

# Captivating Ken

SARAH JONES talks to charismatic *White Christmas* star Ken Kercheval about his 60-a-day nicotine habit, surviving lung cancer and (after some persuasion) the whirlwind that went with playing Cliff Barnes in 80s megasoap *Dallas*

THERE IS NO POINT IN MAKING A New Year's Resolution if it is not going to present a tough challenge.

But if Ken Kercheval manages to achieve his next year, it could well be a miracle.

Famous across the globe for his role as the long-suffering Cliff Barnes in *Dallas*, arguably the most popular show in TV history, he has made a pledge to kick his 60-a-day smoking habit.

At the age of 71, he has been smoking since he was 15-years-old, and carried on puffing his way through a lung cancer diagnosis.

Thirteen years after beating what is so often a fatal disease, and losing much of one lung as a result, he has now decided that the time is right to quit.

It is a pact with the pianist in his latest show *White Christmas* that has finally prompted him to tackle the role of a non-smoker, which could easily be his toughest part to date.

We have arranged to meet to talk about the lavish production, which is currently showing at The Mayflower in Southampton.

When I arrive, I bump into Kercheval outside the theatre – with a striking shock of silver hair, a booming

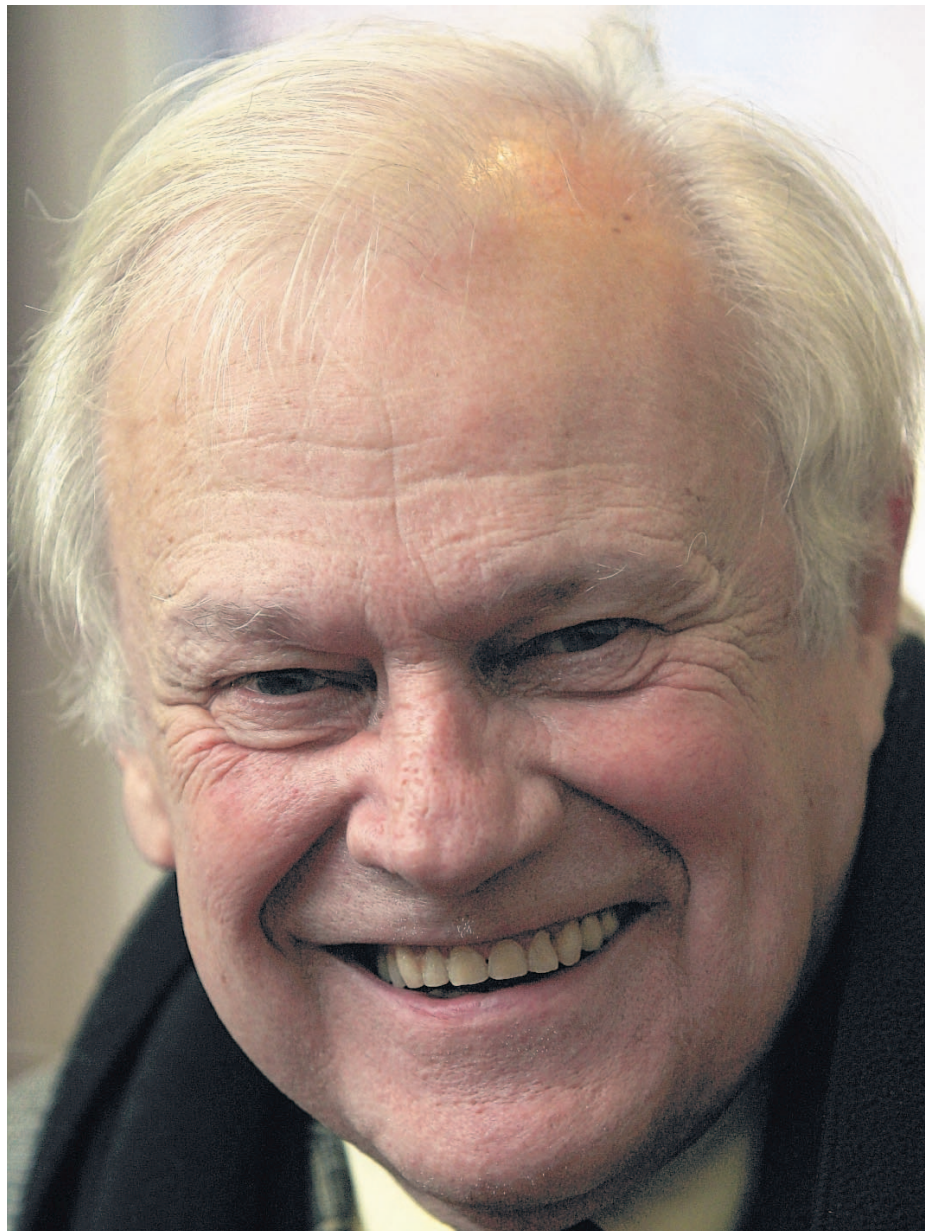
American accent, a scarf draped around his smart tweed suit in stereotypical actor fashion – and a cigarette between his lips.

When the formal interview starts later, I ask him if he feels lucky to be alive in view of grim lung cancer survival rates.

Everybody here kids me about my smoking because it's pretty heavy. It's pretty intense.

"I haven't looked into that," he tells me as if it has genuinely never crossed his mind. "I didn't choose the day I was born, I didn't choose the day I was going to die, so why should I be so presumptuous as to think I have control over any other day?"

