

# Hit Me

**The thin veneer of his characters' self-command makes him exciting to watch. Russell Crowe and the art of violence.**

By Helen Garner

One morning I walked into the kitchen and found my son-in-law standing frozen in front of the TV. On the screen a bloke in a blue singlet was manhandling an electric guitar. I had never before witnessed such a noxious exhalation of inauthenticity. "Who's that?" I asked. "It's Russell Crowe," said my son-in-law. "And his band, 30 Odd Foot of Grunts."

There seems no end to the cataract of hilarious copy set off by Russell Crowe's movements through the world. His name is a byword for gracelessness and self-importance. The sight of him stepping out of a building, granite-faced in aviator glasses, can reduce the onlooker to helpless paroxysms. He and Nicole Kidman are the twin peaks of antipodean self-creation in the Hollywood of our time. One can no longer go out in public without having an opinion about him.

What was mine? First I challenged myself to write down everything I could remember about the films I had seen him in over the past 14 years. Free-associating; no faking. As always in such tests of memory, the results were soberingly sparse.

*Proof.* Minor violence. Genevieve Picot sulking in a droopy cardigan. A camera? Hugo Weaving? No memory of Crowe.

*Romper Stomper.* Violence. Crowe fucking a girl, driving her up the bed with such force that her neck is bent against the wall.

*LA Confidential.* Violence. Detectives. Crowe asking Kim Basinger: "Why me?" Crowe slumped in the back seat of Basinger's car, broken-boned and bandaged.

*Spotswood.* No violence. Worker asks boss to put drops in his eyes. Kick to kick in factory yard. No memory of Crowe.

*The Sum of Us.* No violence. Crowe as a gay tradesman. Jack Thompson laughing very loudly.

*A Beautiful Mind.* Crowe as a mathematical genius. Ivy. Mental illness. Codes. Think I cried. Felt worked over, irritated.

*Master and Commander*. Water. Sky. Naval battles. Crowe as captain. Sea burials. A fiddle, Crowe playing it. Men, boys. No women. Amputation. *Origin of Species?*

*Gladiator*. Missed it. Just lazy, nothing to do with Crowe. Annoyed at myself. Pasted into my diary a still of Crowe with huge glistening muscles and an undershirt of celestial blue.

*The Insider*. Missed it. Don't know why.

That was about the size of it. "And wasn't there an Australian movie called *The Crossing*, way back?" said my daughter. "Russell Crowe stood out. I thought, he's got something."

So I loaded up at the video shop, shut myself into the house and drew the blinds for a week. Outside the window each day my son-in-law was digging and laying out our new vegetable patch, with his 18-month-old son strapped to his back. Whenever I took a break I could hear them out there in the sun, singing and making silly noises and laughing quietly. I was embarrassed by the sounds of warped manliness I imagined reaching them from my closed-in room: the shatter of gunfire, the growling of wild beasts, the screams of the dismembered, the oafish grunts and curses of skinheads, the occasional staccato outbreak of foul speech. There was something perverse about it, on a clean spring morning.

George Ogilvie's *The Crossing* takes place on Anzac Day in a country town. Bugles at dawn, Crowe and girlfriend asleep in hayshed after making love, interiors smoky with golden light. Crowe's widowed mother is a clingy, sentimental drunk. How can he be a man? A nature boy, he's got the sweat-sheen, the muscles, the scowl; he juts his jaw and fires guns into the air and poses wide-legged against a fierce blue sky; but he says "chahnce" and wears tight white jeans, even when hunched under the open bonnet of a ute. Fast forward – but wait. Who's that playing his girlfriend? Woh! It's Danielle Spencer, the woman who's now his wife.

The most interesting thing about her, here, is that *she looks like him*. The broad forehead, the eyebrows in a permanent inverted V of earnestness. The meaty nose. The rare smile. Impertinent psychologising possessed me while the film redeemed itself with a splendidly Shakespearean car and train smash.

*Proof* (1991), written and directed by Jocelyn Moorehouse, whose screenplay for *Eucalyptus* Crowe allegedly felt competent to rewrite, is unusually inward and intense for an Australian movie – a triangle of emotional distortion and manipulation. Crowe plays a young kitchen-hand in a restaurant with red-check tablecloths. On the video case his eyes are a startling, innocent blue, something I haven't noticed on screen.

He, of course, is the Eros figure of the piece – the untutored bogan who brings a blast of freshness into the lives of a nasty Camberwell pair, a blind man played by Hugo Weaving and his spiteful housekeeper Genevieve Picot. Crowe, as a physical worker, is again covered in a sheen of sweat. While Weaving lectures him on aesthetics he gazes up intently, showing us big features, juicily indented lips, a dimpled chin, an interesting breadth of brow. There is a little quality here, some nameless thing. "Everybody lies!" he says to the neurotic Weaving, who suspects and thus meets betrayal everywhere; "but not all the time,

and that's the point!" In Crowe's roguish company Weaving laughs for the first time, an unnervingly jerky, nasal sound.

