



# LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

From Andy Warhol to Harry Houdini, and drag queens to cowboys, Guy Pearce's career path is twisting like a Christopher Nolan indie-flick. *Nick Scott* talked to him about life after escaping the professional cul de sac of Ramsay Street.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAMERON GRAYSON.  
FASHION EDITOR MELISSA BOYLE.

Cotton shirt, \$375, by  
Ermenegildo Zegna.

Water shot took place on the 5th  
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[www.adelphi.com.au](http://www.adelphi.com.au)).



# HAVE

**YOU BEEN STOOD UP, LOVE?** And with that, stupid pride forces me to explain to the kindly, white-aproned speaker why I'm here, alone (20 minutes early) in one of Guy Pearce's favourite haunts — a railway station café in a sleepy suburb of Melbourne. "Ooooh, he's ever so private," she responds, vigorously stirring both my coffee and composure. "He doesn't really like doing interviews, they say." She's the fifth person to tell me this in the past week. And, making things more ominous, "they", in fact, includes "he".

**BACK IN 2002**, Pearce told the US edition of this magazine, "I always go home after an interview and feel like I've prostituted myself. Ultimately, I'd rather actors be seen as their characters and you didn't really know anything about their personal lives."

So it's a relief when he arrives, all loose casual clothes and hard casual handshakes, with a smile most would keep for someone they'd met before. And then we walk to an outside table, and Guy Pearce, contrary to everyone's predictions, launches into an hour-and-a-half of enthusiastic, elaborately gesticulated philosophy and self-dissection. How about this on people who ask why he's reached his fourth decade childless: "To me, it's a lot like someone saying, 'Do you want a broken leg?' 'Well no actually, I'm quite happy getting around without crutches, thanks very much.' 'Are you sure? Everyone else has a broken leg?' Seriously, I love kids, but I love giving them back as well."

He's not done. "I think there are way too many people in the world anyway, so Kate [Mestitz, Guy's wife of 11 years] and I are doing our bit and not having any. That's probably why all our friends are either gay or lesbian — they're the only people we know that don't have kids. We're able to hang around without talking about prams." OK, it's not exactly Keith Richards hovering up his old pop's ashes — but it's a pretty candid outpouring from someone who's supposed to clam up at the sound of a Dictaphone spooling.

Why the reputation for media-phobic circumspection, then? "It's true that I often just need to get away from the industry," he

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## Spirit bound

DEATH DEFYING ACTS DIRECTOR GILLIAN ARMSTRONG DISCUSSES HARRY HOUDINI'S HOT/COLD RELATIONSHIP WITH SPIRITUALISM.



Houdini was completely immersed in spiritualism at the end of World War I, as the post-war era introduced the beginnings of psychology and deeper research into the study of the brain. The movement was led by Sherlock Holmes creator, Arthur Conan Doyle, who intrigued Houdini with the possibility of contacting people in the afterlife.

By the time they met, both Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle were worldwide superstars. Houdini was enthralled by the afterlife for many personal reasons, but chief among these was that he wanted to contact his mother, with whom he had been extremely close, and had missed the opportunity of saying his final farewell to at her deathbed.

However, when he saw a psychic who Conan Doyle and his wife held in such high esteem, Houdini caught on to the hypocrisy and trickery involved in the spectacle. He then went on a personal crusade to dispel the illusions the psychics had fabricated and prove that these psychics were mere con artists who preyed on innocent people and took their money in return for false hope.

He became so obsessed with this personal mission that he actually employed a team of detectives to travel around America to debunk psychics. Yet, although fervently against psychics, underneath it all he carried some element of hope that there was really somebody who could do it, because he put a bounty up for anyone who could contact his mother, and flew people in from all over the world to attempt it.

says. "I don't know how people who fully live in the limelight do it. OK, it fuels them, but it's out of balance for me. As much as I don't think people should be made to feel lonely and left out of the world, I also don't think that people should be transformed into gods. It's just out of whack. And while the industry I'm in does that, it also makes people feel like losers and lonely as well."

Pearce's career trajectory — if you take movie debut *Priscilla, Queen of The Desert* (1994) to be the start of it — neatly follows that of the growth of 'celebrity'. How does a photogenic man with a big-screen profile dodge the public glare so well? "Well, famous people do have to make a real effort to avoid being paparazzi'd," he says. "But I don't feel like I'm real paparazzi fodder — I'm generally not going out and causing trouble, or jumping out of limos at premieres with my kilt on but no jocks."

Broken legs? Gay mates? Tackle-ahoy red carpet appearances? I've clearly caught Guy Pearce on a good day. Or, let's make that a good phase of his life. The road to this point, for Pearce, has been a far cry from the gentle-cambered, tarmacked smoothness of Ramsay Street. For those unfamiliar with his backstory: when he was eight, five years after his family had moved from England to Geelong, Pearce's father, a test pilot from New Zealand, was killed in a crash. Guy's elder sister, Tracy, has a learning disability. In adult life, Pearce has faced up to demons such as the premature adulthood necessitated by the above, regret over movie choices (more on that later) and sheer exhaustion, caused by doing movies back to back. Lengthy retreats, Buddhist texts, meditation and therapy — both verbal and herbal — have aided his slow recovery.

