

Mental as anyone

Chris Herden interviews Anthony LaPaglia and discovers the actor is not afraid to take a few risks

When I first meet Anthony LaPaglia, in Queensland to promote the Australian comedy *Mental*, he's leaning back into the corner of a lounge, arms stretched out along the top. He welcomes me with a slight upturn of the mouth, not quite a smile, but a warm enough welcome suggesting we get straight down to business. I can't help feeling like I've strayed into a boxing ring; he's the pro-fighter, sitting in his corner, calm, in control, grabbing a breather between rounds, but coiled, ready to pounce.

He is dressed all in black, hair neatly slicked back, his smooth urban charm immediately apparent. He speaks slowly, precisely, his voice has a deep husky timbre. After nearly 30 years of living in the US there remains just a hint of an Aussie accent.

"Well, I'm married to a die-hard Australian (fellow actor Gia Carrides) and she hasn't lost her accent at all and is throwing the Aussie vernacular around the place all the time and so, yeah, it's still embedded in our household."

The 53-year-old Golden Globe, Emmy, Tony and Screen Actors Guild Award winner is a pioneer, a trailblazer for the herd of young Australian actors who have since tried and succeeded in breaking into American film.

Born in Adelaide to Dutch and Italian parents, he left Australia for the US in 1985, was working in theatre and getting bit roles in television series before becoming a full-time actor in 1989. He is best known for his portrayal of FBI agent Jack Malone in the TV series *Without a Trace*.

"My home is in Los Angeles but I get back to Australia quite a lot, I dust off my bike, go for a

few rides or go to a few football matches, catch up with my friends in the football world."

By football, LaPaglia means soccer. In the 1980s he was a goalkeeper in the National Soccer League, playing for Adelaide City and West Adelaide. His love for the game is obsessive, both on and off the field. He dabbles in soccer club ownership in the US and Australia. An investment as part-owner helped kick off the A-League club Sydney FC in 2004 (he bowed out in 2008 but still regularly flies back from California to attend matches). His first hip replacement in 2004 couldn't keep him off the soccer field, neither could the second in 2010.

"I have a personality defect," he says. "If it's risky I want to do it."

LaPaglia is used to taking risks, evidenced early in his LA career when he started to tell casting directors he was from Brooklyn (he was frustrated at persistently being told at auditions to recite Paul Hogan's travel mantra: "put another shrimp on the barbie").

He recently risked falling foul of a Hollywood heavyweight when he pulled out of Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* in favour of Australian telemovie *Underground* (which was recently accepted into the Toronto Film Festival and will appear on Channel 10 later this year). It's about the early years of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. LaPaglia looks slightly uneasy when I ask him if he now feels like a marked man.

"No, that was an unfortunate situation and it wasn't without repercussions for me but it was a scheduling conflict. Besides, I knew the Tarantino film would survive just fine without me. It's got

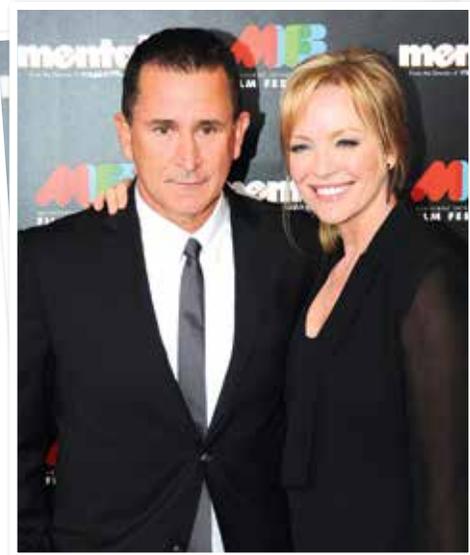
lots of big stars. *Underground* is different, it's a small Australian film, the money raised for it was dependent on my participation and that of Rachel Griffiths. And it's a subject I'm quite passionate about.

LaPaglia is also passionate about what he perceives to be the message of *Mental*, the black comedy he stars in with Toni Collette, Rebecca Gibney and Liev Schreiber. "I hadn't read anything like *Mental*, I didn't know what to make of it. I thought this is either absolute insanity or utter genius. I'd done the *Without A Trace* series for seven years and I was a little bit burned out, decided to have a year or two off to get it out of my system. This is the first film project that came my way I cared about."

Mental was filmed on the Gold Coast and LaPaglia plays Barry Moochmore (based on director PJ Hogan's father), a local mayor who has neglected his wife and four daughters to such a degree that the whole family has become dysfunctional and plagued with neuroses....a situation that couldn't be further from the truth in his own life. He has a "tremendous sense of responsibility" to his girls, wife Gia and nine-year-old daughter Bridget, who he adores.

"The central thing of the movie to me is family responsibility," he says. "I think most families are dysfunctional in some way and when I hear that someone had a perfect childhood I'm a bit suspicious."

LaPaglia admits he was an angry young man, his mix of Italian heritage and serious demeanour has helped him attract tough guy Mafioso-type roles. "It's not hard for me to draw



Anthony LaPaglia and *Mental* co-star Rebecca Gibney

on that kind of anger," he says.

"The movie shows that you can take any person and find an idiosyncrasy they have, then you magnify it and they look mental. It's like me when I am trying to find my keys in the morning; for 30 years I've been doing the same thing, 'where are my keys?' Is it some form of mental illness that I haven't figured out that if I put them on that shelf they will be there in the morning?"

Next up for LaPaglia is an off-Broadway play, *Checkers*, about the personal life of former US President Richard Nixon and in February he'll be in Italy filming an Australian-Italian co-production called *Uno*.

My interview time is up, we stand and shake hands. I risk one last question; is there a role he would like to play? "Oh gee I feel so fortunate, I'm about to play Richard Nixon." He looks me in the eye, there is an uncomfortably long pause, I sense the boxer is back. He pounces. "I would like to do a hard core action shoot-em-up type of action flick." And that's my cue to leave.

Mental opens in cinemas 4 October.

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