

ugh Jackman's face breaks into a wide grin when he sees the tray of sushi I have brought him. Diet features large in this Australian actor's life. When he was in training to play the mutant action hero Wolverine in the X-Men films he was waking at 4am for his first meal and eating every three hours. 'This is a good way to my heart,' he says. 'What you eat is everything. I always thought it was about lifting harder, heavier, longer. Now I think you have to eat more and eat leaner.'

We meet on a warm breezy day at his film production company, Seed Productions, based at Fox Studios in Sydney. He is svelte in a black Louis Vuitton shirt and jeans, his tanned face obscured by sunglasses. His thick nut-brown hair is slicked back, emphasising those chiselled features and well-groomed stubble.

Rather than sit inside to talk about his new film, he motions to a grubby table and chair on the grass opposite. In Hollywood Jackman's reputation as the Mr Nice Guy precedes him. Rachel Weisz went so far as to describe Jackman, whom she starred opposite in *The Fountain*, as 'a sort of male sex God. He's so beautiful and such a perfect gentleman at the same time.'

He has lost 9lb training for his starring role in Baz Luhrmann's new film, *Australia*, as 'the drover' – a lasso-slashing whip-cracking cowboy – and he only picks at the sashimi: he doesn't do carbs after midday. Down-to-earth, with no trace of self-importance, Jackman is an intriguing combination of laidback Aussie charm and flashes of English thespian (his parents are English). He speaks fast in a sunny drawl, quotes

Shakespeare and tends to ruminate philosophically on the nature of the self.

Jackman's career is singular for its versatility. Now 40, he began in musical theatre – leading roles in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Sunset Boulevard* in Australia led to a year in London, where he first came to the attention of the British public playing Curly in Trevor Nunn's *Oklahoma!* in 1998, for which he was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award. Six years later he won a Tony Award for his portrayal of the gay Australian entertainer Peter Allen, in the Broadway musical *The Boy from Oz*, which would lead to three years hosting the glitzy Tony Awards at New York's Radio City Music Hall.

'For many years I had this weird feeling that my career was like being dragged by a Great Dane down the road,' he says, thrusting out an arm as if gripping a lead. 'I was holding on and it was fun and exhilarating and hysterical but – aaarrggghhh – it was also a little out of control.' He almost leaps off the seat before catching himself. '*The Boy from Oz* turned out to be one of the turning points for me because it was a risk. I wasn't 100 per cent sure I could do it, but I felt a compulsion to give it a go and it worked out.'

Many counselled against him signing up for a year on Broadway. 'Aside from the fact that it was a "gay character who's not that famous,"' he continues, 'it was the worst time in the trajectory of a film career to take 18 months out. You know – "You're in your mid-thirties, and it doesn't last for ever old man."' The risk paid dividends. 'Darren Aronofsky saw it and thought that I could play the role in *The Fountain* [three incarnations of the same character over a 1,000-year period],

Woody Allen the same [casting Jackman in *Scoop*], then Christopher Nolan [who directed Jackman in *The Prestige* in 2006, a drama about two 19th-century rival magicians].'

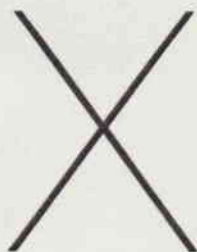
Amid this sweep of arthouse films – including the romantic comedy *Kate & Leopold* and the gothic horror *Van Helsing*, which grossed £200 million worldwide – was his touching portrayal of Wolverine, with mutton-chops like shag-pile carpet, in the X-Men series, alongside Halle Berry, Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen, which brought Jackman box-office success.

