

his reluctance had been displayed during a recent interview on GMTV to promote *White Christmas*, which left presenter Kate Garraway visibly squirming.

So it was with trepidation that I approached the D-word.

“It was a good job, it was a marvellous job,” he says quickly. “That doesn’t happen in many actors’ careers – 13 seasons.”

So far, so good.

He adds that *Dallas* was not the most exciting thing to happen in his career despite its worldwide success.

“I always say that the exciting moments are when you are rehearsing in a play in New York and you are in some cold little rehearsal room,” he says leaning in towards me.

“You got the first and third act down pat but the second act you can’t put your finger on, and then you go to work one day and the second act falls in place.

“Another moment would be when you’re standing backstage on an opening

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night and you hear the orchestra start,” he says making a knocking sound with the roof of his mouth. “Wow. Mmm, mmm, mmm. Those are the memorable moments.”

Kercheval has cleverly steered the conversation away from the D-word and I ask him if he is reluctant to talk about the show.

“I don’t care,” he replies with a defiant shrug, “but it’s ‘blood under the bridge’, in the words of Edward Albee.

“That was part of my career, part of my life, it was fun and I enjoyed it and it did bring about a certain celebrity, I’m not fond of the word at all,” he shudders. “I don’t like it.”

After struggling for words, what can be best described as a passionate rant, steadily builds up a head of steam: “If I get up in the morning to go to work on *Dallas* and I stop at a gas station to get gas and somebody says, ‘Oh damn, saw the show, you’re fantastic’, that’s nice, except that has absolutely nothing to do with when I get to work and how I’m going to play a scene.

“It’s not relevant. I still have a scene to play whether this person said anything or whether they didn’t say anything. Or whether they said I was good or whether they said I was lousy or if they never watched the show or they watch the show.”

Banging his coffee cup on the table to emphasise each point, he says: “I used to say, ‘Look, I go to work. I say my jokes. I get paid. I come home. That’s it.’”

By now the captivating Kercheval could do with a lectern to finish his delivery.

“I don’t really have actor friends, I have friends who are actors but I don’t socialise with them. No more than if I was a plumber, I wouldn’t invite a plumber friend of mine to come over and put a bunch of pipes in the middle of the floor and say, ‘Let’s play pipes’. Right? I’ve got another life. My private life is not my



With his co-star Lorna Luft

professional life.

“People say what do you watch on TV? I say nothing,” he fumes. “I watch Discovery and public stations.”

It’s powerful stuff and a fascinating insight into life inside the skewed claustrophobic bubble of Hollywood.

Indeed he describes the *Dallas* years as “crazy”, when he would have half a second between walking into somewhere and people recognising him, often just from the back of his head.

“It was crazy, but it’s ok!” he exclaims. “You become kind of insular because you know people are staring at you as if you have four nostrils, but I always try to be cordial when people ask for autographs and all that. I figure it takes just as much energy to be pleasant as it does to be an ass. When I go home at night, I put my head down and say, you know, it’s fine. Bit of an inconvenience, so what?”

Subjects closer to Kercheval’s heart

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meanwhile receive an altogether different degree of warmth.

He talks of his “obsession” for collecting antiques, especially on Internet trading site eBay, and classical music.

Another is family history.

At the height of his *Dallas* fame, Kercheval received a letter from an elderly man in Nottinghamshire who told him about the area’s links with the Kercheval name and they corresponded for many years.

He’s quickly on his feet, exclaiming, “I love you today!” at a similar volume.

“I love you today,” shrieks back Lorna.

And so the exchange continues.

They head off for a photo-call and when they return Kercheval is whipping a cigarette out of his pocket and making for the door before the theatre PR can usher him to his next interview.

I accept his invitation to join him outside to round off our chat as he heads out for a smoke.

It’s raining and miserable and Kercheval, in between coughs, has got things on his mind.

He arrived in Southampton the night before and is struggling to get his bearings, “Where’s this WestQuay place and Marks Spencer?” he asks sounding out the alien words.

The actor needs some “wash cloths”, to find a Post Office, to get his Christmas shopping done and to find “somewhere fancy” in Southampton to take his daughter for dinner on Christmas Day.

He says he’s keen to meet up with Patrick Duffy, who played Bobby Ewing in *Dallas*, and is performing as Buttons in panto in Woking.

Kercheval confesses he is keen to rib his former co-star after seeing promotional shots of Duffy dressed up in a frilly costume.

Another friend he wants to catch up with is Henry Winkler, better known as The Fonz, who is starring as Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* in London.

He speaks fondly of both men and says they are both good businessmen, to which he adds, with a wry smile, that he is not.

After bemoaning the price of getting hooked up to the Internet while he is in town, he admits his computer skills are limited to checking eBay and writing an e-mail.

“Maybe I’ll take a class when I give up smoking, I’ll have more time on my hands then,” he muses. Within the space of our short chat, Kercheval has chain-smoked three Marlboro red in swift succession, each time chucking the butt swiftly into the road.

I wouldn’t go signing up for any classes too soon, Ken.

FACTFILE

- *White Christmas* runs until Sunday January 28, excluding Mondays.
- Evening performances are at 7.30pm on Tuesdays to Saturdays.
- Matinee performances are at 2pm on Thursdays, 2pm on Saturdays, 3pm on Sundays.



On stage in *White Christmas* as the Army General