



# TAMING THE BEAST

KING KONG IS MAKING MUSIC ON STAGE IN MELBOURNE AND NOBODY KNOWS THE BEAST BETTER THAN THE SHOW'S LEADING MAN, CHRIS RYAN. INTERVIEW BY MATTHEW MYERS.

**DNA: King Kong! Is this a dream role?**

**Chris Ryan:** It is actually, although I never thought my dream role would be in the stage musical of *King Kong*. But once I got it and started rehearsing, I thought, yes! This is something I've always wanted to do and it's certainly big. We started rehearsals in February out at the show grounds during a massive heat wave. That feels like a lifetime ago.

**Chitty Chitty Bang Bang has the car, Phantom the chandelier, but is King Kong the most dramatic stage prop of all?**

It's definitely something people haven't seen before on stage, particularly in musical theatre. He's big, lifelike and really impressive. They've done a fantastic job with him.

**But he's not really a prop is he? He's real!**

That's true. In fact, he copped a bit of an injury the other day when we were running the show and had to have a few repairs. You could really feel everyone's emotion. It was like our baby had been dropped on its head. He really takes on a life of his own and has a real personality.

**You see King Kong up close and personal. Is he anatomically... a boy gorilla?**

[Laughing] It's funny because he is a boy, but there is nothing to show for it. We went out to the Werribee Zoo recently and we couldn't see their bits and pieces either. Apparently gorillas have small ones and you can't really spot them, even in the wild.

**Have you watched the film adaptations, where your role is played by actors like Adrien Brody, Jeff Bridges and Bruce Cabot?**

I watched the 1933 original and then I started watching the Peter Jackson version, but stopped because I know Adrien Brody pretty well as an actor and I knew we were doing something different with my character. It was kind of messing with my head! Our version of all the roles is quite different and we're trying to put a unique stamp on it. What's interesting is that we really see his past and the reasons for him being on the ship. He's running away from a life that he didn't subscribe to. You get a bit of insight into his mysterious past.

**What future role do you have your eye on?**

I'm still too young, but I've always wanted to play Javert in *Les Misérables*. That was the reason I first started singing, when I saw Philip Quast singing *Stars* and thought I want to do that. I'd love to play that role one day, and I think every actor also wants to do *Hamlet*.

**You've studied opera; what is your vocal range?**

When I studied opera I was a kind of baritone, and I probably still am a high-ish baritone. But when rehearsing for this I discovered notes that I didn't have years ago so I've got a few of those in there.

**Do you ever get mistaken for Chris Ryan from *The Young Ones* or the soldier turned novelist Chris Ryan?**

At primary school, my older brother and his mates did the Cliff Richard *Living Doll* thing at school assembly, and they got me to play Mike



Above: Esther Hannaford as Ann in the grip of King Kong, a spectacular 6-metre puppet; and dreamy Chris Ryan who plays Jack in the heart-stopping theatrical production.

## “I’ve got Ryan Gosling fever like the rest of the world!”

from *The Young Ones*! If you put my name into Google you also get the novelist. It's a common birthday present that I get Chris Ryan books. I have about twelve of them.

**What about being mistaken as gay?**

It has happened occasionally, but it's not a common thing, as I usually come across as pretty straight. I've been out with a few friends to gay clubs, and it's a problem there because people tend to assume [laughs].

**Does it ever feel odd being a straight man in musical theatre?**

Not really. I certainly don't feel out of place, in fact, it's kind of nice for a straight guy.

**Who would you turn gay for?**

It's probably a cliché...

**It's Adrien Brody, isn't it?**

[Laughing] I could be tempted by him, but I have a thing for Ryan Gosling. I've got Gosling fever like the rest of the world! There are a lot of man crushes on Gosling. I also had a thing for Ralph Fiennes, but in his younger days.

**Where do you stand on gay marriage?**

Whenever I hear politicians arguing that marriage is between a man and a woman... It's kind of a ludicrous debate. We'll look back on and think what were people so scared of?

**Who is Chris Ryan's diva?**

Beyoncé. I've been listening to *Halo* quite a bit lately. I've also been getting into Kat Power's latest album, *Sun*, which is fantastic.

**This is our grooming issue. What's your most important grooming tip?**

Well, I'm one of those lucky guys who still doesn't have a great deal of body hair. I think I'm still going through puberty in my thirties! I recently shaved my head and that's a really

great grooming tip because there is nothing to worry about, you just roll straight out of bed. Also the beard trimmer is great to keep your facial hair at the right length.

**When not on stage, what do you do for kicks?**

I like to keep fit and I hit the gym two to three times a week, which also keeps my energy levels up. I like getting away to the beach and the country, and I'm a big sports fan and a Collingwood supporter. In fact, I get a bit intense screaming at the television. I get a lot of anger out on the weekends!

**Who has been your biggest career inspiration?**

I've had some amazing teachers, going back to high school with my music and drama teachers. When I studied acting at the Victorian College Of The Arts, Lindy Davies was the head of drama and she was a massive influence. She's one of the best acting teachers in the world, as well as another teacher there, John Bolton. I was lucky enough to do a tour last year with Cate Blanchett called *Gross Und Klein*, and watching the way she goes about her work was just incredible. There's just no bullshit about her, she's the real deal.

**What advice would you give to someone wanting to break into theatre?**

Stick at it and find ways to keep your creativity thriving and growing. Try and incorporate it into every bit of your life. Make things yourself. Write your own songs and music. Write and perform in your own work. Get together with like-minded people and stay the course!

**Any wardrobe malfunctions on stage?**

Going back to the diva question, I should add cabaret artist Meow Meow. She's fantastic and I toured with her in London, and it was there the zip on my fly broke, and you could see my jocks hanging out! There was nothing I could do. I went out onstage and I think everyone assumed I'd left my fly undone. I just had to suck it up!

**On that note, are you a jocks man, boxer man or free-baller?**

I'm tight-fitted boxers all the way!

More: King Kong is playing now at Melbourne's Regent Theatre. [Kingkongliveonstage.com](http://Kingkongliveonstage.com)