



The entertainer

He won our hearts as Portaloo man Kenny. But Shane Jacobson was entertaining audiences long before he donned the overalls and manned the suction pump. **Simon Plant** reports

IN THE dark, nobody notices him. He's just a carrot-haired kid in the stalls, enjoying an amateur variety show in Melbourne. But Ronald Jacobson's youngest boy is watching, listening, drinking it all in.

The vaudeville patter, the tap routines, the singalongs... nothing escapes his attention. And at the end of the show, Shane Jacobson turns to his dad and says: "That's what I wanna do. I wanna be a performer."

Thirty years on, he has his wish.

Jacobson, known far and wide as Portaloo king Kenny Smyth, has traded his immaculate overalls for a natty grey pinstriped suit. And eight times a week, he treads the boards at The Princess Theatre in *Guys and Dolls*.

As petty crim Nicely Nicely Johnson, Jacobson has some sly Damon Runyon lines and one of the best songs in this fabled Broadway musical, *Sit Down, You're Rockin' The Boat*.

"I don't think my voice strips paint off

walls," he says of his "high baritone". "But I'm hitting notes I haven't hit for a while."

Jacobson, 38, is also loving the "instant gratification" that live theatre can deliver.

"You finish the number — your arms high, your fingers spread — and as the band hits that last note, the applause

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comes through. Fantastic. Whereas in a film, you finish a line and four years later someone laughs at it... and you're not even in the room with them."

We are chatting backstage and Jacobson — in polo top, jeans and runners — seems slightly awed by the company he's keeping.

"Geez, this is the stuff dreams are

made of," he says as Magda Szubanski and Garry McDonald saunter past. "Finding out you're going to be acting next to Marina Prior is like being asked to ride on a donkey with Jesus."

But if anyone has earned his place on the professional stage, it's Jacobson. Long before he became a household name as Kenny and won an AFI Award for Best Actor, he was stealing scenes in *Gang Shows*, doing theatre-restaurant slapstick and playing the warm-up man.

"To the public, it's like I've just turned up in the world of theatre and gonna have a go," he says. "Actually, the stage is where it all started for me."

In conversation, Jacobson is anything but theatrical. He plonks himself in a

chair, folds those big arms of his and gives the impression he has all day to shoot the breeze.

A mischievous smile lurks in his ginger beard, but Jacobson's crinkly blue eyes — locking on to you like lasers — signal an agile mind that's constantly whirring.

Elder brother Clayton (*Kenny* direc-

tor) confirms it: "Shane's energy is incredible. They don't make pies fast enough for him to put his fingers in."

The Jacobson brothers have finished shooting *Kenny's World*, a comedy-doco for Network Ten which "scours the globe for bizarre, intriguing and downright ridiculous examples of toilet technology".

But other filmmakers have come knocking too. Bryan Brown recently cast Jacobson as a truckie in his outback heist movie *Cactus*, and producer Naomi Wenck decided he was ideal to play a working-class father of three in her coming-of-age surfing tale, *Newcastle*.

WENCK says: "The minute Shane was suggested, we thought it was a brilliant idea because he really represents the real Aussie male... we didn't bother auditioning anyone else. We didn't even audition him. It was his role."

Jacobson chuckles. "I know some people have their tragic stories about success," he says. "But every time I've opened a new door, I've been thanked for the room I've just left and welcomed into the one I'm entering."

For years, doors slammed in his face. Jacobson the journeyman was compelled to work the margins, addressing

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▲ **Family ties:** (left to right) Shane Jacobson, his father Ron and brother Clayton.

▶ **Young talent:** the young Jacobson embraced the showbiz spotlight at eight and has been hooked ever since.

▶ **Old haunt:** (main picture) Jacobson outside the Palais theatre in St Kilda, where he appeared in *Gangs Shows*.

Picture: CAMERON TANDY

▶ **Doing Nicely:** (inset, left) Jacobson in song and dance action in *Guy's and Dolls*.

corporate lunches, inventing radio characters and singing at weddings.

"You spend a lot more time not being paid for your craft than you do being paid," he sighs.

But he never had a choice in the matter. From the moment he danced at Broadmeadows Town Hall, aged eight, he was smitten by the spotlight. So much so, teenage friends nicknamed him "Hollywood" Jacobson.

Clayton says: "With Shane, there's not a huge gap between performing on stage and just living his life. It doesn't matter if he's standing on a stage or a set of steps or a barge somewhere, he'll wanna make you laugh and connect on some level."

The impulse to act comes from Jacobson's upbringing in Melbourne's west.

