



HUGH JACKMAN

# Australia's Gentleman

WORDS SARAH BLINCO





“...it’s the role of a lifetime.”



Imagine an underground world of talking rats, singing slugs, arrogant French frogs, an evil toad and the instantly recognisable and gentlemanly voice of a lovable Aussie superstar... It’s all a reality in the world of *Flushed Away*, a movie that is sure to be the biggest (and cutest) release of the Christmas holiday period, and that adds another creative milestone to **Hugh Jackman’s** repertoire of achievements.

**F**lushed Away is an underground adventure like no other. This gorgeous flick was three years in the making and is another successful addition to DreamWorks Animation and Aardman Features’ list of delightful films that currently include *Shrek* and *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.

The movie tells the story of Roddy St. James (voiced by Hugh Jackman), a pampered pet mouse who thinks he has a flawless and luxurious life in his Kensington home. Enter sewer rat, Sid, who through a stroke of luck (that is, burst water main) is thrust out of the kitchen sink into Roddy’s perfect home. Sid decides that he wants Roddy’s life, and this is when Roddy finds himself, well, ‘flushed away’... down the toilet! His life really begins ‘underground’ when he meets street-wise rat Rita (Kate Winslet), and despite his efforts to make it back ‘up top’, Roddy soon realises there’s more to life than plush possessions.

Hugh Jackman is suitably cast as the sweet protagonist Roddy, and loved the experience of working on such a terrific animated feature, with a talented supporting cast (including Ian McKellen, Andy Serkis, Bill Nighy, Shane Richie and Jean Reno) and production team. “I’ve been a huge fan of these guys (producers

and directors) for a long time. It’s a lengthy process, we did it over three or so years, but it’s a wonderful experience,” he said.

Despite his varying roles in films such as *X-Men*, *Swordfish*, *Kate & Leopold* and *Van Helsing*, Hugh says the animation process was a learning curve for him. “It was more challenging than I had expected.

“when 10,000 people show up and cheer, it’s a good feeling – a good drug.”

I didn’t realise how much you rely on facial expressions, gestures... you know, all the things you take for granted when communicating,” he said.

“I saw models of all the characters, which gave me an idea of what the look and feel was. I then voiced some of the script, then some animating would be done and we’d watch it, then I’d do more voice. We’d see it little by little, add little reactions, and improvise,” Hugh explained.

The animation process is long and complicated, but well worth all the effort in the end, as is evident in *Flushed Away*. Before creating model sets and filming, the production teams actually toured London’s city sewers so they had a genuine feel for an ‘underground rat city’. As far as Roddy’s characterisation though, Hugh

said, “I brushed up on an English accent for his character, but essentially treated him like an English gentleman who loved his life, that is of course until his journey to rat-tropolis,” he laughed.

*Flushed Away* is a step in a different direction from Hugh’s past body of work, but he says it’s a deliberate decision to vary his film choices. “Particularly early on it was a conscious decision to do a lot of different things, but now I especially just want to work with great people, and I enjoy variety, so that’s what I base my decisions on,” he said.

There are some exciting film releases ahead for our favourite ‘Boy from Oz’. Coming soon is another animated feature *Happy Feet*, followed by *The Fountain*, co-starring Rachel Weisz, which chronicles a 1000-year period and three parallel stories of love, death and spirituality. It is to date, Hugh’s most testing role. “In *The Fountain* I play three parts. We spent a year working on it before filming, with much preparation and many rehearsals. It was a real challenge but will be amazing,” he said.

Following this will be the highly anticipated *Wolverine* movie (a spin-off of the popular *X-Men* series) as well as a spectacular, as yet untitled >

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Baz Luhrmann project. "It is an epic romantic adventure, like *Gone With The Wind*, set in Outback Australia, 1935-42, on a cattle station. It co-stars Nicole Kidman – it's the role of a lifetime," Hugh enthusiastically stated.

The charming star not only has exciting acting roles coming up, but is keen to promote his new production company. "I want to get Seed Productions up and running. Its first film is about to shoot in New York, and our (future) aim is to get a lot of Australian productions running, to get the industry here moving again," said Hugh.

As much as fans may look up to the talented star that is Hugh Jackman, he himself has those who he respects. "In terms of business, Mel Gibson is to be admired for his variety, production work, his company... he's a wonderful model. On the acting side of things I always looked up to English actors like Ian McKellen, Judy Dench, and others like Kevin Kline who play a variety of roles, from theatre to film."

