SATURDAY AGE

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SPECTRUM

‘NO RISK, NO MAGIC’

Jason Donovan is about to wrestle a ‘monster’. He just wishes his dad was here to see it. P4

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ELIZABETH FLUX

Where the heart is

Jason Donovan's homecoming for One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest now looks very different to the one he had in mind.

Jason Donovan says "a lot of roads" have led him to Randle McMurphy, the charming, unruly psychiatric patient he will play in an upcoming stage production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

"I've never worked so hard on a script," he says, speaking from Manchester, in the midst of his run as Coach Bolton in the stage production of *High School Musical*.

McMurphy is a departure from the parts Donovan is best known for and he swings between excitement and apprehension. He is deliberately steering clear of studying Jack Nicholson's Oscar-winning take on the character in the 1975 film, but he's delved deeply into Ken Kesey's novel. His review of the book, like most of his conversation, is candid, blunt and ends with a laugh.

"I've read it. Not great on a first read. I reread it. Still f---ing … quite difficult to get your head around. [But] I sort of just threw caution to the wind. The biggest fear is fear itself. So I went, well, let's go. You know, no risk, no magic. I think it's the fear of the amount of work in it, the amount of dialogue. It's a monster."

The script now resonates more on a personal level following the death of his beloved father Terence, also an actor, in July, at the age of 90. "There's parts of my dad in this character … the craziness of this guy. I sort of channel a little bit of my father in that role. So there's a lot of roads that lead to this moment for me."

Though he has lived in the UK now for longer than he ever lived in Australia, Donovan's accent hasn't changed. He speaks with a mixture of deep thought, candour, poetic turns of phrase and enthusiastic swearing.

His conversation is liberally sprinkled with "you know?" and "do you know what I mean?" and when a reflection catches him off guard he happily punctuates with "f---!" On the atmosphere of Australia compared to his adopted home, he says: "Everything [in Australia] is in focus. It's in *focus*. Here, it's like a Turner painting. Then: "QF1 – you know I've been on that f---ing plane back and forth more than probably most people." Later, he finishes off his carefully considered dissection of the themes of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* – conformity and rebellion, the danger of institutions, freedom and redefining sanity, and the impact of the story being set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War – with a self-deprecating "blahdy blah".

He first heard whispers that this show would happen the last time he performed in Melbourne – in 2023, when he was playing Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show*. This time, stepping onto the Athenaeum stage will have a different resonance, with his father having also performed at the theatre – for *Breaker Morant* in 1978 and *Certified Male* as part of the Melbourne Festival in 1999. "The whole thing has, not weight, but it's a wonderful bookend, really."

Set in a psychiatric institution in the early 1960s, the story follows McMurphy as he challenges authority figures holding up a broken system. "McMurphy is a trailblazer for all his flaws," says Donovan.

Elements of Terence Donovan will make it into his performance in November. "I was very excited for my dad to see it," he says. "You know with Dad you never quite knew somewhat what version you were going to get sometimes … he was feisty, strong, [and] had a sort of controlled madness about him. He embraced life – he went for it."

Donovan knew that his father would be remembered for his acting. But in a career that started in 1960, his work spilled not just across the stage and screen, but into what lay underneath it all.

"There's a great picture of my dad holding a coffin," he says. The photograph is black and white, and in it Terence Donovan is standing next to Gerard Kennedy, the actors leading a procession of pallbearers through the streets of Melbourne.

Taken in April 1975, this isn't an image of a funeral; it's a protest. Inside the coffin were rolls of film, spilling out from under the lid. The procession was made up of some of the biggest names in entertainment of the time, who had all come together to fight for mandated local content quotas to protect Australian jobs on the small screen.

"I was pretty keen when Dad passed to make sure that he wasn't just known as the guy who did *Cop Shop* and *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*," says Donovan. He draws a line from the activism done in the '60s and '70s "lobbying successive governments to try and make sure that Australia told its own stories" to the industry we have today – one that helped pave the way for his own career.

Though he is almost constantly working, the image we most often see of Donovan is from the late '80s, in stills or videos from what is still one of the most iconic moments in Australian television. In 1987, *Neighbours* aired an episode in which Donovan's character, Scott, married his on-screen love interest Charlene, played by Kylie Minogue.

Recently he's been seeing a lot of posts on Instagram where "you can put in a picture of yourself and it pumps out you in 1988 with your mullet … I just put in me in 1988. I don't need to AI it."

By now he's used to occupying the strange space of being a figure in pop-culture history; it's a normal part of his story that there is a band called Scott and Charlene's Wedding. "I have heard about that," he says, and adds that British electronic band KLF had a single called *Kylie Said to Jason*.

Interest in his off-screen relationship with Minogue flared up again earlier this year when he took part in her Netflix documentary. Asked if it was a difficult choice to participate, Donovan doesn't hesitate. "No," he says. "I'll tell you why it wasn't difficult – because it was her documentary … there was no third party involved." He clarifies: "I wasn't telling her story for someone that might be able to misinterpret it … so I wasn't fearful of it being manipulated or misconstrued."