If his legion of adolescent Wolverine Marvel comic book fans were confused by Jackman's new role on Broadway wearing skinny flares and Hawaiian shirts, the gay community championed a new pin-up. 'I try not to find out any of that stuff regardless of whatever the [fan] group is,' he says, adding that towards the end of the show's run, 'There was a fairly substantial rumour going round about my own sexuality. I only know that because my wife [the actress Deborra-Lee Furness] told me. Every time Deb would go to the ladies she'd hear people saying, "Is he or isn't he?" She'd yell out, "He isn't!"' He gives a deep chesty laugh. 'I just took it as a compliment to be honest. Maybe I'm doing a good job of it.'

None the less, the executives at Fox Studios LA have been working hard to reposition Jackman in *Australia* as a younger, rough-hewn Clint Eastwood able to ravish the leading lady, Nicole Kidman, with credibility. As the *New York Times* puts it: 'In Hollywood, where typecasting remains very much a force, Mr Jackman retains a slight stigma.'

The opening scenes of *Australia*, at £60 million the most expensive Australian film ever made and the most eagerly anticipated, quickly establish Jackman's leading man credentials. When Lady Sarah Ashley (Kidman), an uptight English aristocrat, arrives in Darwin in the Northern Territory in search of her husband, the owner of an

'FOR YEARS I HAD THIS FEELING THAT MY CAREER WAS LIKE BEING DRAGGED BY A GREAT DANE DOWN THE ROAD. IT WAS EXHILARATING AND FUN BUT ALSO A LITTLE OUT OF CONTROL'



appeal

If his role as a gay entertainer on Broadway led Hollywood to question Hugh Jackman's leading-man credentials, his performance as a red-blooded cowboy in the film *Australia* has settled the argument. By **Claire Scobie**. Photograph by **Hugh Stewart**



enormous cattle station, the drover is sent to meet her. Swaggering in moleskin trousers and a battered Akubra hat, he throws the first punch in a pub brawl and in the chaos that ensues, some of Lady Ashley's luggage (designed by Prada for the film) is decimated: her underwear – corsets, brassieres and stockings – thrown up in the air like confetti. 'Welcome to Australia,' a bloodied Jackman says to Kidman.

It 'was the most physical part' Jackman has ever played. He takes off his sunglasses to reveal startling hazel/olive-green eyes. 'In the script it says, "The drover was probably the greatest horse rider of all time."' Jackman spent several months in Texas learning how to ride among the toughest cowboys he could find. This couldn't prepare him for galloping alongside 1,500 stampeding cattle across the blistering Kimberleys in remote north-western Australia, where some of the five-month shoot took place. Going on location was like going 'to Mars'.

Temperatures soared to the low 40s and a once-in-a-hundred-year flood marooned the station's homestead, Faraway Downs, delaying the shoot for several weeks. Down the bank from Jackman's trailer was a creek teeming with crocodiles. Yet filming *Australia*, an old-fashioned epic and romping romantic adventure set during the Second World War, was 'incredibly transformational', a sentiment echoed by Kidman (who became unexpectedly pregnant on location), and one of the driving themes of the film.

At its heart *Australia* tells of how the land and mystical Aboriginal culture have the power to transform. Indeed, the film's strongest storyline lies with the character Nullah, a mixed-race Aboriginal boy played brilliantly by the 13-year-old newcomer Brandon Walters, who is trying to escape the cruel fate of forced separation from his Aboriginal family. Until 1973 these children were snatched by the authorities and brought up in church missions to 'breed the black out', becoming known as the Stolen Generations.

Jackman is compelling as the troubled drover whose frozen heart thaws when he and Kidman join forces to outwit cattle barons plotting to seize her ranch. Playing a man of few words, he is forced to express everything through the flicker of an eye or purse of the lips. In America, where Oprah Winfrey dedicated an entire show to the film, enthusing, 'I've not been so excited by a movie since I don't know when,' you suspect Jackman's elevation to the A-list is assured.

Back home, the hype was such that when *Australia* premiered in Sydney last month, one film critic said it was 'the biggest thing this town has seen since the Olympics'. With an £8.5 million tie-in marketing campaign by Tourism Australia, hoping it will re-ignite the country's flagging tourism industry, is there pressure on Jackman?

