

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNING

'He was always the leader.'

– Jocelyn Crowe, his mother

Russell Ira Crowe was born on 7 April, 1964, much to the joy of his parents and the bemusement of his older brother Terry. He was born in Wellington, New Zealand – a city that would become synonymous with Hollywood fantasy epics such as *The Lord of the Rings* and the recent *King Kong* remake. But at that time Hollywood was just as otherworldly to Wellington as Middle Earth. It was sport that had a hold on Wellington and New Zealand – and Russell was born at a time when the country was still giddy from a triumphant win over the South African cricket team – thanks mainly to a dogged determination and plucky battling spirit that saw them triumph despite the odds being truly stacked against them.

There's a similarity to Russell's own battle in making it to Hollywood. As he said himself, 'Sure, luck is part of it.'

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But I believe you are the master of your own destiny. A lot of people go, “OK, I’m born in Wellington and I’m not supposed to go and make feature films in Hollywood. What are the chances of that? Pretty damn slim.” They accept that and maybe I didn’t accept that.’

Russell’s was a close family, and while they didn’t feast on the banquet of the movie industry, the crumbs that would fall down would be just enough to get by. Jocelyn and Alex’s love for each other would be the foundations that Russell would rest against when things went bad, and he has chosen to build a similar foundation for himself with his wife Danielle. His parents were hard-working, full of generous spirit and old-fashioned values spliced with a bohemian and free-spirited attitude befitting of their nomadic life – moving from one place to another depending on their jobs.

Ray Martin, the Australian chat show host, said, ‘Russell’s very close to his parents and brother, Terry. He adores them. If you want to see him go berserk, just insult his mum and dad.’

Russell points at two deaths in his family that bonded them. ‘My mother’s sister [Raewyn] committed suicide when she was 21. Slashed her wrists in the bath. And my father’s youngest brother [Charlie] died in a scuba-diving accident when he was 17. It just hadn’t occurred to me what my father would have been able to say to my mother when she lost her sister, because he had had the same experience, and how close that must make them.’

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His family wasn't religious in the slightest – and when it came to the decision of whether to christen, his mother said, 'Look, I was christened in the Church of England, and my stepfather forced me to go to a Catholic church. My husband was christened in the Church of England. But we think that our sons, when they're old enough, should make that decision themselves.'

Russell would go on to have an 'odd relationship' with religion – and actively sought out different religions to see which was the right one for him. 'Although I wasn't brought up in a religious household, I'm a very inquisitive person about it, and, just the same as with my acting, I've taken things from various sources that mean something to me.'

When he was four, he moved to Sydney, Australia after his grandfather convinced his son that he should stop working for a scaffolding company (as he was at that time) and open a stainless steel muffler shop in Australia – as Stan had the patent for stainless steel mufflers.

'And so my father sort of sold up everything and went and did that,' Russell added. 'Which didn't turn out to be a very good move, and my parents at that stage went into film catering.'

Australia was a country that would play a major part in his life and it's where most people assume he was born. Several magazines and media outlets tag him as the 'Aussie actor' and he is closely linked to his adopted homeland.

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Growing up around film sets sounds like a magical time for young children, especially ones with an unlimited imagination and a need to soak up everything around them like a sponge. At six, Russell got his first taste of being an actor when he appeared in an episode of the then-popular Australian wartime drama series *Spyforce*, which ran from 1971 to 1973. His parents were working on the show, and Jocelyn's godfather, Howard Rubie, was directing the 1972 episode *The Saviour: Part 2*.

The show, which starred Jack Thompson, was an adventure series revolving around the Australian Military Intelligence Operative in the South West Pacific during World War II.

Russell was asked to appear with a group of children for a scene. Maybe it was part nepotism, part driving need to stand out, or a bit of both, but Russell appeared smack right in the middle of the group and even got a speaking part.

His mother remarked that for years after his screen debut, dressing up and acting out was a large part of his life. So was his thirst for being front row and centre, no matter what he was doing.

Russell remembered that he would 'look at the 28-year-old guy playing the war veteran in a film and tell my parents: "I don't know why the director doesn't see me in that role. I might be a little short, but I can do it."'

It was a childhood full of untapped imaginations reined in only by what was being produced at that time

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in the studio. He ran through studio sets with wild abandon, gleefully opening himself up to whatever world the director had in mind.

‘But I was never a child star,’ he insists, ‘I was a child extra. My parents were location caterers, so I was the annoying little kid on the set.’

