If you could only see who I have lunch and dinner with every day!"

So as he returns to his new hometown of LA, what does he miss about Sydney? "The harbour. It's the most beautiful place in the world."

And of his new neighbourhood, the Hollywood Hills, he says, "My dog Jackson and I sit up in the hills and I feel safe with him. LA reminds me so much of Sydney. It has that perfect temperature, so your hair always looks good." J.Fo would be proud.

**Story: Madeleine Collins ●**