



# Que Sera Sera!

From stomping the floorboards in *West Side Story* to clawing them up in *Cats*, Rohan Browne is the next big thing on the Australian stage.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS PARKER

**DNA:** You play backup in *Doris: So Much More Than The Girl Next Door*. Did you research the men in Doris Day's life to prepare for the show?

**Rohan Browne:** We had a lot of open discussions when we were work shopping the piece and spoke about who Rock Hudson and James Garner were. My research was more around the *Pyjama Game* number that we do, *There Once Was a Man*, and looking at John Raitt. It's important to realise that we're not emulating Doris Day but more talking about her. I learned a lot about Doris just from reading the script, especially in regard to her personal life.

**Is there one particular thing about Doris Day that intrigues you?**

Her personal life and how she dealt with that. A lot of what we bring up in the show is completely unknown. We hear the gasps from the audience when they hear things for the first time. There's a lot that we cut out of the show that is quite dark. But to know that she had a tormented personal life and was still so successful is a tribute to her. There were those who did become unravelled, like Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe, who struggled with personal demons, and yet Doris hid it all so well and I'm sure there's stuff that even we don't know.

**Of the modern divas, who do you admire?**

I can't help but admire what Madonna did for pop and for women. It's so much so

that she's emulated and she's still doing it all. But I also think there's a point where you have to stop. My hat goes off to Lady Gaga, too. You either love her or hate her, but I admire her for not being afraid to be ugly or dirty to sell a product.

**You originally studied dancing and merged into singing and acting. Do you think acting could eventually play a greater role?**

Yes, definitely. It's what I'm aiming for and why I was intrigued with this show. We're not so much backing up Melinda, but there to support her and the story itself. I get to work on my acting skills and it's great for what I want to do. I want longevity in this industry and being 32... well, you can't dance forever. I need to be marketable in other areas.

**Was West Side Story what drew you into musical theatre?**

Yeah, I was studying to be a ballet dancer and I went to see *West Side Story* when I was about 14. I had never seen men dance like that, with so much passion and fire. To see people fighting that way, with the Jerome Robbins choreography and the added meaning behind it, really lit something inside me.

Fred in *Chicago*, Herod in *Jesus Christ*

## "I was the only straight guy in the Chicago boys' dressing room. I was kind of the novelty, which was fun for a change."

**Superstar, Rum Tum Tugger in *Cats*... do you have a favourite role so far?**

There have been a few and playing Fred in *Chicago* was a step up for me, so that will always hold a special place in my heart. I loved playing George in *The Drowsy Chaperone*, but if I had to pick one, it would be Riff in *West Side Story*. That was the role I was so hungry for.

**Is there a future part you have your eye on?**

Yeah, I'd love to play Scott Hastings in *Strictly Ballroom: The Musical*. That's coming out in 2013 and I'm putting a projectory out towards that!

**Playing a role in *Cats* must be so extraordinary. Do you really have to study cats?**

It was more about a process of discovery. Every day in rehearsal we had an hour of improvisation in our characters. The director would give us three adjectives that best described our character and we would have to explore them as a cat, with other cats and their different adjectives. A lot was trial and error. It's a tough gig being a human playing an animal! That's why I think someone like Andy Serkis, who was Gollum in *Lord Of The Rings*, is a genius.

**Is the make-up for *Cats* a big deal?**

At first, yeah. They have a make-up artist and the look changes for different faces. It's based on a model of how Rum Tum Tugger should look and the make-up artist would do half my face and then I'd have to learn the rest. The first time I did it, it was pretty bad!

I think girls are much better at doing it than guys. Sometimes, in between shows, me and a mate used to have a competition to see how fast we could get the make-up on. I think he did it in four-and-a-half minutes. He beat me by about two-and-a-half minutes!

**You appeared with Geoffrey Rush in *The Drowsy Chaperone*. What was that experience like?**

Incredible. When my partner [Christie Whelan] and I auditioned we actually auditioned with Geoffrey Rush, because he was the reader. Geoffrey is one of those people who really supports new talent and he's been wonderful with Christie and I. We went to his 60th birthday party and he calls us dear friends. He's an incredibly talented man, knowledgeable and a beautiful person.

