

Russell Crowe: Hollywood's own tempest

By Kathy Marks

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If Russell Crowe were a character in a Greek tragedy, there would be no prizes for guessing his fatal flaw. Nice bloke, shame about the temper.

Crowe received an Oscar for his leading role in *Gladiator*, and narrowly missed winning another for his portrayal of John Nash, the tortured genius in *A Beautiful Mind*. He has played many and varied roles off screen, too: singer in his own rock band, diehard rugby league fan and, of late, doting husband of Danielle Spencer and proud father of 16-month-old Charlie.

This week, the 41-year-old Australian starred in his own piece of theatre: arrested, charged and paraded outside a New York courthouse in handcuffs after allegedly hurling a telephone at a hotel concierge during a 4am altercation. Crowe insists he aimed at the wall, and did not intend to inflict the wound that now adorns Nestor Estrada's right cheek. Mr Estrada, 28, begs to differ. Tabloid headlines dubbed the actor "Pscycrowe" and "Mad Maximus".

Crowe - who is in the US to promote his new film, *Cinderella Man*, in which he plays a 1930s boxer - was contrition itself when he appeared on *The Late Show* with David Letterman on Wednesday. He had flipped out of frustration at being unable to place a call to Spencer in Sydney from his room in the ritzy Mercer Hotel in Manhattan's SoHo district, he explained. So he unplugged the telephone and stormed downstairs.

"I'm, you know, trying to fulfil my basic obligations to my wife, who needs to know I'm at home, I'm in bed, I haven't had too much to drink and that, you know, primarily important, that I'm alone," he told Letterman. "These are questions that every wife has the right to have answered every night, and that's my duty, and the time difference is really rough."

Students of the Crowe temperament are familiar with this formula: an explosion of rage followed by a fit of remorse. The Telephone Incident, which could see him jailed for up to seven years for assault and possession of a weapon, is the latest in a string of violent outbursts that have earned him a reputation as Hollywood's bovver boy.

Everywhere that Crowe goes, the wild man image follows. He was even pilloried in an episode of the American cartoon series *South Park* in 2000.

There was the brawl in 1999 outside a nightclub in Coffs Harbour, the coastal town near Crowe's 1,400-acre cattle ranch in northern New South Wales. The club's security video showed him

headbutting one man and biting another on the face. Three men were later acquitted of trying to extort money from him in exchange for the footage.

There was the torrent of abuse directed at a BBC television producer, Malcolm Gerrie, who excised a poem from the delayed telecast of Crowe's acceptance speech after he won best actor award for *A Beautiful Mind* at the 2002 Bafta Awards ceremony. Crowe cornered Mr Gerrie in a storeroom and harangued him during the post-awards party.

There was the fight on a Mexican beach, during filming of the nautical adventure movie *Master and Commander* in 2002, from which he had to be rescued by his personal trainer, a female karate champion

And there was the punch-up in an upmarket Japanese restaurant, Zuma, in London, where a drunken Crowe licked the face of a female diner and then took on a New Zealand tycoon, Eric Watson, in the lavatory, ending up in a heap on the floor.

It was after that fracas that he decided to take a break from the spotlight. Blaming a "massive level of stress", Crowe cancelled a US tour by his band, 30 Odd Foot of Grunts (TOFOG), and retreated to the peace and solitude of his Australian rural property. He proposed to Spencer, and married her in a three-day ceremony at his ranch in 2003. Eight months later, Charlie was born.

The family lived quietly on the farm, then moved to a harbourside apartment in Sydney. Crowe seemed a changed man: calm, even mellow. Spencer was hailed as the woman who tamed him.

On his 40th birthday, he penned an "open letter to Sydney" in which he declared: "My wife is a blessing, my son a kiss from God. I don't know what I have done to deserve such good fortune."

Sweet words, but then he went and ruined it all again - and once again the Australian press, which usually claims him as a native son, is referring to him as "Kiwi-born".

Crowe was, indeed, born in New Zealand, in the capital Wellington, but he moved to Australia at the age of four with his parents, who worked as film set caterers. Thanks to their job, he gained an early entrée to the acting business, appearing as an extra in an Australian television series, *Spyforce*, when he was six years old.

After serving time in soap operas and touring musicals, he was given the lead role in a low-budget Australian film, *The Crossing*, directed by George Ogilvie, at the age of 26.

More Australian films followed, including the well-received *Proof* in 1991. But it was his role as a neo-Nazi skinhead in *Romper Stomper*, released in 1992, that brought him to Hollywood's attention. In 1997, he starred opposite Kim Basinger in *LA Confidential*, a film that lifted him into the A-list.

