

# OUT OF THE BLUE

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**ONE WAY TO TAKE AN OZZIE ACTOR OUT OF HIS DEPTH: PLUCK HIM FROM SUMMER BAY'S BEACHES AND DUNK HIM IN EPIC VOLUMES OF FREEZING WATER. RHYS WAKEFIELD, STAR OF JAMES CAMERON'S *SANCTUM*, CAN ATTEST IT'S A BRACING EXPERIENCE. NOW THAT HE'S HUNG UP HIS WETSUIT AND MOVED OUT TO HOLLYWOOD, HE FINDS HIMSELF SWIMMING IN SHARK-INFESTED WATERS OF AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT KIND.**

Rhys Wakefield always wanted to be a superhero. From tiny tot to athletic teen, growing up first in Cairns, Australia, before his family transplanted to Sydney when he was five, young Rhys was transfixed by the same superhero movies his older brother loved. And, in this day and age, the trustiest route to becoming a superhero is to portray one on screen, leaving Wakefield in no doubt what to do with his life. "It seemed like such an obvious choice," he explains, "to become an actor and play a superhero."

Wakefield has yet to land a lead in a Marvel franchise, but give the guy a break – he's all of 22 and has just played the starring role in *Sanctum*, a 3D thriller produced by James Cameron in which the actor gets trapped with a group of fellow speleologists in the world's largest cave in Papua New Guinea, after a tropical storm transforms it into an underwater death trap. If shooting *Sanctum* was the most physically and mentally taxing experience of Wakefield's young life (more on that later), getting there wasn't quite so tough thanks to that early, eager-beaver determination to make performing his profession. With the backing of his parents (his father is in the Navy, his mother is a medical standards officer), Wakefield enrolled at McDon-



ald College, a Sydney-based performing-arts academy of which the most famous graduate is Natalie Imbruglia, where he starred in school productions, worked with the Australian Ballet and, at 16, bagged a role in that breeding ground for future Australian megastars, *Home and Away*.

"It does seem like a rite of passage these days," laughs Wakefield, who was on the show at the same time as Chris Hemsworth, about to appear on the big screen as Marvel's *Thor*. "So many people are coming out of there, it's an amazing little community. I always describe it as paid training. They're putting out five episodes a week so there's no time to screw up. It's a machine of a place but it's the best way to learn fast on the job."

During his three-year stint as a teenage soap hottie, Wakefield dated one co-star (Indiana Evans) and became embroiled in a controversial storyline with another (Jessica Tovey), in which their characters have sex and – gasp! – are shown chatting about it afterwards in bed. Too raunchy for a kid-friendly series, it seems, the scene whipped Australia's TV censors into a frenzy and forced the Seven Network to bump up the show's rating to PG. None of which Wakefield had the first clue about. "I wasn't aware of the aftermath, but that's awesome, I love that!" he hoots. "I can't even remember what the lines were, but that's so cool that I got to challenge the rating system of Australia."

The show's relentless grind (he appeared in close to 400 episodes) left little time for a social life and put academia on the back burner – in his final year of school, he only turned up 15 days. Somehow he succeeded in graduating, and he's currently studying sociology with Open University. During his final year on *Home and Away*, he shot a movie that put his career on a fast track. *The Black Balloon* hoovered up acclaim on the global film festival circuit, with Wakefield singled out for his earnest performance as a frustrated adolescent trying to negotiate his first romance (with Australian supermodel Gemma Ward, no less), while coping with his disruptive autistic brother. Considering his mother was played by the hugely versatile Toni Collette, that's high praise, and Wakefield judged the film's reception as the perfect incentive to try to crack America.

Before he won his role in *Sanctum*, Wakefield had his fair share of knockbacks, coming within spitting distance of a few major projects, only to have them snatched away. "There have been many, many things I've gotten very close to," he admits. "But that's part of the game in Hollywood – it's a fickle business." Ironically, he was in LA when he found out that Cameron liked his *Sanctum* audition tape and summoned him to Australia to meet both him and the actor playing his tyrannical father, *Moulin Rouge*'s Richard Roxburgh. Once he'd passed that test, it was straight into intensive scuba diving and rock climbing instruction – basically, earning a packet to have fun. "It's an incredible realisation when you're 25 metres underwater being paid to learn to scuba dive with just you and some fish," he marvels. "That's when you know you've picked the right career."

