



AND... ACTION!

What's worse than giving birth while being electrocuted? Actor **Damian Walshe-Howling** found out! He tells Matt Myers all about it, about his friend Heath Ledger, his mum, and the great challenges of his career.

Damian plays prosecutor Owen Mitchell in Aussie legal drama, *Janet King*.

DNA: Readers will be excited with the return of Janet King. What's in store for your character?

Damian Walshe-Howling: It's a completely different situation because we are running a royal commission into gun crime, and he's now the assistant commissioner to Janet. So we are forced to work even closer together than we did in the first season.

How did you prepare to play a prosecutor? I went out to the Melbourne courts and spent time with a number of crown prosecutors and defense lawyers. I also varied the court visits to include the Supreme, Magistrates' and County Court to get a real sense of how it all works. I also realised there are many types of lawyers!

Your acting career has spanned an impressive 25 years. Is there one show that stands out?

I'd say *Underbelly*. When you're playing the role of someone who has lived and died, there's a sense of responsibility, so I took the role very much to heart. The scripting, directors and other actors were all fantastic. Acting never happens in a vacuum with just yourself; it's about collaboration. On *Underbelly* it was particularly special. Then getting the AFI award for that role was pretty exciting, too.

You starred in 2010's shark thriller, *The Reef*.

What was that like? It was fun, but being in the water 14 hours a day was also very cold! The environment was quite extreme and, as actors, we had to create the illusion of terror associated with a Great White shark. But the thing is, I stepped on a stonefish [a venomous Australia fish, known to be fatal to humans]. It was a beautiful Queensland day, and I was walking along and suddenly felt a pain in my foot that I could only liken to maybe childbirth and being electrocuted at the same time! So I went down like a bag of shit, got picked up by a speedboat, given oxygen and rushed to hospital. Production shut down for 24 hours and everyone got to go waterskiing while I was in hospital getting stonefish spines dug out of my foot. Luckily, I survived to tell this story!

Back in 2003 you were in the classic film *Ned Kelly*. That must have been special? It was amazing. I actually had a very tiny role as a policeman, but I also worked with the actors in the rehearsal room reading for anyone who wasn't available. The director, Gregor Jordan, is a personal friend and asked if I wanted to help out. It was only later that he asked if I wanted to do the cameo, and it was a chance to be a part of great cinema and also our history.

And you worked with Heath Ledger! What do I say about Heath!?! He was an incredibly generous human being and that came across in both his social interactions and his work – in spades! Most people wouldn't know how supportive he was of other Australian actors. When people would go to Los Angeles, he would go out of his way to make them feel welcome. But he was also a very private person and a personal friend.

You're also a busy director, having earned acclaim at the Lexus Short Film Series competition. Tell us about that. I entered with the film *Suspended*, which I wrote and directed back in 2013, and they asked me to write a synopsis for a film I'd like to make, so I did – and became one of four winners from around the world. It was an honour to be chosen and now we're full steam ahead in preproduction, tweaking the script, casting, and we'll be ready to shoot soon. Directing is something that I'm far more interested in these days. As a director, there is far more scope to explore stories.

You also work as an acting coach at

“ **Heath was an incredibly generous human being... But he was also a very private person and a personal friend.** ”

Melbourne's Brave Studios. Brave Studios is a brilliant acting facility and, as the name suggests, I think they really engender an environment where people feel safe to express themselves. I love working with the students. It's fantastic to integrate with aspiring actors who are passionate about getting involved in the craft. I learn as much from them as they hopefully do from me!

Have you ever played a gay role? Yes, in a film called *Saturn's Return* [2001] with Joel Edgerton and Harold Hopkins who passed away a couple of years ago. Harold played a man dying of HIV and Joel was his son, and I played Joel's partner. It's a beautiful film about letting go of life. It was about the grieving process and what drew me to the role was how clear and strong the story was. It wasn't really about being gay or straight, but rather just the human condition.

Back then, did you find it a risk to take on

such a role? I don't think so. It wasn't a risk for me because the first port of call is story, and if the story is intrinsically based on reality and has something that sparks the imagination, and heart, then I want to walk into it and with it. So to me, the gay part didn't really pose a risk to my career. It's just not the way I approach work. I was lucky enough to grow up with a mother who was one of the founding members of Melbourne's La Mama theatre in the late '60s. So I grew up with many different cultures and personalities surrounding me. I see diversity, and love the diversity of life.

Have you ever witnessed homophobia? Oh, for sure. I think people have phobias for all sorts of reasons and my personal belief is that any phobia is based on false evidence, and is something that people can't accept in themselves.

Who is your diva? Deborah Harry. I fucking love Blondie! She's amazing. I was a huge fan as a kid and I love *Rapture*. Another one would be Patti Smith. I love the album *Horses* and the song *Gloria*.

This is our Sports issue. What do you do to keep fit? I swim three to four times a week and mix it up in the pool. I love jumping in the water and getting some laps under my belt. I don't get into the gym that often, but I do a bit of resistance work in the water. I like to stay neutral in my build and not get too big.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career? There are three. Firstly, my mum who had a huge influence on the artistic side of things and my passion also comes from her. The director Fred Schepisi has been a real friend and mentor over the years, and is so generous with his time. He's always been there for me. And the third would be Charles Slucki who was my drama teacher in high school. He only just passed away last year and it was a big shock to the whole acting industry. He was always there for a pep talk. So many actors owe a lot to him.

At the beach and pool, is it boardies or Speedos? Boardies most of the time, but if I'm swimming laps it's Speedos. And if I'm in Europe, budgie smugglers for sure!

And are you a fitted-boxers, jocks or free-balling guy? At bedtime it's sometimes freeball and during the day I like a bit of support, so it's fitted boxers! ★

MORE: Janet King screens Thursdays 8.30pm on the ABC.