He told *Interview* magazine in 2005, ‘Mom and Dad were caterers, so there was always information about castings and stuff. And it just so happened that they were working on a TV set, so in order for us to spend time with our parents, we would be on the set and walk around locations and play with props, or see half a submarine built inside a building. You’d get a different perspective on the whole thing because you’d know that it was all manufactured. I was just very interested in it all.’

If he wasn’t running around sets, he and the rest of his family would be watching TV at night. He recalls a routine that the family would adhere to religiously. ‘My family used to be obsessed with *Dallas*. We used to all gather together on a Tuesday night and it would be the one night of the week we were allowed to eat on TV trays in the lounge ... The first couple of seasons of *Dallas* ... I was into that.’

Russell fully believed, as most youngsters do, that he was meant for something. And he knew it would be linked to performance. ‘I used to have these very strange situations where I’d be walking down the street and I would imagine people calling out my name. I was as

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optimistic and as full of hope as anybody could be. Lots of things didn't turn out the way I wanted them to when I was a younger fella, but I didn't lose that thirst to understand what it is that I could do well.'

In another interview, however, he noted, 'I was shy. I was the sort of kid who would sign up for a talent quest and then, having done all the rehearsal and all the work, not turn up.'

When he wasn't around film sets, Russell would spend many an hour at the Wemyss family house, where his grandfather ran a little studio and film theatre. 'He and Stan were so alike, both artistic, both perfectionists,' his grandmother recalled. 'Now when I see Russell he's like my late husband when I first met him.'

His burning ambition was very much evident from a young age, as was a competitive attitude that still blazes inside him today. His grandmother remembers that he would throw his racquet onto the court if she ever beat him at tennis.

'He got really angry,' Joy recalled, 'threw a temper tantrum and chucked his racket down the length of the court. Eventually he calmed down and shook my hand, but he didn't like telling his parents that Granny had beaten him!'

The young Russell was only interested in performing – whether it was dressing up as a pirate, jumping off the ghost train near Sydney Harbour with his friends and terrifying the other passengers, or mimicking the actions

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and voices of family and friends. ‘I was always an annoying little bastard and an embarrassment to my parents. I’d mimic their friends and my mum would say, “Don’t worry about Russell, he’s a bit mental.”’

He briefly took an interest in writing. His morbid written work, which always had ‘everyone dead by the end’ intrigued one of his first school teachers – Elizabeth Morgan – who remembered him as a ‘darling child, a lovely chubby little boy with those cheeks that you could push’.

Russell recalled, ‘I’ll always value what she did for me. She activated all the creative things inside me. Ms Morgan asked me to sing once. I sang *Ben* by Michael Jackson. She looked me in the eye and said: “That was a very special performance.”’

Talking to the American writer James Lipton, he said, ‘I would do these war plays, where basically everyone would just run around the stage and die, but there’d be some kind of point to it. Each week there’d be a new episode or whatever and I’d spend most of Wednesday and Thursday making uniforms out of paper which I would then pin to the costumes of the cast members.’

Russell was seen as a tough guy at school – as one childhood friend, who refused to be named, recalled to the *Sunday Times* in 2002, ‘They were scared of him. He was one of the toughies – boisterous, loud, a show-off. But nice, not nasty.’

Despite a small role in *The Young Doctors* when he was 12 – ‘I walked into a casting agent’s office and said:

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“Give me a gig.” I was very practical’ – performing held less and less interest for Russell as he matured – sports and music were preferred when he moved to Sydney Boys High School.

There he was remembered as an energetic and cheeky student. His schoolmate, Troy Sermon, said, ‘He was always flamboyant. He had that drifty flair about him. He had a way of doing things, over-dramatising things a little bit.’

Another former pupil, Tony Hannon, added, ‘He was an independent spirit, interested in everything. He spoke his mind, wouldn’t put up with shit.’

Russell was the ringleader of a small group of mates – a ‘rabbly type of mob’ according to one of the gang, Blake Veverka. ‘There were half a dozen of us,’ he remembered. ‘He’d go to Sydney Girls High, and try all kind of things to get their attention, make them laugh.’

It shouldn’t be a surprise to see Russell looking elsewhere for success. His childhood was something of a nomadic life, moving here and there – flats above the hotels and bars that his parents managed after they left the catering business would be his temporary shelter. He and Terry would help out by changing kegs and Russell worked as a short order cook as a short-order cook.

