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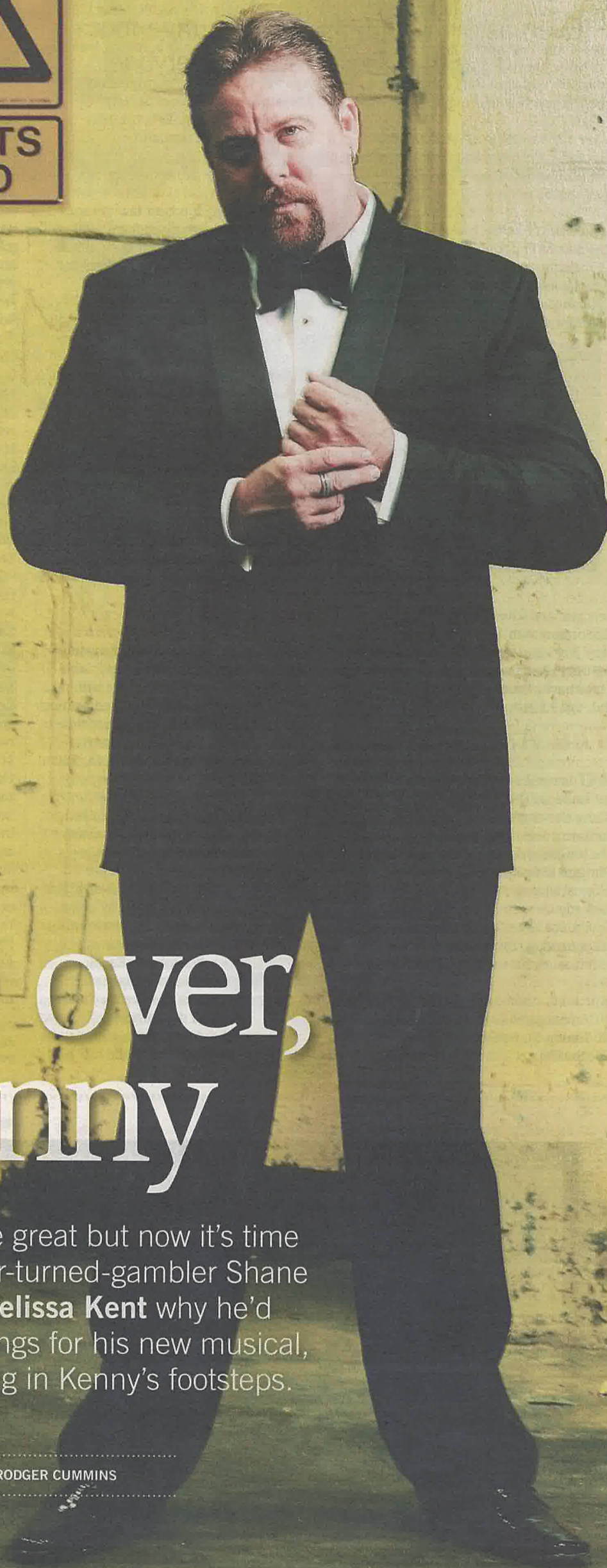
Homes Shine makes
a big comeback

Music Move over Amy,
here comes Adele

Shane reaction

Swapping screen
for stage, Australia's
favourite dunny guy
reveals why it's time
to let go of Kenny

INSIDE Based on a hit movie — the buzz on film-to-theatre productions



Role over, Kenny

The Portaloos were great but now it's time to move on. Cleaner-turned-gambler Shane Jacobson tells **Melissa Kent** why he'd prefer to receive gongs for his new musical, rather than dancing in Kenny's footsteps.

PICTURE RODGER CUMMINS

It is a warm Wednesday afternoon as I wait for actor Shane Jacobson outside the Princess Theatre. Office workers on their lunch breaks scurry past, glancing with mild interest at posters of the *Guys and Dolls* cast in the windows.

Among the veritable who's who of Australian entertainment hanging there — Marina Prior, Garry McDonald, Lisa McCune, Magda Szubanski — it is Jacobson, dressed in 1940s garb as Nicely Nicely Johnson, that stops one couple dead in their tracks.

