

review



Ready for his close-up

He's the next AFI's host and a Helpmann award-winner
(but you used to know him as Kenny)

{The prime of Shane Jacobson}

The most wanted man in Australia's acting firmament tells **Greg Callaghan** how he gets it all done

SHANE Jacobson, eyes twinkling, his surprisingly athletic 185cm brickie's frame twisting in all manner of directions, is bounding about the photographic studio wielding a chrome stool as though he's a lion tamer. Jacobson artfully sidesteps the attentions of a make-up artist who is desperately trying to put a dab of pancake on his shiny cheek. A wonderfully rubbery sneer passes over his face. Everyone in the studio is laughing, including the photographer.

Unlike some other comedians who can barely muster a smile or joke when off stage or away from the camera, Jacobson seems to relish cracking people up, whether he's being paid to do so or not. By his own admission, the 40-year-old plays no one better than himself. Those who have worked closely with him say they're in awe of his prodigious energy levels, exquisite showmanship and clear business savvy in choosing and shaping projects that are perfect for him. Suddenly, Jacobson is one of the hottest properties in the Australian entertainment business.

Next month he'll be hosting the AFI Awards in Sydney, a prestigious gig that not only speaks of his ascendancy in the showbiz world but caps off a highly successful year in

which he's a) become co-host of the top-rating *Top Gear Australia*, after the Nine Network famously outbid SBS for the local franchise; b) won warm praise and healthy box-office receipts for his role in the film *Charlie and Boots* opposite Paul Hogan (we'll get to his other film projects in a moment); and c) cemented his reputation as a respected and in-demand theatre performer, following the success of *The Drowsy Chaperone* for the Melbourne Theatre Company opposite Geoffrey Rush and Robyn Nevin. (In 2008 Jacobson snared a Helpmann award for his role as Nicely Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*.)

The Jacobson bandwagon will be rolling on next year with roles in another feature film, *Surviving Georgia*, and *The Apprentice*, a short film produced by American wunderkind Peter Farrelly (*Dumb and Dumber* and *There's Something About Mary*).

Just more than four years ago, Jacobson was what in showbiz circles they disparagingly call a near-nobody, albeit a busy one. Between impersonating business figures at corporate functions, warm-ups for *The Footy Show* and the odd theatre-restaurant gig, he juggled jobs as diverse as a dental supplies salesman, a credit card fraud investigator and a pyrotechnician at large outdoor rock concerts. In short, a renaissance guy in an age of specialists. ("If necessary, I can turn my hand to most things," he says.) Then along came an endearing, sweet-souled portalo plumber called Kenny Smyth and a film that took nearly \$10 million at the local box office and went on to achieve respectable DVD sales in Britain, Canada and the US. Suddenly, Jacobson — or at least his alter ego Kenny — was a household name.

To succeed as a comedian isn't easy. It requires truckloads of comic talent, determination and self-confidence — the type that doesn't spill over into arrogance. But for the public to like you requires an additional gift, something far more difficult to define: a down-to-earth warmth and authenticity, both of which Jacobson has in spades.

Perhaps more than any other male entertainer to emerge in Australia during the past decade, Jacobson comes across as a likable, approachable bloke. Highbrow types may still be inclined to dismiss him as a bit of a low-comedy boofhead, a one-hit wonder who fixed the blocked dunnies in *Kenny*. But what they recognise when they scan his CV is a career spanning radio, television, theatre and feature film; what they discover when they meet him is a warm, self-deprecating man for whom nobody in the industry seems to have a bad word.

Which probably explains why image makers describe Jacobson as — for good or ill — that rare commodity: a trusted, quintessentially Australian brand, the male equivalent of Magda Szubanski (whom he played opposite in *Guys and Dolls*). Yes, people may laugh at him as well as with him, but they also believe in him — he's the type of bloke with whom both stockbrokers and labourers would feel comfortable having a beer — and women trust him. He's cuddly. And funny. And smart.

So who is Shane Jacobson? Spend some time talking to him (see our Q and A below) and you realise the breadth and depth of his talent owes much to his remarkable, eclectic family and a solid foundation of lifelong nurture and encouragement. No unhappy

childhood. No tales of a tortured adolescence. No gut-wrenching creative angst or pressure. Just a couple of loving, multi-skilled parents who doted on their two daughters and two sons. (Jacobson is seven years younger than his brother Clayton, his co-star and co-writer on *Kenny*.)

From his mother, the young Jacobson learned to dance, cook and charm; from his father how to box, fix a car and tell a joke. His mother, Jill, a dance teacher of 50 years' standing, still teaches at Avonde Calisthenics College in Melbourne's Avondale Heights, where the Jacobsons have lived for nearly 30 years; earlier this year his father Ron published a book, *Kenny's Dad, The True and Amazing Life, Laughs and Lessons of Ron Jacobson*, in which he details much of the family's colourful history.