‘My dad was a pub manager. He didn’t own a house until I left home, but he’d run pubs for other people,’ said Russell. ‘When there was a bit of a lull in that at one point, they started cooking in a garden bar for this guy

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who taught my dad a little bit about the pub game. Then in '72 a guy offered my dad his own pub to run, so for six years solid we lived in the pubs where my father worked. We didn't live in a house again until 1978.'

It was then, at 14, that Russell's world was turned upside down when his dad moved his family back to New Zealand to run a pub in Auckland.

The Potter's Wheel was a hotel. 'It's a tavern, really. It was part of a licensing trust in the west of Auckland. It was the job my father found in order to finance moving the family from Australia back to New Zealand. They used to serve beer in glass jugs roughly the size of a two-litre pitcher. And if a problem started in the room, they'd start throwing their jugs.'

It was a move that Russell didn't cope well with. Being part-Maori from his father's side, he struggled with his heritage when he was younger. His great uncle Hukurangi Wemyss remembers, 'His mother asked me to have a talk to him about it one day. He was a teenager and he was disrespectful of the whole thing, so we sat down and had a chat. He was all right after that.'

Russell says now about his heritage, 'I've seen racism from both sides of the fence. My dad was a hotel manager for a while, back in New Zealand: the nickname for the hotel was The Flying Jug – this place was famous for fights. So I've seen racism from Maori to Samoan, Tongan to Maori, not just white to black. My maternal grandfather's mother was Maori. I have an option to vote

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on the Maori roll. And I've been bashed in New Zealand for being white. You can't stop and say, "Excuse me, my grandfather's mother was a Maori."

After enjoying a fairly positive experience at Sydney Boys High School, his subsequent time at Auckland Grammar School was not so good. According to its website, the school helps boys to 'discover their individual strengths and weaknesses and affording them opportunities to feel good about themselves', but it seemed Russell found anything but that during his time there.

Not only did he hate having to wear the rigid school uniform – in this case roman sandals – but he found his creative talents stifled by the school's somewhat prioritised take on sporting prowess over academic endeavours. Even winning the class's English prize couldn't gloss over the feeling that his creative talents weren't being nurtured.

While sport was a huge hobby to Russell, it was never a realistic career option. In fact, the sporting tradition of his family would cast a shadow over Russell. 'Sure I had the potential to possibly play in an under-11 side but not really the ability or the desire and, besides, everyone else was bigger than I was,' he would say later.

Russell's cousins Martin and Jeff Crowe enjoyed something of a hero status at the school because of their cricketing abilities – their father was a renowned cricketer too – and they would go on to prove that at the top level. Not surprisingly, being dubbed the 'cousin of

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the cricketing Crowes' – or the 'singing cousin of the cricketing Crowes' when he began to experiment with music – was a tag that didn't sit well with the fiercely ambitious Russell.

Frustrated with school life, Russell and Terry were transferred to Mount Roskill Grammar. 'I wasn't expelled or anything but let's say it was a very amicable parting,' Russell said in an interview with New Zealand's *Woman's Weekly*.

Mount Roskill's former English teacher, Warren Seastrant, remembers of Russell: 'He was unhappy at Auckland Grammar, but he wasn't expelled. It was decided that he would go into my class because he had a little bit of form.'

The school's former deputy principal, Bob Laing, recalled, 'He had a few hassles there. He'd get his backside caned for various things he thought weren't fair. He wasn't rude to teachers, he wasn't bolshie – he just had a strong personality.'

While he now had more success in being creative, Russell was acting like most teenagers – disillusioned with what school offered and with no real path to follow.

'The hooded eyes and the cool disengagement,' remembered Seastrant. 'He had a great deal of self-assurance – superficial self-assurance at least. A lot of the prescribed arrogance was part of the image he was projecting. Yet he could switch it on. He was like a peacock on speed.'

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‘He was good fun, basically a decent guy. He had a bit of a career of disruption. He would do enough to get by, usually at the C-Plus/B-Minus level. He was capable of much more.’

Russell’s home life only added to the fiery discontent inside him. Fights and screaming arguments would be a regular occurrence because of his surroundings in a pub. ‘When people drink they go to a lot of weird places emotionally,’ he remembers. ‘I’ve been in a room where 50 people are punching each other because they’re drunk. I was basically a kid faced with adult fury. This is tattooed on my brain.’

Appalled by what he saw, Russell became more determined than ever to make something of himself – and not be someone who propped himself up on a barstool, with brawling as a pastime to break up their daily routine.

And it was music, not acting, that Russell first tackled in a bid to prove he was more than just a cousin to a couple of cricketers.