Kercheval, whose has also had problems with alcohol in the past, then adds with a weary sigh: "I didn't say I was smart, it's terribly unwise." So cold turkey is the weapon of choice in his war against tobacco and his cast members are



already preparing themselves for the worst.

"I'm going to have to put my head somewhere else," he says despairingly. "Everybody here kids me about my smoking because it's pretty heavy. It's pretty intense."

In fact, intense, it transpires, is a good word to describe the personality of the likeable Kercheval.

In his latest role of the General in the spectacular winter musical, based on the record-breaking box office film of 1954 starring Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye.

"When I got the job I had never even seen the film," he reveals. "So I went out and I rented it. I can tell you on a scale of one to ten, ten being best, the movie is a four, this is a 22!"

Kercheval is used to being in the biggest and the best shows.

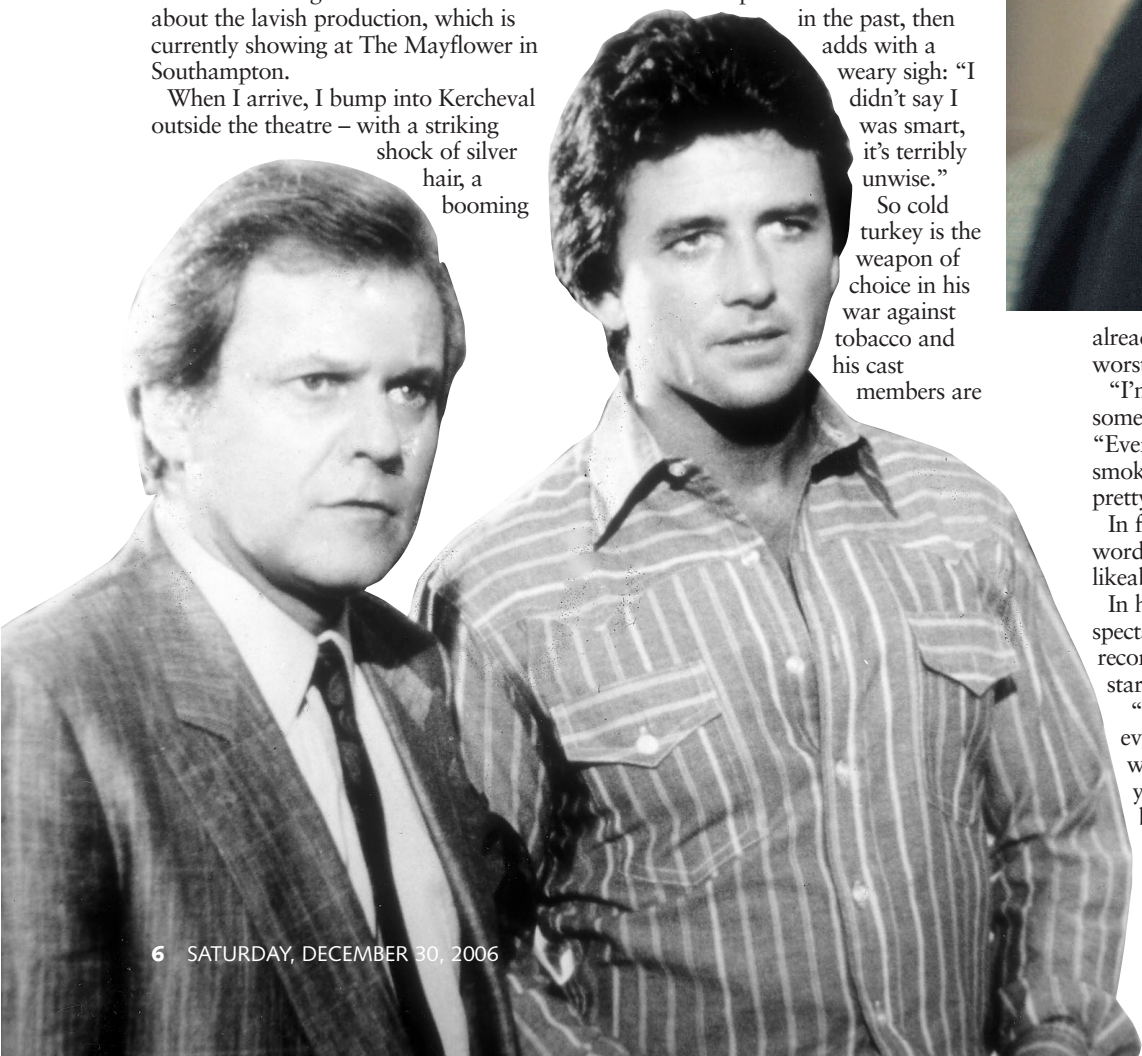
The glitzy mix of shoulder pads and stetsons and passion and punch-ups among Texan oil magnates in *Dallas* proved irresistible to audiences across the globe.

In 1980, a staggering 82 million viewers in America alone tuned in to find out who shot JR.

Along with lead man Larry Hagman, who played JR, Kercheval was the only character to stay with the show for its entire run from 1978 to 1991.

But prior to the interview I had been warned that he would probably not want to discuss the show which made him a household name, in his role as JR's arch-enemy.

No reason was given, but a glimpse of



◀ Starring in *Dallas* as Cliff Barnes with Patrick Duffy as Bobby Ewing