The Jacobsons descend from a long line of Victorian carnival performers who — family legend has it — had a pat list of responses to the inevitable put-downs of their itinerant lifestyle in a big circus tent. "My grandparents were carnie folk," Shane Jacobson says. "We all have big fingers and a weakness for cheap food."

The young Jacobson was always encouraged to express his feelings.

"When I was a teenager," he recalls, "my mates would give me a ribbing when I kissed my dad. They told me it was a bit weird seeing me kiss my old man. But when I compared myself to other families, I soon realised how lucky I was."

"I came to see kissing my dad as a badge of honour. He was a boxing trainer, an athlete, a typical man's man. Now he's my mentor and my mate. My brother, too. We're a very close family."

While Jacobson is happy to talk about his upbringing and anything to do with his career, he makes it clear questions about his partner and two young children are strictly off limits, beyond the fact he admits he couldn't be happier or more settled in his private life. They have been together for several years but have yet to tie the knot.

"I will make an honest woman out of her when she starts lying," he jokes.

He pauses for a moment, then reflects. "Performing isn't my entire life, it's not something I depend on for personal happiness. And it's about the work, not the glory. But I gotta say, I'm on a pretty good trip at the moment. How can you complain when you're paid to do the thing you love?"

Spoken like a true celebrity.

Q and A

You'll be hosting the AFI Awards next month. Your friend Paul Hogan did a nice job co-hosting the Oscars in 1987 at the height of his fame with *Crocodile Dundee*. Will you be asking him for tips?

I will follow the advice he has already given me. "Just be yourself, mate. It's all you need to do, trust me, it'll go all right for ya." So the person I will be playing on the night is Shane Jacobson. If that doesn't work, I will give Paul Hogan a call.

***Kenny* may have been your breakthrough but you were doing amateur theatre, stand-up comedy and TV commercials for years beforehand. Was it a struggle**

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I CAME TO SEE KISSING MY DAD AS A BADGE OF HONOUR

SHANE JACOBSON

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for you during those early years?

It was hard work; I did so many varied gigs and performances, but I could never call it a struggle because I loved every minute of it.

You played Nicely Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*, for which you won an award, and performed with the Melbourne Theatre Company this year in *The Drowsy Chaperone*. What's the biggest challenge in doing live theatre?

Drowsy Chaperone was an easy one because it was such a short-run show, we only ran for five weeks or so, sold out every night then we were out. But longer running shows like *Guys and Dolls* I performed over 250 times. After three months you have got the show pretty much permanently planted in your every muscle; after that you have to ensure you are keeping your performance fresh and energised. For me it was just wanting to give every audience my very best effort because chances are they were only going to see the show once.

What did you learn from performing with stage veterans such as Garry McDonald and Geoffrey Rush?

To never stop trying to perfect your craft. Both Garry and Geoffrey are like first-class racing drivers, always trying to improve every detail, every nuance of their performance. They never take the easy route, always the higher road. They're also incredibly nice men, very easy to work with. Garry McDonald was a big hero of mine when I was young and, I can tell you, I wasn't disappointed when I worked with him. I learned so much.

You're now co-host of *Top Gear*. You have a car, motorbike and heavy vehicle licence. You're a true-blue petrolhead?

I've got a licence to drive pretty much everything. I wouldn't call myself a petrolhead, though. I'm a motoring enthusiast.

You have a collection of cars, but what's your all-time favourite?

Without doubt my 1964 EH Holden, it's a true classic and the car I dreamed of owning as a kid. Don't get me wrong, I still love HJ and HQ Kingswoods and the Kombi van, but the EH is my sentimental favourite.

What would be the coolest car to own?

Probably a Shelby Cobra.

You once managed the fireworks at rock concerts. I believe you once saved Guns N' Roses and Skid Row from a disaster.

We had a lot of stage pyrotechnics and flame effects that we had let off during the concert, but at the very end of the concert when the band walked off stage, we had an outdoor display set to go off. The band members were then going to jump in a helicopter and head back to Melbourne to their hotel and it was then I noticed that the helicopter and Melbourne were in a direct line over the top of our launch position for the fireworks. Then I noticed that we and the pilot had the exact same cue to start sending himself and our fireworks into the air, and in addition to this we had all of the fireworks wired together with a fuse cord that, once lit, just keeps going all on its own. I thought, I might go and chat to the pilot. He didn't want to answer many of my questions when I first started quizzing him until he heard the word fireworks... "I beg your pardon, son, did you say fireworks? What damn fire-



From top, Shane Jacobson in *Kenny*; *Guys and Dolls*; with Paul Hogan in *Charlie and Boots*; on *Top Gear Australia*

works?" He suddenly became very interested. Apparently he was the only one there who didn't know about them.

