

CROWE'S WINGS HARDLY CLIPPED TELEPHONE-TOSSING RUSSELL FREE - PROVIDING HE DOESN'T ACT UP

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AFTER A STOIC, MONOSYLLABIC courtroom performance, Oscar-winning actor Russell Crowe flew the coop yesterday - a free man after being awarded a stay-out-of-jail plea deal.

The only catch: The bad-boy superstar has got to stay out of trouble for a year.

Crowe, 41, quietly pleaded guilty to third-degree assault for throwing a telephone at Mercer Hotel clerk Nestor (Josh) Estrada and injuring him during a diva-worthy hissy fit.

He was given a conditional discharge by Manhattan Criminal Court Judge Kathryn Freed, who first asked Crowe a series of questions about the June 6 assault.

"Has anyone forced you to take this plea?" Freed asked. "No," Crowe replied.

"Do you have anything to say before sentencing?"

"No," Crowe replied.

After the plea, Crowe sat back in the gallery and hugged and kissed his wife, Danielle.

The sentencing ended an ordeal that Crowe characterized as "the most shameful situation I've ever gotten into in my life" during an appearance on "Late Show with David Letterman."

An enraged Crowe flung the telephone at Estrada, accusing him of being surly and unhelpful, after the screen star had desperately and unsuccessfully tried to phone his wife in Australia.

"He's very happy to have it behind him. He's going to go on with his life," said Crowe's attorney, Gerald Lefcourt.

Crowe was initially charged with felony assault and criminal possession of a weapon - charges that carry a maximum seven-year prison term and could have revoked the Australian actor's right to work in the United States.

Because he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault, Crowe is free to enter or leave the country. He also was ordered to pay a mandatory \$160 court surcharge.

With his wife by his side, Crowe sat quietly in a crowded second-floor courtroom at 100 Centre St., staring straight ahead as he waited for his case to be called.

After entering the well of the courtroom, Crowe smiled and took a piece of gum out of his mouth. Looking for a place to drop it, he pretended to try to place it in a court stenographer's coffee cup and then dropped it in a trash can.

It was the only light-hearted moment for the star of "Gladiator" and "Cinderella Man," who arrived at the courthouse with several bodyguards who fought their way through a huge scrum of photographers.

Crowe and his blond-haired wife seemed shaken as they got inside the courthouse and passed through magnetometers.

"That was terrible, it was terrible," Crowe commented.

Inside the courtroom, Assistant District Attorney Chad Sjoquist told the court that his office had reviewed the case very carefully and thought the plea deal was "appropriate."

"This is a 41-year-old man with no known criminal record," Sjoquist said. A lawyer for Estrada, who received a settlement from Crowe, declined to comment.