What the hell was Crowe doing in Mark Joffe's *Spotswood*, that same year? Gee it was a sweet movie – hopelessly old-fashioned but warm and funny. Anthony Hopkins as the time and motion man politely subdues his greatness, but for the first time I feel that Crowe, as the salesman, is bidding his time. Technically one can't fault him, but he's not engaged. He's already somewhere else.

My daughter found a letter I'd written her in 1992 after seeing Geoffrey Wright's *Romper Stomper*. Seems I liked it. "Russell Crowe was the leader of the skins, the one who'd read *Mein Kampf* etc. He sounded more like a Scotch College boy than a psychopath – rounded vowels, strong inner self." I wrote disdainfully of David Stratton's refusal even to see the movie. But now, at second viewing, I couldn't believe how much screen time is taken up with crane shots of boys running wildly in single file down narrow Footscray lanes. The brawl scenes too are interminable, adolescently gloried-in: later I noticed that the credits named five nurses. I started to fidget in my seat.

Crowe looms over the tale, unmodulated, with face of stone. He gets expression by jerking his jaw, swinging it from side to side. There's a fabulous final scene on a beach (just like in *Birth* and *Little Fish*). Crowe does a grand death, twitching and spewing blood, and he leaves a pretty corpse, but the standout in *Romper Stomper* is mad-faced Daniel Pollock, who in real life died not long after. What a loss Pollock is: that delicacy, a puzzled complexity just starting to grow.

I hunted out my 1994 review of *The Sum of Us*, directed by Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton. Crowe plays Jeff, a gay plumber. The blue singlet? A mullet? How hard it is, now, to imagine this: "Jeff, a sweet-natured hulking boy whose self-esteem has taken a knock from a recent broken heart, comes home from the pub late on Friday night with a young gardener in tow." Should I scour the video shops? But "after a tantalising dip into a darker complexity it bounces straight back up to the surface and becomes what its provenance fates it to be – a sentimental exercise about love and family loyalty." OK, pass, though a small warmth lingers.

Here I skipped forward to 1997, Curtis Hanson's *LA Confidential*. Twenty minutes in and Crowe, as Officer Bud White, has beaten up a couple of creeps, torn the Christmas decorations off the house-front of a wife-bashing parole violator, and pressed money into the grateful victim's trembling hand. Though I'm interested in detectives, I eschew them on screen; but *LA Confidential*, humming with the highly worked and disciplined craziness of the James Ellroy novel it's based on, is something else.

For a start it's so beautiful. Every shot, every juxtaposition makes you gasp. The long, pale cars. The cream and white interiors of Kim Basinger's apartment, her private bedroom all sunny and embroidered. Hanson cuts away from Crowe (in a singlet) beating the shit out of a perp in a blind-dimmed room to an exterior shot of a sunlit skyscraper which is so blatantly, glowingly phallic that you want to burst out laughing.

And the talent! It overflows. Guy Pearce as the idealistic prig, that porcelain face he's got, the vulnerable rimless glasses; Kevin Spacey as the celebrity crime stopper, his level, insolent, flat-

eyed stare. Crowe, the violent crusader with the wounded soul, is at ease in the big league. He has earned his place in these superbly lit montages of expressionless men in suits, painterly group shots of casual beauty, with a thick soundtrack of shifting feet and murmuring voices and, somewhere out of shot, a man sobbing.

For disgraced Officer Bud White in *LA Confidential* I am prepared to forgive 30 Odd Foot of Grunts. I will even overlook the documented existence of a song called "Swallow My Gift". Go, Russ, go! Let Kim Basinger drive you to Arizona, and learn to be happy.

Now we come to the problem of Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind*. Why am I so reluctant to see it again? I don't know, but my resistance is adamant. I try hard to remember what bugged me about it. I don't much like biopics. There's a scenery-chewing element to movies about "the triumph of the human spirit" that I can't hack. Also, my week with Russell is running out and I've still got to plough through *Master and Commander*, *The Insider* and *Gladiator*. This isn't supposed to be encyclopaedic. If it were I'd have had to go back to *Neighbours*.

Life is short. Pass. And I'm only pretending to be sorry.

You can't talk about an actor's *oeuvre*. Directors have *oeuvres*. Actors have jobs. They have skills, they have luck, they have reputations, they have things they are known for doing well – and they risk getting stuck in their own groove. What Crowe does best is a certain sort of maleness: he is really good at violence, and at only just managing to hold back from violence. The thin veneer of his characters' self-command is what makes him exciting to watch, if you like that sort of thing – and a woman can get pretty sick of the bloodletting that seems inseparable from Hollywood's narrow concepts of manliness.

Peter Weir's *Master and Commander*, concerning as it does the adventures of men and boys in the early 19th-century navy, turns on male codes and encompasses a great deal of violence, but in its flexible ideas of what manliness might be it displays a genial maturity. Its screenplay, issuing from a series of highly literate novels, holds firm against the horrid brutality of a naval life, the formal starch of what is still 18th-century speech. Fourteen minutes in, the decks are awash with blood and the ship is holed and wallowing, but "If you please," they say, or "May I beg you?" A tiny midshipman comforts the ship's doctor with the gift of a beetle. At table, officers burst into song without embarrassment or irony. The idea that a man might be an intellectual without losing face is given full worth.

