

David Hasselhoff became a cult figure by accident, but he's been smart enough to milk it for all it's worth. Jane Cornwell meets the actor and finds his blend of rampant egotism and self-deprecation strangely endearing. Just don't mention the cheeseburger.



Hoff the hook

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DAVID HASSELHOFF is renting out a penthouse suite in Manchester, England, and the view is spectacular. The lit win-

dows of high-rise buildings blink and twinkle against a frosty night sky. Way below, in a main square filled with Christmas lights, a giant inflatable Santa sits atop the Town Hall, while a billboard on the city's Opera House boasts a close-up of Captain Hook, the swashbuckling villain in the traditional Christmas pantomime, *Peter Pan*.

Or rather, a close-up of Hoff the Hook: even with a black curly wig, stick-on twirly 'tache and a stonking great pirate hat, there's no mistaking those piercing blue eyes and Ken Doll features.

Thanks to some canny marketing – newspaper pics of Hoff the Hook with a black *Knight Rider* car, of Santa Hoff riding a red sleigh pulled by reindeer – all Manchester knows David Hasselhoff is in town. From up here, it's as if he owns it.

"Doesn't that view blow?" Hasselhoff has crept up behind me in true, albeit unintentional, panto style. The Hoff! He feels so familiar. For a few beats we look out across England's north, Hasselhoff standing tall and square-shouldered at my side in khaki chinos, a cream windcheater and trendy two-tone trainers.

"I won't need to go anywhere on New Year's

as the most watched TV star ever – but he's pretty sure it's happened for a reason.

"I believe in the power of celebrity to make a difference," he says. "Just like I believe you can imagine what you want your life to be, then live it."

Such fierce optimism underlies *An Evening with David Hasselhoff*, the one-man show that enjoyed popular success and critical bemusement at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival – and will visit Australia in February. No matter that a seven-date UK tour of *An Evening with ...* in January was cut down to one London show, thanks to either lack of ticket sales ("Get ur tickets this min or he av2 cancel," tweeted Hayley) or what his representatives deemed "logistical issues". Hasselhoff is returning to Australia – the country where the phenomenon of "The Hoff" was created – just over a year after filming his abrupt three-episode stint on Channel Nine's *Celebrity Apprentice*.

"I had to leave because of a personal situation with my dad" – his former sales executive father Joe, 87, to whom he is close, had an emergency heart bypass operation – "but we raised \$245,000 and we gave it all to the Starlight Foundation and visited the Sydney Children's Hospital. The fact I show up shows them their prayers are answered because somebody came and cared." He shrugs, smiles. "For me, it takes no time."

Ah, Hoff. A master of the humble brag, a man-child with more blind spots than Cyclops,

“There were emails going around with every possible Hoffism from Baryshnihoff to Brave Hoff.”

Eve," he booms, running a hand through his still-luscious mop of hair. "I'm gonna wheel the bed in here and watch it going on. Just me," he says, twinkling like the skyline, "and Hayley."

A petite Welsh blonde almost 30 years Hasselhoff's junior, Hayley Roberts is one of the main reasons the TV star has been spending so much time in Britain. Axed as a judge on *Britain's Got Talent* midway through 2011, Hasselhoff might have hotfooted it back to the Los Angeles home he shares with his two adult daughters and a menagerie of pets had he not met the former sales assistant in a hotel bar while filming the *BGT* auditions in Cardiff.

"It's amazing how everything I've imagined and dreamed has come true in my life," he says once he's sitting, his long, skinny legs wide apart, on an L-shaped leather couch, a tad wired after three cans of Red Bull.

"I said in my head, 'What [kind of woman] do I want? I want a nice young girl who's blonde, who isn't in show business, who will love doing nothing but walking down the beach and playing games and being romantic. Then, BAM!" He bashes a fist into his palm. "She shows up!"

Right from his childhood acting debut as Nibs, one of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan* ("Be careful what you dream 'cause I'm doing *Peter Pan* again and I'm freaking 60!"), Hasselhoff never doubted he would be a star. He couldn't possibly foresee that he'd end up listed in Guinness World Records

Hasselhoff is as endearing and guileless as he is savvy and business-minded. A decade ago, after discovering that his ancestral German surname was being obsessively parodied by Sydney office workers ("A newspaper told me there were emails going around with every possible Hoffism from Baryshnihoff to Brave Hoff"), he immediately saw the commercial possibilities.

