



Hugo Weaving at The Wharf – the home of the Sydney Theatre Company.

Hugo Weaving is sitting on the balcony of the Sydney Theatre Company's harbourside complex, The Wharf, underlining words in his script in lead pencil. He stops, furiously rubs something out, starts again. He's been worrying at his script like this for a few weeks now.

"I like to unpick every word in the play," he explains. "It's incredibly tiring and weird, a completely unnatural process. But once I have the meaning of every word, I can just throw the script away and forget about it."

As he talks, Weaving leans in. He's tall (188 centimetres), at 50 still strappingly well built and, let's face it, dead famous. Yet you don't feel impressed upon, much less intimidated. Rather, it's his way of offering his full attention. He speaks in a soft, deep voice (he's one of the most in-demand voice actors in animated film) and his sky-blue eyes maintain a steady, though not unflinching, gaze. He habitually thinks before he opens his mouth, rubbing his beard when he pauses to consider an answer. He appears relaxed, although his jiggling left leg betrays a nervous energy. When it gets too lively, he rests his hand on his knee.

He acts, he says, because he wants to understand other people – and himself. "There is a sense of therapy in acting. A sense of escapism or hiding behind someone else," he says. "Or a sense of not exposing yourself by being someone else. For me it's about play-acting, dressing up, entertaining, having fun ... all those things."

Now in rehearsals for *Uncle Vanya*, Weaving is preparing to step onto the stage with some of the leading lights of Australian theatre: Cate Blanchett, John Bell, Richard Roxburgh, Jacki Weaver and Sandy Gore.

The play, which opens on November 15, is directed by Hungarian Tamás Ascher, reckoned to be the world's foremost interpreter of Anton Chekhov's work (his staging of *Ivanov* bowled over audiences and critics during the Sydney Festival last year) and is among the most keenly anticipated productions in this year's STC program.

Weaving plays Doctor Astro, a brilliant, brooding man anaesthetised by country life; a vodka-drinking, tree-planting visionary decades ahead of his time, with a soft spot for a beautiful woman. It's a role he's coveted for years. But after making a string of Hollywood sci-fi and fantasy movies (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, due next year, *Transformers*, *The Wolfman*, *V for Vendetta*, the *Matrix* trilogy and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and several critically acclaimed Australian films (*Last Ride*, *Little Fish*, *The Adventures of Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*, *Proof*), only now is Weaving feeling old enough and wise enough to tackle it.

"The only other time I've done Chekhov was *The Cherry Orchard* [in 1983]," he says. "That was a younger role and probably good for me at the time but I don't think I really understood Chekhov or his work as I do now. He expresses human problems in such an empathetic way. The really lovely thing about this play is it manages to be incredibly sad and incredibly funny."

Weaving, who considers himself a stage actor above all, has read Chekhov's letters, plays and short stories to prepare for the role. It's an almost scholarly approach and, for an actor, an extraordinary amount of homework. Weaving says it is normal for him. "The preparation can be endless. I just want to know what Chekhov was thinking and what →



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Philosophical but playful, Hugo Weaving can be reflecting on his family one minute and talking television the next. As he prepares to take to the stage in *Uncle Vanya*, Elissa Blake meets the contradictory actor.

Photography
Damian Bennett
Grooming
Allison Boyle



the characters are thinking,” he says, suddenly animated. “I am methodical. I want to know what I’m doing but I don’t ever want to be tied down. I don’t love chaos but I love freedom.”

Weaving has a reputation for being both methodical and mischievous – on stage and off. One stage manager says she has three words to describe him. “Heaven, self-sufficient and naughty.” In the rehearsal room at The Wharf, where all the directions are coming via an interpreter (Ascher speaks no English), Weaving is keeping everyone amused.

“Hugo is hilarious but he always has a joke at his own expense,” says Cate Blanchett, who has performed with him on stage in *Hedda Gabler* (2004) and *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1995) as well as on screen in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) and *Little Fish* (2005). “I don’t think he has a cruel bone in his body.”

She says Weaving is a very subtle actor. “He seems to seamlessly slide into his roles almost by osmosis. I’ve always been in awe of him but he puts you at ease straight away. I feel very supported by him, like he’s hugging me.” She laughs. “I think every woman in Australia wants to be hugged by Hugo.”

Melbourne Theatre Company director Peter Evans, who cast him in Yasmina Reza’s stinging contemporary comedy *God of Carnage* last year, says Weaving can be very intense and “he gets cross with himself and he’s never satisfied”. “But then he gets very naughty,” he says. “He’s like a big cat, light on his feet, ready to pounce and always up for some fun. It’s like he has a glint in his eye.”