**You did an interview with DNA way back in 2003 and Dannii Minogue was going to help you find an agent. Did that happen?**

Oh yeah, my intention back then was to do *Cats* and then go to London, but then I fell in love and came back to start working on *Happy Feet*. I kind of forgot all about that plan, but Dannii was really supportive and was going to help me find an agent in London. I got distracted – with love!

**Can you explain about the Happy Feet gig?**

That was all CGI motion capture work I did for the film. I never thought in my wildest dreams back when I was training to dance that I would be pretending to be a penguin. It was an incredible experience, but it was hard work, too, with long hours of dancing.

**Can you recognise yourself in the movie?**

Well, nothing was ever cut and pasted, so every single penguin in the movie, even way off in the background was us as actors. There were only ever fifteen of us in the room and they would film so many scenes. They would tell us we were on top of an iceberg looking down and then in the middle of the iceberg looking across and so on. There is one scene where I definitely know where I am. It's in the *Find Me Somebody To Love* scene and I'm the backup penguin on the middle right-hand side.

**As a straight man in theatre, do you ever feel the odd man out?**

Not really. I think the theatre world adapts really well in general and everyone is so open. My best mates who I grew up with and am still stay in contact with are gay. I've been surrounded by gay people since I was 12. I think straight people know how to act around gay people and visa versa. I was the only straight guy in the *Chicago* dressing room, but the boys used to like that, too. I was kind of the novelty, which was fun for a change.

**Working in theatre, do people automatically assume you must be gay?**

Yeah, but things are changing now that a

lot more people are dancing. It used to be a stigma that if you danced you were gay, because it was sissy stuff and you were meant to be playing football. But now there are gay footballers, too, so the stigmas are starting to go. There are, in fact, a lot of straight guys in the theatre.

**Have you ever played a gay role?**

To me, George in *The Drowsy Chaperone* was a gay role. It's open to interpretation and it wasn't ever specified, but the way I played it was that he was in love with his best mate Robert, who he was planning the wedding for. But it wasn't an overtly gay role and that was my choice for it. Even Rum Tum Tugger is promiscuous. I mean, he's a cat! He's very flamboyant and could swing either way.

**Do you get men hitting on you?**

Sometimes, but I get girls as well. I just make my position known, that I'm in a serious relationship and about to get married. That's where my heart is.

**If you were gay, who would you hit on?**

Hmm, I would go with somebody with a sense of humour. I think Matthew McConaughey has that rugged thing going for him, and Ryan Gosling, too, but I think I'm more attracted to his acting.

**In the entertainment world, who has been the biggest inspiration and influence on you?**

I'd say Markham Gannon, who is one of my best mates and I've known him since I was a kid. I aspire to be like him. He's a really incredible person, with the way he handles himself in situations, the way he is with his friends, his loyalty and honesty. I admire his defiance in what he believes in. He's a strong person.

**You have a tattoo down the inside of your arm, what's the story with that?**

I got it 11 years ago. It's a Buddhist mantra for compassion, but a Tibetan version. I wanted a tattoo that would mean something to me. At the time I was reading a lot and deciding how to lead my life. This mantra kept coming back to me and I didn't even know what it meant.

**What's your porn name?**

Sharni Park!

**Have you ever had a wardrobe malfunction?**

I guess the worse thing that happened, which used to be available on YouTube, was when I was playing Rum Tum Tugger on a TV show in South Korea. Normally the show is about Grizabella, but Rum Tum Tugger is like the king over there. They go nuts for him. There's a certain bit where Tugger glides down onto the stage and starts rubbing his parts on the ground. So I'm down there in my black costume and full mane, gyrating on the stage and there's a nail popping out. I feel this prick in my prick and pull back and it rips a hole all the way up my crotch! I had on a flesh-coloured dance belt and that ended up showing through, but I had no idea I had this huge gash there. And here I was on national television in front of fifteen million people!

*Doris Day: So Much More Than The Girl Next Door* is currently touring. For more visit [dorisday.com.au](http://dorisday.com.au)