'I'm quite hard on myself [but] the pressure

'MY WIFE WOULD BE LITERALLY HIT AWAY AS WOMEN TRIED TO GET TO ME. SOMETIMES I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY I AM GETTING THIS ATTENTION'

Top and right Hugh Jackman with Nicole Kidman in *Australia*. Playing a drover, Jackman was taught to ride in Texas by cowboys



comes from me. So the simple answer is probably no. Being an actor, it's all in some way very neurotically linked to your self-esteem and I think you've got to understand where your anxiety comes from. What is the fear? Is it the fear I am letting down Tourism Australia or the Australian film industry or myself?' He pauses. The biggest fear 'would be for Baz. Overriding that there's always that actor's fear that they'll find out this time,' – his chuckle sounds slightly forced – 'they'll find out I am just that kid from Wahroonga.' Who's he kidding?

The leafy middle-class suburb of Wahroonga on Sydney's North Shore is where Jackman grew up, the youngest of five children. The year before his birth, in 1968, his English parents had migrated to Australia as 'Ten Pound Poms' (under the Australian government's scheme to encourage skilled migration). His father, Chris, knuckled down as a hard-working accountant; his mother, Grace, did not adapt so well. After Jackman's birth she suffered post-natal depression severe enough for Hugh to spend the first 18 months of his life with his godparents. When he was eight his mother returned to England. It was out of the blue, Chris Jackman has said recently – she left 'just a letter' and five 'heartbroken' children.

'For many years I believed that she was going to come back. I think you live in that kind of world.' Jackman falls silent. With his mother and four siblings now living in England, he's reluctant to elaborate. 'I'm sure it shaped me but I wouldn't say it's haunted me or made my life dark or full of anger and angst. Mum and I have come to a peaceful place with it.' From the age of 14 Jackman travelled to England occasionally to see his mother, where his love of the theatre blossomed.

As an adolescent he disliked all the attention



and sympathy he received from his friends' mothers and desperately wanted to fit in. At school, the high-achieving Knox Grammar, he was an all-rounder who excelled in sport and drama and became school captain. Jackman drew great strength from his father, a devout Christian – as was Jackman when growing up, but no longer – who brought up five children single-handedly through discipline and hand-me-downs. 'I've never heard Dad say a bad word about anybody including my mum. I love that quality about him.'

After studying communications and journalism at Sydney's University of Technology, Jackman switched to acting in 1991, turning down a role on *Neighbours* to study at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in Perth. Those three years were 'probably one of the happiest times of my life,' he says. 'We'd do Shakespeare, then circus skills and singing and dancing. It is a quality that seems to tap into my surname, Jack of all trades.'

During those early lean years Jackman made his living as a clown at children's parties, and worked in restaurants and petrol stations, before his first television break in 1995, aged 27, in *Correlli*, a prison drama on which he met his wife, 13 years his senior. Recognising his rising star, she put her own ambitions on hold to further his career.

'That had its moments for Deb,' Jackman says, a shadow crossing his face. 'When we first went to Hollywood people would ignore her. She'd call it the chopped liver syndrome. She would be literally hit away as [women] tried to get to me,' he sighs. 'It takes adjusting for me too. Sometimes I don't understand why I am getting this attention.'

Notwithstanding his ranking as one of *People* magazine's '50 Most Beautiful People in the World' from 2000 to 2004, Jackman still walks freely in New York or London. In Sydney he is on first-name terms with the Australian paparazzi who trail him on dawn swims at Bondi Beach. 'I'm pretty boring,' he shrugs. 'There's no scandal.'

Much of this is down to the rock-solidness of his 12-year marriage. For Jackman it was love at first sight – 'like a thunderbolt. I knew 100 per cent that Deb was going to be my wife.' Furness laid down the 'two-week rule' – the 'backbone' of their marriage according to Jackman – stipulating that they could not be apart for longer than 14 days. 'She'd seen so many relationships go awry, particularly on location when people were away for months on end,' he explains. 'Absence

doesn't necessarily make the heart grow fonder.'