And not just fish... Before the *Sanctum* shoot kicked off, Wakefield went shark-diving in Fiji, where he was spending New Year's with friends – something he neglected to tell Cameron or the producers about, knowing full well they'd flip their lids. "It was my first dive out of training and I got talked into swimming with sharks, which I was definitely not well-trained enough to do. I survived, thank God. We saw heaps of white tips and black tips and reef sharks – it was amazing." No fear, then? "Well, I went through 60 minutes of air in about 40 minutes," he chuckles. "Believe me, that's heavy breathing."

Even though *Sanctum* was filmed entirely in a highly controlled environment – sound stages on Australia's Gold Coast that were elaborately constructed to simulate real underground cave systems, and then flooded with thousands of gallons of water – Wakefield shivers at the memory. Literally. "The soundstages were freezing cold because these 3D cameras seem to only function at sub-human temperatures. That was a battle. That's why the training was so important. Leading up to it, I was doing three hours of swim training a day and breath holds to enhance my lung capacity. I was in top physical shape."

Still, spending hours, days and weeks on end underwater, shrivelling into a prune in a custom-fitted wetsuit that Wakefield chuckles "left no room for the imagination," can't have been too much fun. "It was nightmarish," he agrees. "You'd walk out of the sound stage into the boiling hot sun, so you'd spend all day slipping in and out of this wetsuit. When you've been in the water for more than an hour, you start to get cold and the wetsuits didn't offer a great deal of thermal protection. We were all doing sit-ups and push-ups off the side just to keep warm and stay alive."

*Sanctum* might not have stormed the box office, and was greeted by a fierce critical smackdown (for the record, *Man About Town* was mildly amused by its mix of adrenaline-junkie thrills and underwater cinematography). But no matter, Wakefield's career is hotting up simply because Cameron picked him over thousands of other wannabes. Having jetted back and forth between LA and Oz for a few years, Wakefield is staying put in the City of Angels for the time being, renting a house in the Hollywood Hills and seeking to capitalise on the golden aura that comes with starring in a James Cameron production. Judging by the number of times he drops them in our conversation, his two favourite words are "surreal" and "ridiculous", and he applies both when describing the city's manic social whirl for a bright-eyed newcomer like himself, where mingling with actors who were your idols growing up is all in a night's socialising.

"I went to this party a couple of weeks ago and Mark Wahlberg was there and Christian Bale and John Travolta and Anne Hathaway and Sacha Baron Cohen," he says with the genuine awe of someone who still can't process his good fortune. "It was an amazing party and it's always fun, especially when you get to meet a director whose films you've been watching your whole life. Ridiculous. It's a completely surreal town like that."

Even with A-list parties to go to, projects to audition for and filmmakers, studio chiefs and prospective girlfriends to meet (for the record, Wakefield is currently single), this down-to-earth Ozzie is seriously missing his life Down Under: barbecues by the family pool; days out at the city's glorious beaches (they put LA's comparatively shabby ones to shame); and a laid-back vibe totally at odds with the one-track-mind town he's now calling home. "I'm a Sydney boy at heart," he says. "It's such a beautiful city, and my family and friends are there. My family flew over for the premiere of *Sanctum* in the heart of the media maelstrom, and it was nice for them to see this world. It's great having a family that's blissfully ignorant of the entertainment industry because it's so humbling when you go back home."

As for what his future holds, Wakefield can't reveal just yet. "There are a few projects on the boil but I'm not allowed to say what," he drawls. To his relief, *Sanctum 2* isn't one of them. "The idea of getting wet again... that's a horrendous thought," he says, flinching. "No, I want to stay on dry land. Maybe I'll do something in the desert next."