At the these-days tender age of 40, Pearce is in a much perkier zone. Often, he scours the LA circuit for movie projects that suit his varied palate. Usually, he's at home in Melbourne with his wife and zero sprogs (unless you count Zelda and Lulu — but they're Egyptian hunting hounds), doing the things he loves: reading avidly, writing and playing music, singing with his mate's jazz-funk band The Unconscious Brothers, administering some home renovations that seem to him to have been going on since Mrs Mangel turned pubescent.

On the professional front, the man who once plunged into post-Neighbours panto-and mini-series nihilism while Kylie and Jason became global household names continues his vertiginous ascent. *Death Defying Acts*, a tough-to-classify semi-fictional period drama directed by Gillian Armstrong, is the latest in a chain of movies which showcase Pearce's versatility as an actor.

Not so much a historical biopic in the vein of *Ned Kelly* or the forthcoming *The Young Victoria*, *Death Defying Acts* is what Armstrong calls, "A what-if movie". It weaves a yarn about Harry Houdini (Pearce) who, during a tour of Britain, has a Freudian-flecked fling with a psychic con-artist (Catherine Zeta-Jones) who is trying to pocket a prize fund the escapologist is offering to anyone who can contact his late mother. "There is a lot of factual stuff about Houdini in it," says Pearce. "He was quite fixated on his mother and the afterlife [see *breakout box*, left]. But really the thing that we take licence with is this supposed love affair with this fictional woman."

It's only when he begins to talk about casting of the movie that the self-doubt and coyness I've heard so much about surface. "When I talked to Gill Armstrong about doing the movie in the beginning, I didn't feel I was right for it," he says. "Physically I was in a totally different place and that has an affect on you psychologically. I was preparing to play Andy Warhol [in *Factory Girl*] at the time,

“PEOPLE THINK THAT ACTORS OWE IT TO OTHERS TO ENTERTAIN THEM. BUT I’M PURELY SELFISH IN MY ACTING PURSUIT.”

Wool check sports jacket, \$2,368, by Ferre. Wool tweed pants (part of suit), \$1,828, by Tombo-lini. Cotton pinstripe shirt, \$200; silk bow-tie, \$80, both by Polo Ralph Lauren. Leather lace-up shoes, \$519, by Boss Black.



Cotton pintuck shirt, \$440, by Emporio Armani. Velvet pants, \$420, by Hugo. Leather belt, \$189, by Boss Black.



“PEOPLE SAY TO ME, ‘WHY DON’T YOU DO A ROMANTIC COMEDY?’ AND I SAY ‘SHOW ME ONE THAT I FIND FUNNY, THEN I’LL DO IT.’”

so I felt like I was evaporating away, whereas Houdini was very physical and weighty. He also had a level of self-confidence and power and ability to command a room, and that’s generally not how I feel. When I walk into a room, I think, ‘How can I sneak across to the other side without anyone seeing me?’”

Is cold feet just before a movie common for him? “Yeah, I often feel that. I have that feeling, usually about a couple of days before we start shooting. In the end, it’s the fact that you have no choice. You have to find it. It’s like social anxiety, something I used to suffer from pretty intensely — I face playing a character by thinking, ‘What’s the worse that can happen?’”

Always one to emphasise what he perceives as his failings, Pearce even suggests at one point that he tends to require more takes on-set than most of his acting peers. But his adaptability to slip into esoteric personas, combined with his unaffected affability, gives his name a happy aptness (“You know, Guy Pearce — that regular kind of bloke who can penetrate your imagination at the drop of a clapper-board”). Take his eerily plausible portrayal of Warhol, for example; or what about his simmering menace as *LA Confidential*’s by-the-book office-boy cop, Ed Exley; his turn as memory-shot avenger Leonard Shelby in *Memento*? The utterly convincing high-camp of Felicia Jollygoodfellow in *Priscilla, Queen of The Desert*?

Pretty much everyone who has directed Pearce will speak of his extraordinary ability to get under the skin of the left-field, often emotionally dislocated characters he portrays, Armstrong included. “He is the kind of actor that completely transforms,” she says. “A lot of great actors play pretty well close to themselves most of the time, but we needed to have someone who could completely morph into Houdini. I couldn’t think of anybody better than Guy.”

As far as Pearce is concerned, though, versatility can be a curse — if it’s at the expense of integrity. This is a man who, with a cheeky wink towards the right Tinseltown stogie-suckers, could have landed some high-profile fluff roles. Think flawed-but-decent-dude-meets-Ms Ryan/Bullock/Lopez in *When Harry Met Miss Congeniality* and *Got Mail* in *Manhattan*. And he still could. The eyes are getting slightly steelier with age, but he still exudes youthful vitality. And he’s stayed in shape, despite the lapse he blames on Andy Warhol. You can still picture the man who won Junior Mr Victoria when he was 16 yanking a tram down Flinders Street with a rope gripped between his teeth. >





But Pearce just isn't interested in such roles. "People say to me, 'Why don't you do a romantic comedy?' and I say, 'You show me one that I find funny, then I'll do it.' But I find them very formulaic. Meaningless, vacuous entertainment. I don't go to the cinema just to be entertained, I go wanting to be shaken up. I want to come out thinking, 'Wow, I feel as if I've just been beaten up', whether it's hysterically funny or really dark. So they end up being the kind of films that I want to make too."