When Weaving arrives at *the(sydney)magazine*’s photo shoot at The Wharf, he is unaccompanied and on his best behaviour, wearing a roughly ironed checked shirt over a T-shirt with a tiny moth hole in it. A crop of greying chest hair protrudes over the top. His sleeves are rolled up as if he’s ready to chop logs. In between set-ups, he maintains a kind of lizard stillness, alert but conserving energy.

When he’s relaxing, he says, he reads histories and biographies. He’s recently read the life story of French Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne, known as the father of scepticism (“an absolutely wonderful book”). The TV show he loves most is *QI*, with Stephen Fry and comedian Alan Davies. “I’m always watching TV. When I get home from work, I love to put my feet up.”

His musical tastes are eclectic. “I listen to a lot of music from Mali and Senegal in West Africa. African

music has always been a big feature, initially because I was born in West Africa. It’s quite a big sound and then I discovered more bluesy and acoustic sounds.”

The actor has done countless interviews and prefers not to rake over his childhood story. In a nutshell, he was born in Nigeria in 1960 but moved to England as a baby when his father, Wallace, a seismologist, changed careers to work in the fledgling computer industry. The family moved a lot. Weaving, his younger sister and older brother travelled with their father and their mother, Anne, a former teacher, between Melbourne, Sydney, Johannesburg and back to Bristol, England, before settling in Sydney.

At 16, Weaving pursued acting in school plays at Knox Grammar in Sydney’s north, before heading to the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) straight out of school. While he was there, his parents divorced, an event he has described as “traumatic”. →

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He has been with his partner, artist Katrina Greenwood, for 30 years. Living in Paddington, they share their home with their children, Harry, 21, an acting student at NIDA, and Holly, 17, who is finishing her HSC this year. Ariel Books and the Palace Verona cinema are regular haunts. In the winter months the family can be found in the Brewongle Stand of the Sydney Cricket Ground, barracking for their beloved Sydney Swans.

The family’s retreat is a former dairy farm on the Williams River, just outside Dungog, three hours’ drive north of Sydney, on which Weaving has planted hundreds of eucalyptus trees. (This, he says, was going on long before he knew he would play Astrov. His methodical approach has its limits.) “I really love that property. There are always a million things to do if you want or you can just disappear and eat and drink and sit around,” he says. “We have wallabies and rabbits and possums and goannas and beautiful birds. We go as often as we can.”

Weaving claims not to know the secret to his long relationship with Greenwood. “We’re quite different in many ways but we have lots of similar interests and similar things make us laugh,” he says. “We just spent 10 days together in London, which was fantastic. We spent a lot of time in galleries and wandering around the countryside. We went to a little village and cycled. We just hung out together and that’s something we’re looking forward to more and more. Our great thing in common now is the farm. Just being up there, planting vegetables and cooking them, is wonderful for us.”

Since turning 50 in April, Weaving says he has been examining his life. Family and fatherhood have always been his priority – although he says he’s “just been muddling through, trying to understand where his kids are coming from” – but now that his children are adults, things are changing. “When your kids are young, the family thing is so total and you’re focused on getting them through each day,” he says. “Things are opening up. Katrina and I are reassessing who we are. We’re thinking about going to live in Berlin for a while or going up to the farm and disappearing ... or we don’t know what. It’s exciting. You never stop being a parent but it changes.”

Weaving likes to keep his life simple. For a long time he didn’t have a mobile phone or a laptop, though he has recently caved in on both. He limits his intake of current affairs to just a newspaper in the morning and the ABC’s *Lateline* at night. He rarely spends time on the net.

He doesn’t drive, either, a result of being diagnosed with epilepsy at 13. “I haven’t had a seizure for 12 years now, I’m off the medication and consider myself no longer epileptic,” he says. “But I still don’t drive. I could and I would like to drive but I don’t think I ever will.”

He tries, he says, “to simplify things as much as I can. Life can be incredibly confusing and chaotic for everybody. Increasingly so, I think. I don’t have a philosophy for life, I don’t have anything worked out. I just try my best to be present in all things. The most →

A masterclass with Hugo Weaving

Weaving goes to a rehearsal having read everything he can lay his hands on about the playwright and the play. But he does not learn his lines. “For me, the more research I do illuminates the role but that’s not necessarily going to create a wonderful character on stage. You need to jump up and try stuff out and be brave and fall on your face and don’t know what you’re doing and get in there.”