Admirably, Hugh speaks highly of his fans who he says are "very good and supportive – there are only a couple of kooky ones," he jokes. He does not really consider himself (or behave like) 'a star', but admits that when he was performing shows on *The Boy From Oz* tour, "when 10,000 people show up and cheer, it's a good feeling – a good drug".

For a celebrity of this calibre, Hugh is sweet and down-to-earth, encompassing those 'Aussie characteristics' that make us so likeable on an international stage. He jokes that he is terrible around the home - "My wife would say I'm the world's worst handyman." When asked for advice on maintaining a successful family relationship and a hectic work schedule, however, he seriously adds, "You can't do it all, something has got to give... We have a rule where we try not to spend more than two weeks apart at a time... My wife says the most important parts in life are kids, hubby, work, social life, so you need a balance, but that's what life is about anyway – measure and

balance. I must say though, when I'm in Australia I find it easier to balance all these elements than when I'm somewhere like New York for example, where it's all go," he concluded.

Hugh is a loving husband and father, and is looking forward to the release of *Flushed Away* for professional and personal reasons. He happily quips, "I think there's something for everyone in this film. I know as a parent you'd sometimes rather die than go to kids' films, but this one really is for adults as well as the kids." For fans of the producers' previous work, keep an eye out for 'cameos' from *Chicken Run* and *Wallace and Gromit* characters, and don't be put off by the fact that the central characters are all rodents... they're very cute rodents and as a parent, you will need to get used to them because the character merchandise from *Flushed Away* is likely to rate highly on Christmas wish-lists this year!

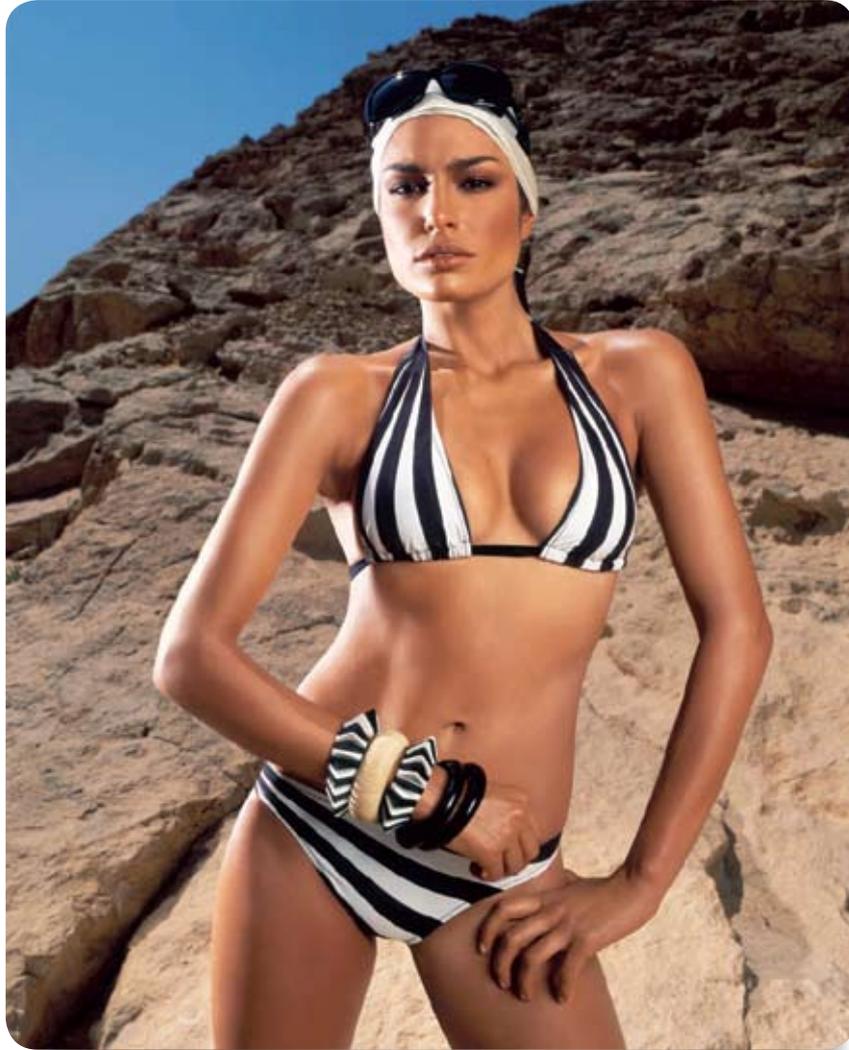
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