Rather than an innate yen for the cerebral, Pearce puts his aversion to popcorn trash down to some of the bleaker aspects of his early life. "There are things that have happened in my life — losing my dad and so on — that are connected to why I want to act. Now that I'm older, I see life as a fantastic experience, but when I was younger, it was a really difficult and awkward thing to get through. So while many actors are not interested in digging deep or expressing anything to do with the dark side, I'm just really fascinated by the extremities that people have to go through or suffer with."

Isn't there anything to be said for giving

people what they want? "You know, a friend of mine keeps saying to me, 'When are you going to do something that I'm going to want to watch?' People think that you, as an actor, owe it to others to entertain them. I'm purely selfish in my acting pursuit. I do this for me, completely and utterly. I'm fully aware of the audience, but as for the drive to do it... I've tried to do things in the past for different reasons, and learned that I don't get anything out of it. You feel kind of fraudulent."

Unsurprisingly, he declines to give examples (although our money says that *The Time Machine* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* are two of them), but Pearce wears his regret on his sleeve. "I talked myself into doing roles before, and I've learned — you go out and try and publicise it and justify it afterwards, and the reality hits you: 'I shouldn't have done it, and it's a pile of shit, and I was crap in it and this or that is why I was crap in it, and it's there forever on film and I'm embarrassed.'"

Pearce has Australian murder thriller *How to Change in 9 Weeks*, ensemble drama *Winged Creatures* (with Kate Beckinsale and Forest Whitaker) and a cameo in Iraq war thriller *The Hurt Locker* all in the can. Up next is *Traitor*, a CIA/terrorist cell tussle co-starring Don Cheadle. The coyness tag that may be proving

fishy today, but never try to nail Pearce down on where his meandering career might go beyond the next movie. "I'm not very good at sticking to something for very long," he says. "I kind of delve in, and can react to things pretty quickly, and express something — which works well for film — but I could never become a politician. I'm a sprinter, not a long-distance runner."

In fact, if you really want to rub him up the wrong way, ask him the "Do you come here often" of movie star interrogative. "I loathe it when people ask me, 'What would be your ultimate role,'" he says. "I feel so boxed in by it. By answering that, you're immediately eliminating a lot of other roles. So now when people ask, I say, 'Oh, Mikey from *Neighbours*, of course. I've already played it. Everything now is a dull old downhill ride.'" **GQ**

*Death Defying Acts* is out now

## Pearce De Résistance

GUY PEARCE ON THREE MOVIES WITH WHICH, GQ RECKONS, HE'S SCORED A SHOW-STEALING HATTRICK



LEONARD SHELBY  
(*MEMENTO*)

"I get a lot of compliments for *Memento*, and it's funny because I don't feel like I can reply 'Thank you' because Chris Nolan and his brother Jonah created that entire world. Straight after I read the script the emotional world of that character was so clear to me, whereas you work on other films and you go, 'Okay, I can sort of see that he's struggling with this, trying to work out what to do now, going to come up against that issue — but I don't really know who he is. Is he a big, brash, ugly bastard who's really pissed off at everything, or a really sensitive, sweet confused guy?'"



CHARLIE BURNS  
(*THE PROPOSITION*)

"When I got the call from Nick [Cave, writer of the movie], I had been taking some time off after having done too much work back to back. I'd told everyone to let people know I wasn't reading or looking for work. After a few attempts through the proper channels, the producers thought I'd respond if Nick called me directly. I was at home with a mate one night getting very stoned (as was my inclination in those days) when the phone rang. I went to the machine to hear who it was — that voice is so distinguishable. Clearly neither of us were capable of having an intelligible conversation with anyone other than each other, so I didn't pick up. Being Nick, I'm sure he would've understood. I think I kept the message..."



ANDY WARHOL  
(*FACTORY GIRL*)

"Playing someone real, mimicking somebody, is easier than making it up. I'm no good at trying to invent somebody, unless it is exquisitely written and the character is totally clear in your mind, you have to pull together aspects of people that you know. But there's so much conflicting material on Warhol. My prime piece of research material was audiotapes of telephone conversations between him and Brigid Berlin — they recorded every phone conversation they had from 1967 onwards. To hear him on the phone, one day being vulnerable and manipulative the next, then sensitive and freaked or totally at a loss. Exquisite stuff to listen to."



THIS PAGE  
Grey pure cashmere coat, \$4,565, by Brunello Cucinelli from Henry Bucks. Grey cashmere wool jacket, \$1,395, by Z Zegna. Grey wool pants, \$595, blue and grey wool vest, \$595, silk stripe tie, \$195, all by Ermenegildo Zegna. Cotton blue pinstripe shirt with white round collar, \$189, by GNH by Gant.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
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GROOMING by Bradwyn.