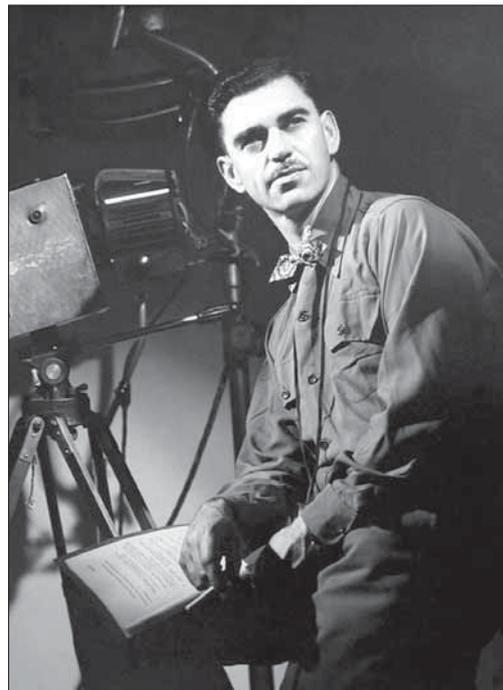


Above left: Russell Crowe as a young boy at Sydney Boys High School in Australia.

Above right: Russell posing for a shot in the 1980s.

Below left: Another headshot showing Russell as a teenager.

Below right: Russell looks terrifying in heavy make-up as 'Eddie' in the 1986 staging of *The Rocky Horror Show*.



Above left: Russell Crowe's grandmother, Joy Wemyss, proudly displays a picture of Russell as a school boy.

Above right: An old photograph of Russell's grandfather, Stan Wemyss, in Auckland New Zealand.

Below left: His first single cover, as Russ le Roq, called 'I Just Wanna Be Like Marlon Brando'.

Below right: Performing with his band Roman Antix in 1986.



Above: Like many famous Australian actors before and since, Russell appeared in the popular Aussie soap opera *Neighbours*. Here he is as Kenny Larkin, with Jason Donovan as Scott Robinson.

Below: Russell's first film role was alongside Danielle Spencer (who later became his wife) in *The Crossing* in 1990.



Above: Russell's starring role in *L.A. Confidential*, with Kim Basinger, finally brought him the mainstream fame and attention in the USA that many of his fans thought he deserved.

Below: He received a Best Actor Academy Award nomination for his part in *The Insider*, with Christopher Plummer.

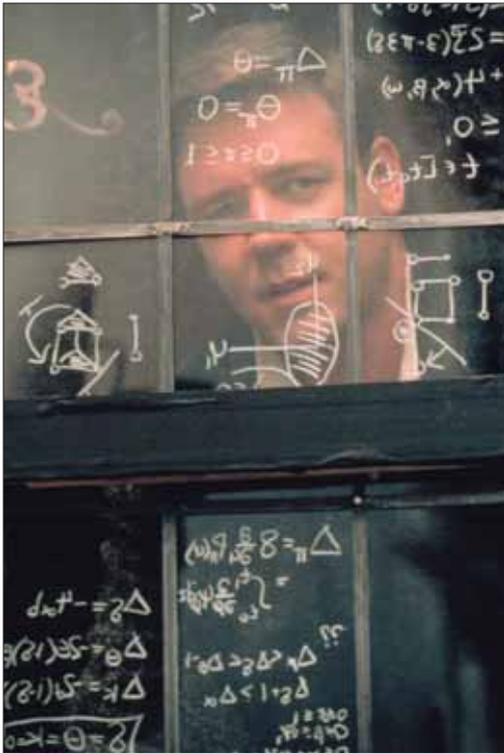


Above: Roman General Maximus Decimus Meridius from the movie *Gladiator* was to become one of Russell Crowe's most enduring characters.

Below: Maximus' sword and scabbard from *Gladiator*.



Russell Crowe won the 2001 Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *Gladiator*. Julia Roberts won the Oscar for Best Actress in the same year, for *Erin Brockovitch*.



Above left: Russell portrayed Nobel Laureate John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). He was nominated once again for an Academy Award but lost out to Denzel Washington.

Above right: Greeting Prince Charles on the blue carpet at the premiere of *Master and Commander – The Far Side of the World* (2003).

Below: In character as heavyweight boxing champion James J Braddock in *Cinderella Man* (2005).



Russell married Danielle Spencer at their home in a lavish ceremony in Nana Glen, New South Wales Australia, on 7 April 2003. It was his 39th birthday.