"Hey look, it's Kenny! Ha, he looks different without those overalls."

"Yeah, but you can still tell it's him."

Jacobson, I soon learn, would probably be pleased and frustrated in equal measure at such a reaction.

It is three years since he created Kenny, the loveable toilet technician with a heart of gold and nostrils of steel in the low-budget "mockumentary" he and his director brother Clayton made largely themselves.

It was a huge, instant star-making hit, both here and overseas. In Kenny Smyth, a put-upon, straight-talking "knight in shining overalls" with a crappy job, cranky father and troublesome ex-wife, we found the kind of quintessential Aussie battler we love to love, in the same way we adored Crocodile Dundee, Darryl Kerrigan and Steve Irwin.

It catapulted Jacobson, then a virtual unknown, to the level of success the former television warm-up guy had sought his entire career: an AFI best actor award, a spin-off TV show, several film and stage opportunities and a royal toilet tour of the world to promote the film.

But therein lies the dilemma for the 38-year-old Melbourne actor. So thoroughly and convincingly did he inhabit the Portaroo plumber — he did all his press in character and people continue to be surprised that he doesn't really talk with a lisp — Jacobson runs the risk of being forever known as Kenny.

Or at least, he thinks so.

"I know that the only way to move on is not to keep going back to Kenny,"

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RON JACOBSON

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Jacobson insists, several times, over lunch at the Princess Theatre coffee shop between rehearsals. "It's not that I'm sick of him. I love the guy. I'd like to meet him one day, but funnily enough he's never around when I turn up.

"People around me keep telling me I have to leave *Kenny* behind for the sake of my career, but no one knows that better than me. I've done so much since *Kenny*, I've made two films, and it was so long ago I just don't want to keep going back."

In fact, he is so anxious to distance himself from the character who made him famous that, for this interview, he refused to pose for any photographs that had anything to do with *Kenny*. Stripping off the overalls and showing the real Shane in a tux underneath? No way. OK then, a corsage on the tux lapel, made of loo paper? Nope. Right, how about ... ? Don't even go there.

Jacobson's insistence on shutting *Kenny* out seems ironic, considering *Kenny* himself was immensely proud of his career as the "Dalai Lama of Poo". In media circles, this kind of behaviour borders on what is known as "being difficult".

But face to face, Jacobson turns out to be not at all fretful. He is personable, full of anecdotes and quick with a funny tale. He looks, well, just like *Kenny*, everyone's favourite humble handyman, even down to his red-flecked goatee beard, heavy-set physique and silver earring decorating his left ear. And aside from *Kenny*, he'll talk about practically anything.

You get the impression that Jacobson is intent on exercising control over the direction of his career after a lifetime working on the sidelines of the entertainment world, dabbling in this, that and the other. When it comes to performing there is pretty much nothing he hasn't done, both in front of and behind the scenes. It runs in the blood, he says; his father, brother, nephew and sister-in-law all had starring roles in *Kenny*.

His father, Ron, came from a carnival family and featured in the 1973 film *Come Out Fighting* about an Aboriginal boxer. His mother, Jill, continues to run a calisthenics school in Avondale Heights.

"I don't know if you could say I came from a strong acting background because Dad wouldn't call himself an actor, but he's always been a performer and an entertainer," Jacobson says. "He did stand-up comedy when I was a kid and was involved in a lot of sporting clubs where he'd get up and do a bit of a routine and have everyone in stitches. He was just the funniest guy I knew, and still is. I guess if he'd been Peter Brock, maybe we would have driven race cars instead.

"Mum has taught ballet and calisthenics for 45 years, and my sisters were dancers when I was young, so getting up on stage was kind of inevitable for me. I did my first performance on stage at the age of eight, dressed as a cowboy with mum's dancers at a calisthenics concert.

"I was doing amateur theatre and singing in bands, I sang in a barbershop quartet, I did tap dancing. I played Fagin in our primary school production of *Oliver!*. Performing was what I always wanted to do."