He was, however, surprised by how prominent he was in it. "I was a big part of

Clockwise from far left: Jason Donovan with his father, Terence; with Kylie Minogue in *Neighbours*; the pair promoting her Netflix series; Terence Donovan protesting in 1975; Terence with Boer War veteran Captain Hugh Woolf at the Athenaeum during the 1978 season of *Breaker Morant*; Jason in *The Rocky Horror Show*; Jack Nicholson as Randle McMurphy. PHOTOS: JASON DONOVAN, AFP, NETFLIX, AGE ARCHIVES, NIKKI SHORT

'There's parts of my dad in this character … the craziness of this guy … with Dad you never quite knew what version you were going to get … he was feisty, strong [and] had a sort of controlled madness about him. He embraced life.'

episode one. That's not a negative thing. That was a positive thing," he says. "But I didn't anticipate being probably such a big part."

The documentary covers the pair's years on *Neighbours*, and the breakdown of their relationship. In it, Donovan is very open about his feelings at the time. "Love hurts, mate," he says bluntly near the close of the first episode.

"Maybe there's an element of trust with her and I, which is a good thing. I think she trusts me to be honest and, you know, I trust her," he reflects. "That's a unique bond. That's a good partnership … that even though there's many years between us since those moments, there is still a trust and a respect; a mutual respect."

Today, he is just as open about the grief of losing his father.

"It's no surprise that I've had a bumpy few months," he says. The pair were very close, walking back and forth in each other's footsteps in careers that separated and intersected across the years. "I was brought up by my dad," he says. "That's quite unique, particularly in the '70s in Australia."

It meant his childhood was spent in the company of creative people. "It was a nightmare!" he says with a laugh. "There were wonderful highs and sort of wonderful lows. I was surrounded by actors growing up, most of them pretty negative about the work and the life, but always passionate." He pauses. "That's something I really latched onto. That passion. I watched my dad. I went to set. I went to plays. I watched him work, probably because I didn't really have a mother figure … so it was just him and I."

Donovan started acting as a child, but it was when he was cast as Scott Robinson in *Neighbours* that fame quickly found him and he continued on to a career that has spanned stage, screen and music, including playing Joseph in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in London.

But it isn't what he imagined for himself. His sliding doors moment was enrolling at RMIT to study graphic design.

"I never thought I was going to become an actor because every f---ing actor around me was out of work and depressed," he says with a small smile. "All my dad's mates were like, 'Oh, it's a terrible business'."

Donovan is more circumspect. "I'd love to have done a great film. Unfortunately, I made some pretty shit choices early on, and I turned down some jobs that might have gone in the direction to have had a career in film," he says.

"We all want to be sometimes something we're not. I'd love to have done more film work. I've always harboured the idea of writing a great song, and I certainly tried in both those areas. And who's to say in the future that can't happen?" he reflects. "My dad always talked about versatility as a performer, and that's something that I've really taken on board in my life … it's a wonderful, full life when you get to make a living out of it."

In 1984, while he was still in school, he auditioned for *Neighbours* and was offered the part of Danny Ramsay. His teachers encouraged him to drop out and take the role. "I asked Dad, and Dad said, 'You're crazy. Finish school'". So he turned it down. "It killed me!" he exclaims.

The slight anguish of what he said no to still feels fresh in his voice. "That money each week, which wasn't a lot, but it was big in those days – and those cab dockets out to Nunawading …" Instead, Donovan finished school, and *Neighbours*, which was on Channel Seven, tanked. When Channel Ten picked it up, he got a phone call for a different role and didn't hesitate.

He points again to his father's advocacy for more local content, which meant that by the time he got to *Neighbours*, both he and Minogue had solid acting resumes even though they were still in their teens.

"We hit the ground running," he says. "We are all beneficiaries of that … indirectly, probably shows like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* wouldn't have existed. Films like *Priscilla*, *Muriel's Wedding*."

He pauses. "The pool of talent … there's an indirect nod to the work my Dad did in the '70s to make sure we stood tall and proud as Australians and not become the puppet of America and just cheaper imports."

Though he doesn't live in Australia any more, every time Donovan mentions coming back to Melbourne he refers to it as a homecoming. While he is looking forward to taking on one of his most challenging roles to date, the loss of his father means that both the show and all that lies around it look different to what he had imagined.

"Coming home was originally about being able to spend time with him," he says. "He was an avid *Age* reader … I know how much he probably would have loved to have seen this article at his breakfast table with his latte and his toast," Donovan says quietly.

"I see this as an opportunity for me to really show what I'm capable of and what I'm good at," he says. At his very core, Donovan says, he's an actor.

"Which is something I inherited from my dad. This is a moment since what's happened for me to really embody his spirit."

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is at the Athenaeum from November 13 to December 6.