Crowe received an Academy Award nomination for *The Insider* in 1999, before winning the real thing for *Gladiator* in 2001. That was, naturally, the high point of his career. "I remember my mother cried so much she lost her false eyelashes in the aisle in which she was sitting," he said.

On set, Crowe is known for the obsessive intensity that he brings to his roles, for his creativity, and for his capacity for sheer hard work. He persuaded Richard Tognetti, the Australian virtuoso violinist, to teach him the basics of the instrument for his role in *Master and Commander*. He made crucial additions to the script of *Gladiator*, and was the driving force behind *Cinderella Man*.

Charming, insecure, arrogant, egotistical - Crowe is also a challenge to work with. Ridley Scott, who directed *Gladiator*, said: "Russell is difficult; he has a specific mind of his own, but he is a movie star." Ron Howard, who made *A Beautiful Mind* and *Cinderella Man*, says that directing him is "like shooting on a tropical island ... the weather is going to change several times a day".

Three things endear him to his fellow Australians. One, his unwavering support for South Sydney, a century-old rugby league club which he backed in its battles to remain in the national league. Two, his attachment to home; he once said he would move to Los Angeles only "if Australia and New Zealand were swallowed up in a huge tidal wave ... and if there was a huge bubonic plague in England and ... Africa disappeared from some Martian attack".

Lastly, his boyish enthusiasm for TOFOG, the band that he formed in 1992 and performed in frequently despite the demands of his acting career. The group finally split up earlier this year, and Crowe has since released a solo album.

His love life has always excited interest. He met Spencer, a singer-songwriter, on the set of *The Crossing*, but they separated five years later, and in 2000 he enthralled Australians by bringing Meg Ryan home to his ranch. Wedding bells were rumoured; then he dumped the American star. Gossip linked him with Nicole Kidman, his fellow Australian actor. But in 2001, he rekindled the relationship with Spencer, and the couple have, so far, lived happily ever after.

In recent years, Crowe has been in the limelight as much for his pugilism as for his films. Even before this week's blow-up, which he attributed to a cocktail of "jet-lag, loneliness and adrenalin", there were signs that he was not a reformed character after all.

Last year, after emerging from 12 months of self-imposed exile to make *Cinderella Man*, he was involved in a slanging match with the former boxer Joe Bugner. Bugner called him a "gutless worm" after Crowe fired him as his trainer for the movie role.

A few months later, the actor bit a chunk out of the chest of his good friend and bodyguard, Mark Carroll, during a drunken row in Toronto. But there was no ill feeling, apparently; Crowe said later that they "called each other a few ripe names, had a hug and got on with the job".

For Crowe, his family, and everyone else close to him, his short fuse must be a cause for serious concern. For the rest of the world, it provides entertainment. Consider this account by Georgie

Calder, a young woman who witnessed at close quarters his rampage in Zuma, the London restaurant.

Ms Calder told newspapers that she noticed Crowe smiling at her. "I was surprised at his appearance," she said. "He was wearing this crusty old shirt and trousers that he hadn't appeared to have changed in several days, and he smelt." After a brief conversation, Crowe "suddenly stuck his tongue down my throat".

The situation degenerated from then on. "He started flinging champagne around, smashing plates and coming on to the women," Ms Calder said.

"He was acting like he owned the place and everyone in it, including me. He staggered back to my group and literally climbed on top of me. He pointed to a beauty spot on my face and asked if it was fake.

"When I told him it was real, he licked my face as if he was trying to get it off. I asked him what he thought he was doing, but he just grinned obscenely and shoved some sake at me, which spilled everywhere. The man is a total and utter moron."

On the night he was arrested in New York, Crowe had just returned from a whirlwind trip to Manchester, where he watched his friend, Kostya Tszyu, in a world title boxing match. Back in Manhattan, he went to a bar and had a few drinks. As a result of his attack of telephone rage, he risks losing his US visa, thus jeopardising his Hollywood career.

He told one Sydney newspaper, the Daily Telegraph: "I'm at the bottom of a well. I can't communicate how dark my life is right now."

A Life in Brief

BORN 7 April 1964 in Wellington, New Zealand. Moved to Australia at four.

FAMILY Married to Danielle Spencer. Son Charles.

EDUCATION Dropped out of high school.

CAREER Began at six as a TV extra. Hollywood career started in mid 1990s. Won an Oscar for *Gladiator* in 2001. Oscar-nominated for *The Insider* (1999) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001).

HE SAYS "This is possibly the most shameful situation I've ever got myself in. And I've done some pretty dumb things." - after his arrest in New York.

THEY SAYS "Russ was born in the wrong century. He is a man of the 19th century who believes in sorting things out face to face." - Geoffrey Wright, director of *Romper Stomper*.