Crowe as Captain Aubrey is a new proposition altogether. He's carrying a bit of weight – you could almost say *embonpoint*. The long hair in its queue and the newly rounded face suit him, as does the flattering three-cornered hat. And what are these smiles? These flashes of benevolence and good humour? I had got past my hostility to Crowe, I had even begun to admire him; but this was the first time I'd liked him. When he picked up his fiddle and sat down to play a duet with the doctor, I waited for the famous shudder of embarrassment to spoil it for me. It didn't come. Amazed, I sat there in front of the TV thinking: "He's even made me *believe in the violin*." I pressed pause, ran to the cupboard, and poured myself a large glass of port.

What could one drink to make Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* bearable? Unable despite my best efforts to suspend disbelief, I was tormented by carping thoughts. Did they really have cafes in those Roman colonnades? How did Maximus keep his hair always at the perfect length, and who twirled those little kiss curls across his brow?

I enjoyed the Nuremberg-style extravaganzas. I was thrilled by the movie's gorgeousness, its subtle colours, the extraordinary palette of blues. When they carried Maximus's body away a fat tear plopped into my packet of Bullets. But as soon as anyone spoke I had to get up and do some deep breathing. Those creaking rhetorical flourishes! "You shall watch as I bathe in their blood." "The time for half-measures is over, Senator." "It takes a Nempereor to rule a Nempire." "It vexes me. I'm terribly *vexed*." Coming to *Gladiator* as I did five years too late, I felt like Joaquin Phoenix's Commodus, all perfumed and fresh and maquillé, galloping up to his father Marcus Aurelius moments after the great greasy blackened brutes of Germania's army have been routed by the Romans at untellable expense of life and limb.

"Have I missed it?" lisps Commodus, dismounting from his chariot. "Have I missed the battle?"

His father regards him wryly. "You've missed the war."

The Insider I saved for last. I had managed since 1999 to avoid knowing the first thing about it. I didn't even know that Al Pacino, at whose shrine I have worshipped since *The Godfather II*, was in it. Again Crowe's character is struggling for honour in the world of men. This time he plays a man of science, Dr Jeffrey Wigand, a researcher for a giant tobacco company who is threatened with litigation if he breaks a confidentiality agreement about the harmful properties of nicotine.

"Tobacco's a sales culture," says Pacino, as the tough *60 Minutes* producer who wants Wigand to spit the dummy on TV. "Why'd you work for them?"

"They paid me a lot o' money."

Treated with outrageous insolence by the company executives, Wigand begins to seethe with the desire to break his promise, cleanse himself of his compromises, and wreak revenge. But his only way of doing this is to put himself at the mercy of the commercial TV network CBS. Even a battle-hardened journalist like Pacino's Lowell Bergman, with his dark-circled eyes and husky voice, can't predict or control the treachery of his employers.

Can this blundering naïf, this tormented whistle-blower, be Russell Crowe? He is unrecognisable, leached of vanity and self-regard. By holding his persona in check, he quadruples his power. His body, in the flapping suit, has grown all massive and square. Although his hair is grey, his eyes behind the unfashionable glasses are those of an unhappy, nerdish boy. His mouth is jammed hard in a straight line. Even the back of his neck radiates suppressed emotion.

And the deep texture of the film! The camera always sliding at things from a surprising angle! The music – that counter-tenor soaring while Crowe, half-mad with anger, belts a thousand white golf balls all over the driving range! What’s going on here? I’m sitting in front of greatness! My notebook and pencil slide to the floor.

The tobacco company finds a way to gag Wigand in Kentucky: he is threatened with prison if he speaks in court. The cynical brutality he’s up against paralyses him, thickens the movie’s air. Crowe’s face is big, stunned, wounded, like a peasant’s. “How does one go to jail?” he asks the journalist. Outside the courthouse, watched by the hawkish Pacino, he paces on green grass. His loneliness is appalling. Cars pass in silence. All sound is suspended, except a mandolin strumming soft and fast. Nothing breathes. Then he speaks: “Fuck it. Let’s go to court.” The soundtrack explodes back into reality. That’s when I started howling, and hardly stopped till the credits rolled. It’s a splendid movie, grand and serious, and Crowe is the aching centre of it.

What has he gone through, what has he put others through, to get to this eminence? I hate the internet about movies, its flood of shallow, hysterical opinion, but I roamed around and found an interview with the director of *The Insider*, Michael Mann. “How did you work with Crowe?” they ask him. Mann dodges it. “I don’t talk about some of that. Some of this stuff, it’s just not right to be public about.”

I felt frustrated and chastened, as if I’d been caught snooping. When I told a friend I was writing a piece about Crowe, he fired up: “Where do you get off? You’ve never met him, have you?” “I’m only writing about his movies,” I said, miffed, and that’s what I set out to do. But Crowe’s ludicrous public persona, noisy and humourless and strutting, is forever making rude gestures in the corner of my eye, demanding attention and cursing those who give it. The only way to block it out is to turn to his work, to watch him step away into that free place where art happens.