He joined in the joke, and got the world to laugh with him instead of at him. He began living his life between quotation marks, a genial symbol of all things so-bad-they're-awesome. In the process he made a lot of money. "I do guest appearances at Hoff-themed parties. I do a student night in Hertfordshire with 2000 people wearing Hoff masks."

His alter ego has been a mixed blessing: "I think it has kept David Hasselhoff out of the mainstreams of television and film." A pause. "We're working on changing that. We want to bring *Knight Rider* back as a movie. We want to develop a TV series like *The Rockford Files*."

AFTER STUDYING THEATRE AT THE CALIFORNIA Institute of the Arts, and narrowly missing out on big A-list roles, including Indiana Jones and Superman, being The Hoff must sometimes niggle. But then again: "We're talking to the creators of *The Office* about doing a series called *Tales of the Hoff*. It's about [how], no matter what happens, I always put my foot in it, or get in trouble."



Life's a beach: (from top) Hasselhoff and his Welsh girlfriend, Hayley Roberts, at Venice Beach, Los Angeles; as Mitch Buchannon in his *Baywatch* heyday.

Hasselhoff's career has had enough ups and downs to bring on motion sickness, but *An Evening with ...* cherry-picks the highlights. There are out-takes and songs from the '80s TV sensation that was *Knight Rider*, a show about crime crusader Michael Knight and his talking black Pontiac. And from *Baywatch*, in which Hasselhoff starred as red-Speedo-wearing lifeguard Mitch Buchannon alongside a bevy of beauties given to running along the sand in slow motion.

There are show tunes from his stints in the musicals *Chicago*, *The Producers* and *Jekyll & Hyde*, and rock anthems from his secondary singing career in Austria and Germany.

"I had a hit record in Germany in 1985 that was No.1 for eight weeks," he says, narrowing his gaze. This is, I think, a test.

I know, I say, name-checking *Looking for Freedom*, the song that Hasselhoff famously performed in front of the newly toppled Berlin Wall on New Year's Eve 1989, giving rise to the widespread but erroneous rumour that he had a hand in toppling the Wall himself.

He nods, pleased. "That song launched a massive run of hit records ... 40 gold and platinum records. So I'll be singing that in the show, along with songs like the Ted Mulry Gang's *Jump in My Car*, which I recorded in 2006 when I was about to tour Australia and had sold no tickets and no one knew what to do.

"I take the audience with me on my crazy journey. I tell them that I'm here for a reason, that this is what I've worked my whole life to do. They might start out noisy, but I get them to listen." By way of example he leans forward and croons the lyrics "If someone like you/Found someone like me" from *Jekyll & Hyde* into his fist, twice inter-



THE DAY BEFORE OUR INTERVIEW, Hasselhoff's longtime New York publicist has rung to discuss "sensitivities", to stipulate there will be no questions about her client's well-documented battle with alcohol abuse.

"We've all moved forward," she says, trying to airbrush stories of alleged three-day drinking binges; of mad dashes to hospitals after alleged seizures and alcohol poisoning; of 2007's notorious cheeseburger incident, in which a video of the topless, inebriated actor floundering around trying to eat a cheeseburger was filmed by one of his daughters during Hasselhoff's acrimonious divorce battle with his second wife Pamela Bach, then posted onto YouTube in an attempt, he's said, to shock him into sobriety. It worked.

While Hasselhoff went on to parody the episode on a 2010 Comedy Central roast in his

still out there in his '80s doing a one-man show and you know what's great about it?"

What?

"It's a good show! You know how much balls it takes to walk on stage and carry a show?"

A lot of balls. Does he ever get nervous?

"No, 'cause I know I can walk on stage and say 'roll it' and have a great show no matter what. The most nervous I've ever been was on [America's] *Dancing with the Stars*." Hasselhoff was the first celeb of the 2010 season to be eliminated – "because I wasn't in my element. Simon Cowell, who's a friend of mine, called me, thought I was going to win. My performance was fine."

He leaps up, eager to show me. The Hoff is going off! "Sex bomb, sex bomb," he sings, peeling off an imaginary jacket and swivelling his hips a few centimetres away from my head. "I went to Vegas the

“ You want a party? You got it. We do limbo dancing. We've got beach balls. ”



next day," he says, plopping back down, "and in the airport lounge it was on the breaking news!"

