

## Everything is going his way

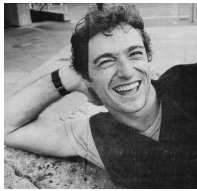


Photo Darren Filkins

**When Hugh Jackman walked on stage in *Oklahoma!* he knocked them dead. It's a dream come true, he tells Ismene Brown**

**"I ran out for the curtain call, and when I heard the shouts the prickles just ran up the back of my neck. The audience here is so warm"**

HIS legs are as high as an elephant's eye, he is six-feet-three of perfect tanned cowboy, and when he walks onto the stage at the National Theatre singing *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning*, a soft female collective sigh runs nightly round the packed auditorium.

Hugh Jackman is the exciting new star of Trevor Nunn's acclaimed new production of *Oklahoma!*, and already the casting agents are flying in begging for information about this extraordinarily attractive singing and dancing actor whom nobody's heard of before.

Jackman plays Curly, the cowhand who loves Laurey but can't stand to be too obvious about it. His Okie accent sounds authentic, but he is actually Australian - at home the first thing they do at drama school is learn other accents.

"There's not much international call for the Australian accent," he says, heaving with laughter when I mention the name Mel Gibson. "Oh, stop it, stop it."

This man is 29 and irresistible. He is newly married. He had just been given the leading role in *Oklahoma!* at the National - the theatre he'd dreamed about performing at for years - when his wife, Deborra-lee Furness, had her own big break: she won a place in Australia's most exclusive film school.

It was a hell of a dilemma. "I said, 'Deb, I'm happy to stay if you want to do the course.' She just laughed at me, slapped me a few times, and said, 'Are you kidding? This is the National!'"

"So she's applying to the London International Film School over here. Which is very nice of her... We wouldn't be apart, you see."

Four years ago Jackman, as a budding actor, got a friend to take his photo outside the National Theatre with praying hands. "I tacked the picture up on my wall at college in Perth. I didn't use it as a shrine or anything, but..."

Meeting him is to be bathed in a warm glow of unforced, natural humour and straight-up decency. He is a well-known actor and television presenter in Australia, but as the son of two English parents who emigrated, he always longed to prove himself here.

"Mum's from Norwich and Dad's from London. They and my three older siblings came out to Australia on the £10 trip, paid for by the Australian government. I was born and bred in Sydney."

When Hugh was eight, his mother returned to London and remarried; Jackman senior, an accountant, is a remarkable man, who subsequently raised his five children on his own, before himself remarrying. Hugh is contentedly in contact with both parents.

"I was lucky enough to be brought up in a way that just encouraged me to learn, not to worry about what I would do with my life. It would just be a corollary to learning to enjoy life."

"If I went to Dad and said, 'I'd love to learn saxophone', he would help me start tomorrow. That's what he believed money was for. He spent pretty much all of it on our education."

Hugh trained in journalism, decided he wasn't ruthless or truth-seeking enough, and switched to acting, where he was instantly noticed. He was offered a part in the soap opera "Neighbours", but preferred to do his training and hit the boards.

TREVOR Nunn hired him to lead the Australian *Sunset Boulevard*, which is how Jackman came to win *Oklahoma!* He waxes lyrical about Nunn, his acuteness, his sense of fun. "Trevor has such a big name in Australia, bigger than you'd expect."

He remembers the first night of *Oklahoma!* for the rude bottom-baring before curtain-up that some of the actors did as a good-luck sign, at Maureen Lipman's insistence - and for the audience's reaction.

"It dawned on me that here I am, going on at the National. And I found it kind of emotional. Josefina Gabrielle

[Laurey] and I ran out for the curtain call, and when I heard the shouts, the prickles just ran up the back of my neck. The audience here is so warm, so responsive, much more than I am used to in Australia."

Jackman's winning insouciance and lack of vanity extends to his dancing, which he makes no great claims for. He has to cope with the big dream-ballet at the end of Act I, created by the brilliant Broadway choreographer Susan Stroman, which she sneakily expanded day by day as he grew more confident.

What does he think of his dancing? He laughs heartily: "I would call it... encouraging. I'd say there's room for improvement."

He claims the energetic lifts with Laurey that bring the house down are not much to do with him at all.

"Josefina is so good. You know, my acting teacher used to say, you can always tell a good actor if the other looks great. If I look half good, it's because of Josefina. To this day, if you ask me how I do that lift [where Laurey ends up flying on his shoulders], I couldn't tell you. That is all Josefina. But I realise the more I say, the more I reveal how little I know."

In fact, the more Hugh Jackman says, the more attractive he reveals himself to be. He even makes a shaming admission about his musical tastes - he likes Phil Collins and George Benson. "It's true - I'm sorry, but I like really daggy, commercial radio music. When I have a party, my friends always bring the music. God, I can see that teenybopper queue of fans disappearing now."

Down at the National's stage door, they say, with the placidity of long experience, "Yes, we are about to have to deal with Hugh's fans..."

*Oklahoma! has been extended till October 3 (0171 928 2252)*