The result is a Bedouin lifestyle. They have lived in Pimlico, London and Soho, New York and after two years in Sydney, will return to New York this Christmas. Jackman knows that this may be unsettling for their two adopted children, Oscar, eight, and Eva, three. 'It's pretty simple. It started with the marriage. Now we ask, is this good for the family or bad? If it's good we do it. If it's bad we don't.'

The couple experienced considerable heartache trying to have their own children. After three years of IVF in Britain and Australia they decided on adoption. In 1998, during the previews of *Oklahoma!*, when Jackman was rehearsing all

day and performing at night, exhaustion set in.

'We'd been told by a naturopath that you've got to make love every day for a 10-day period. I never thought I'd get to the point where I was like, "Deb, can I have a break?"' He rests his chin on his hand, thoughtful. 'It's very hard with IVF, there are a lot of emotions,' says Jackman, who was giving his wife daily injections as part of the treatment. 'We did have a couple of miscarriages as well and those are very tough. When we adopted, all that seemed to melt away instantly.'

After finding the red tape impossible in Australia, they succeeded in adopting both their children in America. 'For Oscar we opted for open adoption because we thought it would be much easier to discuss the whole subject.' Flouting the rules, they became friends with the birth mother, a young woman from Iowa, and attended Oscar's delivery. 'It was exhilarating. I remember tears running out of my eyes in the happiest possible fashion.' With Eva they chose closed adoption; both children are of mixed race.

A devoted father, Jackman worries about his children's right to a private life. 'I tell them the truth: people see me in movies and want to know what I do at the weekend. They don't really love me, I tell Oscar. Real love is what you and I have and will never go. The interest in me – the fame, the magazines – that will go. I don't know when, but that means it's not real.'

It's this detachment that keeps Jackman so level-headed. A detachment cultivated, perhaps, from 15 years of daily meditation – since 1993 he has followed the School of Practical Philosophy, a mixture of religious beliefs and philosophies from Hinduism to Socrates. Under no illusions that *Australia's* wave can crest for ever, he is already looking ahead to next year's release of his own production of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, the prequel to the X-Men series.

Later that day I catch up with Jackman at the photo shoot in a large warehouse studio. He greets me with a 'hello darling' and a peck on the cheek. Then, without warning, peels off his black shirt. The stylists gasp audibly. I find myself manoeuvring out of the way: Jackman's presence fills the entire space.

At the *Australia* press screening the audience break into spontaneous applause in the scene where Jackman, naked to the waist, is taking a shower, his gleaming upper torso covered in soap suds. Without a doubt, this is the HJ factor and with his no-frills Australian attitude, it must cut through the Hollywood artifice. 'Do you want a curtain?' the photographer inquires as Jackman strips down to grey boxer underpants, his legs like a thoroughbred ready to sprint. 'Naah,' he says. 'Don't worry. I just drop my pants anywhere. I'm from the theatre.'

'Australia' is released on December 26

'THERE'S ALWAYS THE FEAR THAT THEY'LL FIND OUT THIS TIME,' – HIS CHUCKLE SOUNDS SLIGHTLY FORCED – 'THAT I AM JUST THAT KID FROM WAHROONGA'

From top *The Fountain*, with Rachel Weisz (2006); as Wolverine in *X-Men* (2000); with Scarlett Johansson in *The Prestige* (2006); *The Boy From Oz*, Imperial Theatre, New York, 2004; in *Oklahoma!* with Maureen Lipman in 1998

“Or a gorgeous,
treat for him”

worth £35 when you
spend £18 or more on
N°7 at Boots



N°7 For Men

Only at
& boots.com

Boots

*See opposite page for terms and conditions.