He flashes a perfect smile. "[America's Got Talent judge] Piers Morgan calls me 'Breaking News Hasselhoff'. One day I was watching breaking news and [there was a newflash] and I thought they'd caught Obama! That it was about Obama! [He means Osama bin Laden.] But it was 'David Hasselhoff is off to rehab' or something! Everything gets blown out of proportion. You have to laugh.

"But now," he adds conspiratorially, "I have this great tool called Twitter. Now before anyone prints stuff, I can say what's really happening.

"You have to laugh," he says again.

You really do, I say, feeling a little giddy.

"Where you from?" he wonders. "Melbourne? My best friend's from Melbourne – Mark Holden. When I was in Australia in January 2011 – I went down to do a commercial for Splice, your popsicle – we went to a cricket match called the Ashes. There was a guy there named Swanee? A pitcher? And he pitched to me and I was hitting them. Bam! And bam! And everyone was like, 'Oh my God! He's the biggest pitcher in history!'"

Swanee? Does he mean English bowler Graeme Swann?

Hasselhoff frowns. "He was telling me he is dating Elizabeth Hurley," he says.

Ah, I say. That's Shane Warne. Warnie.

"Yeah, Shane Warnie," he says. "I was hitting them and people were flipping out!"

Since he is recognised wherever he goes in Australia, this time Hasselhoff plans on wearing a disguise when he's out and about. He has a great one at the moment, a sort of beard mask, but he posted a photo on Twitter of himself wearing it, so will have to come up with another.

Hayley handles his celebrity just fine. "Everyone gives her the camera to take a photo with me and she doesn't mind. She knows it's because I seem like I've jumped out of people's childhoods."

The Hoff genuinely seems to get a buzz out of making other people happy. And when he gives me a Hoff mask, a Hoff DVD and a signed photo of himself bare-chested in his red *Baywatch* budgie smugglers, I'm irrationally delighted.

He walks me to the lift and presses the button. "Follow your dreams," he yells as he disappears around the corner, trailing what might be magic Hoff dust. **GW**



rupting himself with heckles of "WE LOVE YOU, HOFF!" before powering on again.

"When I'm on stage," he says a little bullishly, "I'm in control. I give 110 per cent. You want cool, classy entertainment? You got it. You want a party? You got it. We do limbo dancing. We've got beach balls."

Phew! Throughout all this, Hasselhoff has barely drawn breath. But so far, so good. With his nephew and assistant, Nick, sitting within earshot after collecting me from street level ("David would have come down, but he tends to be mobbed"), Hasselhoff has managed to stay on message and so, indeed, have I.

The many faces of The Hoff: (clockwise from top) as Michael Knight in *Knight Rider*; the infamous cheeseburger incident; as Captain Hook; with "best friend" Mark Holden and Holden's daughter, Katie; with his daughters, Hayley (at left) and Taylor Ann.

honour – and while the much-watched YouTube clip rallied his global army of "Don't Hassel The Hoff" T-shirted fans – he clearly wishes the whole thing would go away.

An email from the Australian promoter of *An Evening with...* is blunt: should I even mention the incident, that's it. Interview over. The Hoff will be off.

"Girls would be outside my trailer door clamouring to get in and I would drink the minibar," states Hasselhoff in his 2006 autobiography, *Making Waves*. "Even though I had achieved worldwide success, there was an emptiness inside me, an aching loneliness. I desperately wanted to be found out."

As he might say, be careful what you wish for. Anyway, he is sober now, and peddling the aphorisms that typically follow stints in AA and rehab. "Life isn't fair," he says. "When my daughters told me they wanted to go into show business" – budding singers Taylor Ann, 22, and Hayley, 20, were featured on the short-lived UK reality-TV series *Meet the Hasselhoffs* – "I said, 'How will you handle rejection?'" He fixes me with his blue-eyed gaze. "I mean, I was [a judge] on *America's Got Talent*, and suddenly I'm off?"

In 2010, Hasselhoff was axed from the show amid claims his drinking had made his position untenable. "Then one of my best friends dies of cancer in his 40s. That blew my mind! But you have to forge ahead with using your imagination."

Hasselhoff doesn't need to work so hard: he made a fortune from re-runs of *Baywatch* after buying back the rights from NBC and, with his other lucrative endorsements, is a multimillionaire. "Why should I stop?" He looks incredulous. "William Shatner is richer than all of us, and he's