Sometimes he surprises the other actors by running through the scene incredibly slowly or very, very fast. “I’m looking for a feeling or a rhythm that can propel you through the scene,” he explains. “Sometimes I’m going backwards and forwards over a line and the other actors are falling asleep. It’s a very painstaking way of working. But I find the character in the language. You need to understand *why* they are saying what they are saying to find out what sort of person they are.”

He still feels nerves before a performance but he knows how to handle it. “Nerves can give you wonderful, positive energy where your whole body is alive or they can shut you down,” he says. “If that happens, it means you are thinking about yourself and the impression you are making too much. Just stop thinking about yourself and listen to the other people around you. We are all the same; we all go through the same stuff. We only get out of balance when we focus on ourselves too much.”



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10 things you didn't know about Hugo ...

1. In 2001, when on stage for an STC production of *The White Devil*, he fell to the floor in a death scene. But he stopped breathing. “I very nearly died,” he said. “Of course, everyone thought I was acting, even the person doing the strangling... Luckily, someone noticed the froth coming out of my mouth.”
2. One of his first performances was as a five-year-old in Melbourne, singing *The Teapot Song (I'm A Little Teapot)* at a school concert.
3. As he doesn't drive, he walks everywhere – in fact, that is his only form of exercise.
4. He once described Los Angeles as “an endless sprawl of Parramatta Roads in every direction”.
5. Geoffrey Rush taught him clowning at NIDA.
6. He met Katrina Greenwood when he was four. “She was one of two little blondes in our street and we played together.” They reconnected when he was at NIDA and she moved into his share house.
7. He wears a wedding ring, although he and Greenwood have never married. “We’ve occasionally talked about the idea of getting married, perhaps when we’re really old. We’ll have a big party at 60-something. Or 70.”
8. At 13, he chose to go to boarding school in Bristol, even though the school was in the same city where his family lived. “I absolutely loved it. But it was an odd decision.”
9. His parents’ divorce in the late ’70s had a huge impact on him. “That was the end of our world, because the family was the constant.”
10. When he became an ambassador for animal-rights charity Voiceless in 2004, he was still eating meat. But encouraged by his children, Harry and Holly, both vegetarians, he gave it up.

important things in life are my family, my extended family, my friends and my work. I just try to be engaged with what I’m doing at the time. It’s hard.

“But it’s exactly what’s happening in *Uncle Vanya*: all the characters want to achieve things but they’re thinking, ‘What’s the point? Life’s so hard, I’m getting old, I’ve lost it, I’m exhausted, no one likes me.’ All the things we think about.”

Weaving concedes he is a long way from losing it. After NIDA, he walked straight into a two-year contract with the Sydney Theatre Company and hasn’t been out of work since. But he now feels less pressure to achieve. “An actor’s life is chaotic,” he says. “But I’m much less ego-driven now. I’m more discerning and I’m saying no. I don’t want to be working all the time; I want to be with my family.”

The perfect year, he says, “would be one play at the Sydney Theatre Company or at Belvoir Street and one small independent film in Australia. Every second year, I’d like to go overseas just to be completely different. But my preference is to be here. I really do fall in and out of love with acting – not the material but all the red-carpet nonsense. Sometimes I think I’m finished with film or I never want to do theatre again. Sometimes I think I want to stop acting. But then I find something that inspires or excites me again.”

Blanchett regards Weaving as having one of the most healthy relationships to work she’s encountered. “He’s totally enviable. Andrew [Upton] and I are always saying what a fabulous life he has. I think that’s why he’s such a good actor, because his life is so rich and he’s so engaged in other people’s thoughts and ambitions and endeavours. He’s a passionate friend and he seems to have the work/life balance really sorted out, which is something we all try to achieve.”

Right now, Weaving is listening to a lot of Chopin. It’s for work. Chekhov was a fan, particularly of the composer’s preludes. “I just love Chekhov,” he says. “He seems such a humanist and such an intelligent man who wanted to work and he wanted to make a difference because he knew he had tuberculosis and he didn’t have long to live. He had such a love for the landscape and painters and writers. He had a love of people and a rejection of pettiness that infects us all and the world we inhabit... There is so much to admire about him.”

It seems Chekhov and Weaving share many values. He smiles and nods. “I think a lot of actors feel that way about Chekhov. He speaks to actors in a very personal way. He infuses his characters with so much humour and irony and complexity that we feel we have something in common with him. The audiences feel it, too. It’s why this play has endured.”

He takes a long pause. “The next time I plant a tree on my property, I’ll probably think of Chekhov. Will he make me plant more trees or plant them in a different way? Who knows? But I will be planting... and thinking.” (s)