Ronald Jacobson, who co-starred in *Kenny*, remembers: "We used to all go down to my mum's place at Marlyrnong, the kids and everyone. They were occasions for them to be with their cousins and uncles, and my boys would listen to all the tales, tall and true. I think a bit of that old Aussie humour rubbed off on 'em."

The family home in Avondale Heights rang to the sound of music. Jacobson's dad played the drums ("Billy Hyde

taught me") and took movie bit parts; mum Jill ran a callisthenics school.

Clayton says: "Every time we came home, there'd be girls in the living room doing warm-up exercises or learning a routine. Some of Shane's earliest gigs were en-entertain dance concerts. He'd go out and entertain everyone while the girls got ready for their next act."

Jacobson's mother even hired Goldberg's Progress Theatre so her leggy lasses could see classic movie musicals. Her boys usually went along too.

CLAYTON set his sights on being a movie director. Shane, seven years younger, wanted to "get his noggin out front" and work the crowd.

"I come from a background where you'd go to a party and sit around a piano and sing songs," he says.

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In the 1980s, Gang Shows staged by the Scouts were the next best thing. They were rowdy and exuberant, just the place for Jacobson to exercise his big talent.

"One night at the Palais, I did a dance routine with a broken forearm," he recalls. "This bloke strapped it up in

skin-coloured bandages and out I went with top hat and cane."

Elsewhere, Jacobson was Jerry Lewis to a mate's Dean Martin. Straight-faced Damien Lippiat would open their double act, only to be interrupted by a "drunk" in the audience.

"Shane was very forthright," Lippiat recalls. "He'd actually start climbing over people's heads . . . which was a bit confronting. You don't expect to have a 70kg bloke coming at you in the stalls."

BUT Jacobson's real comedic talent was not physical. It was verbal. Once, he passed himself off as an American motivational speaker. Another time he pretended to be a doctor and had nurses taking notes.

Jacobson was especially good at miming memorable lines. Still is. Asked if we can revisit his childhood, he shoots back: "Yeah, that's our pool. We can splash in it."

A later question about the price of fame gets Jacobson riffing on technology: "Sure, you'd like to see your friends more, but some pretty clever people are inventing new techniques for staying in touch. They have this whole internet thing going, which I really do think is gonna take off one day. And email . . . mate, that's gonna be huge. No longer will I have to keep stapling notes to a homing pigeon."

In deciding to go professional, Jacobson had the full support of his family.

Ronald says: "I was never too worried about my youngest because he's always had confidence in his own ability. That's not to say Shane's up himself, but he knows what he can do."

Resilience is another hallmark. Lippiat often wondered why his friend persisted with showbiz, "but every time, Shane would go, 'no . . . if I can

just get this thing right, this other thing around the corner might happen' . . ."

In the late 1990s, Jacobson managed a lighting and production company, but between gigs he kept juggling down ideas and crafting lines.

Kenny began that way. Through his events management work, Jacobson befriended the manager of a toilet-delivery company called Splashdown.

THE seeds of a comic character study were sown and, 2½ years later, Kenny Smyth was up on the big screen, taking care of everyone's business with unshakably good grace.

Clayton, who co-wrote *Kenny*, says: "The whole film was really a riff on decency and Shane. I think, embodies that. He's not overly complicated in his sense of humanity. You just meet him and know he's going to give you his time. A very open-hearted fella."

Jacobson, a single man, is guarded only when it comes to his private life. Friends protect him as well.

"Shane's job is his partner at the moment," is all Lippiat will say.

Jacobson nods. "I'm living three or four lives at the moment, but it's a great year for me in that I'm getting to do different things."

Guy's and Dolls came out of the blue when Jacobson was circling the globe, making his *Kenny* spin-off.

"I didn't have a lot of time to research the character," he says. "But I knew I needed to make him warm and endearing and do it my own way."

Jacobson's answer was a Nicely Nicely Johnson who combines Fred Flinstone with Barney Rubble. In other words, a tough nut with a heart of gold. That line could almost describe Kenny . . . and Jacobson, too.

Lippiat remembers the best man's speech Jacobson gave at his wedding: "Of course it was very funny — lots of belly laughs — but Shane closed with the most heartfelt sentiment. The loyalty and love he has for family and friends is unbelievable."

Jacobson calls his nearest and dearest "the coriander in the soup of my life" and they were out in force for the opening night of *Guy's and Dolls*.

For all we know, there was a little kid sitting in the dark as well who watched Shane Jacobson sing and dance and thought to himself: "I wanna do that."

Guy's and Dolls is now playing. *Cactus* and *Newcastle* are due for release soon. *Kenny's World* screens on Ten later this year.