As a teenager, this mini one-man show continued to nurture his love of drama through his involvement in the scouting movement rather than his school, Niddrie Tech, which focused on more practical vocations for its students.

Ron recalls a young Shane honing his versatile skills in the scouts' *Melbourne Gang* shows, an annual revue-style variety performance. "Year after year he was in those *Gang* shows down at the Palace Theatre in St Kilda," Ron says. "He'd do a bit of singing and dancing and some comedy sketches, then later on he was also a producer. They were very popular night after night, so he got a lot of exposure there at an early age for his acting.

"Even as a young fella in the lounge room, he'd be there in the centre entertaining everyone, pulling funny faces and mimicking people. So it didn't surprise me that he got into the acting field."

While his big brother Clayton focused on a career as a film director and editor, Shane dabbled in a little bit of everything connected to showbiz. He has been variously: engineer, event manager, warm-up guy for television show *Live and Kicking*, half-time entertainer for the Victorian Titans basketball team, "Sergio the Italian hairdresser" on Gold FM, wedding MC, corporate stand-up comedian and — yes — pyrotechnician.

Which brings us to one of his funny stories: the time he saved the members of Guns N' Roses and Skid Rowe from a fiery death at the infamous Calder Park concert in 1993. "I used to do all the fireworks for bands like Bon Jovi, Dire Straits and AC/DC," he says. "At the Guns N' Roses concert, their helicopter was due to take off 10 minutes before the end of the gig, which was right about when the fireworks were scheduled to start.

"Luckily I checked the time sheet and realised the helicopter was going to be fired straight out of the air by fireworks. So yeah, in a way Skid Rowe and Guns N' Roses owe their lives to me. Not bad huh?"

For some, dream jobs don't come much better than that. But Jacobson, according to his father, wanted to concentrate on film, and decided to quit his job as general manager of entertainment lighting and production company Premier Lighting to focus on working with Clayton on *Kenny*.

"I reached a point where I realised I was getting distracted by my business career which had just kind of taken off," he says. "It was never the plan — life just happens sometimes.

"Comedy is something I've always enjoyed doing. Making people laugh is a hell of a drug and if you get a chance to drive a vehicle that will make people giggle, you just want to drive it up and down the street all day. Acting in films was something I really wanted to do but I did get distracted doing comedy and warm-up."

Kenny's success has undoubtedly opened many doors for Jacobson and he has wasted no time walking through them. In the past 18 months he has made two films — *Cactus*, a kidnapping drama he describes as a "very cool road movie" opposite Bryan Brown, and *Newcastle*, a coming-of-age surfing drama in which he plays a dry dock worker called Reggie. He and Clayton have also revisited *Kenny*, travelling to 15 countries for a television spin-off series called *Kenny's World*, which will screen on Ten this year.

For the moment, however, he is focusing all that irrepressible energy on his first professional stage role as gambler Nicely Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*. "It is an amazing cast — to me, working with Garry Macdonald and Marina Prior is like getting in a plane with the Wright brothers every day," he gushes, barely controlling his glee. "Garry is the pioneer of what I did with *Kenny*. He was doing Norman Gunston when I was a child, before Borat or anyone like that, so I'm literally star-struck every single day.

"I'm excited about the audience seeing me as someone else because they've only seen me as *Kenny*."

Aside from the job opportunities, *Kenny* has, of course, resulted in a loss of anonymity for his creator — and this has changed his life in other ways. "Just imagine if you walked down the street and everyone knows your name and has been briefed on who you are," Jacobson says. "You just can't describe how strange that is. Having people come up to you in the street and congratulate or compliment you on your work is overwhelming and incredibly sweet. Yes, you lose your anonymity, but it's all ... quite lovely.

"My family don't treat me with any more or less respect, so nothing has changed there. The only difference now is the comments I have to put up with when my photo's in the paper — you know, 'You look like an idiot in that shot', or 'Gee that shirt's horrible' or 'Who told you you were important?' It's tough."

Guys and Dolls is on at the Princess Theatre until June 28.

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