You collaborated with your brother Clayton and father Ron on *Kenny*. Your dad has a joke and limericks website. Did you grow up laughing at one another's jokes?

Absolutely, and still do. My brother and dad have the ability to make me laugh more than anybody. I grew up laughing at them both, which was where my love for comedy came from. But it wasn't just my dad and brother; my uncles and aunts were all funny, too. When the whole mad family would get together they'd sit around and tell stories, some trying to outdo others.

Was there any sibling rivalry between you and Clayton when you were growing up?

Never, but I think maybe because our age gap is seven years, so he was always my big brother and I was always the little brother that he helped and advised. Then as we got older we started to collaborate on projects and then just became mates. We have never really competed with each other as much as enjoyed each other's work.

It's an urban myth, but an irresistible one, that you grew up in the small Victorian town of Bonny Doon, made famous in the film *The Castle*. While it might seem the right fit for *Kenny Smyth*, you really grew up in Melbourne's western suburbs. Where on earth did Bonny Doon come from?

On a TV interview this morning I was asked about Bonny Doon again! The hilarious thing is that someone put it on Wikipedia: Bonny Doon, a real town, but one made famous in *The Castle*. Oh, the serenity! I know someone who changed a fact on Wikipedia so he could win a bet, so it's not the most reliable source. Avondale Heights is the truth. I loved my youth in the west, riding bikes, swimming in rivers, canoeing up creeks and just running amok with mates.

Last year you appeared opposite Paul Hogan in the hit film *Charlie and Boots*, centred on the grief of a widower and the determined efforts of his son to bond with his old man on a fishing trip to the Top End. Do you think the success of the film was partly due to the fact we don't see enough films dealing with the father-son relationship?

I think the reality is we all have some form of relationship with a parent or parents, be it good or bad, so it's a subject we can all relate to. So, with a film like *Charlie and Boots*, an emotion is evoked very quickly with the audience, depending on their experience.

The film was warmly received by the critics. Evan Williams, film critic for *The Australian*, described it as "the sweetest, the funniest, the most endearing Australian film I've seen for a long time".

I'd like to think Evan wrote that because the film really is funny and sweet.

It's also a road movie: during filming you spent two months travelling the 3000km between Warrnambool in Victoria to Cape York in Queensland. What was the wildest place you stayed at?

I have travelled quite a lot in my life, so I must admit I didn't find any of the locations to be wild, all were very familiar. The countryside was a really nice office to have for two months, with a car as a desk, the sky

as a whiteboard and pubs as a boardroom. Not sure if any decent problems were solved in the boardroom, but attendances were good and morale was good in the office.

How did you get along with Paul Hogan during the shoot?

He is a very generous performer, giving you plenty of room in each take. After we shot a scene, he would often tap me on the shoulder and say, "Good on ya, mate". He is very laid-back and easygoing.

Do you think your patient wait to become an "overnight success" at 36 with *Kenny* has helped you maintain a level head as your career has taken off?

I think family, friends and upbringing are the things that help determine how someone deals with having a recognisable head. But I will admit that I think being older when it happens does help a fair bit; by then you have figured out who you are and it's hard to become someone else. Even if I tried to become slightly different, my family and friends would slap me senseless, so I am only avoiding becoming a tosser out of complete fear of being beaten.

You did all the publicity for *Kenny* yourself, in the character of *Kenny Smyth*. You did this so convincingly many movie-goers continue to believe you're a real-life plumber. With hindsight, do you regret promoting the film in this way, given the inevitable typecasting?

Not at all. It was the reason I think the film became the success it did. Actually, I didn't think it was the best way to promote the film, but my brother convinced me otherwise, and he was right. *Kenny* is a much better man than I will ever be, so why not give the public the nice guy instead of the twit? I had 36 years to impress people and I didn't. I'll never regret pulling on those overalls.

Did you ever believe a movie about a man who installed portaloos for a living would be a box-office hit and go on to win awards for best film and best script at the AFI Awards?

No. Not in my wildest dreams. And the success of the film has enabled me to branch out and do many other things.

You don't strike me as the kind of bloke who scares easily, but I'll ask anyway: do you have any fears or phobias?

No, not really, although after filming for *Top Gear* in England recently with a rhino that wanted to kill me and the other hosts of the show, I would be happy never to meet a rhino again.

You have more film projects about to be released.

I have a film with Pia Miranda and Holly Valance called *Surviving Georgia*. I also play a part in an American film made up of many short films. Both of [them] are coming out next year. A TV show, *When I Grow Up*, is also coming out. There are a few other projects that I am starting, so it looks like I may not have enough time to do my paper round.

What's the best joke you've heard recently?

That one day I should run for PM. (Jacobson goes on to deliver a long and funny joke, available in our video interview.)

To see our video interview with the very funny Shane Jacobson, visit *The Weekend Australian's* website, www.theaustralian.com.au.