

Film

The LIFE of **RYAN**

It's a long way from making TV in Auckland to being the superstar 'guy on the billboard'. By **Leena Taylor**.

Ryan Gosling is a little miffed. Last March a mysterious doppelganger was photographed around Auckland, sparking nationwide, star-spotting pandemonium. Newspaper headlines sprouted across the country, a Twitter campaign tagged #NZGoslingHunt set celebrity-hunters on a wild goose chase and throngs of women mass-exited downtown offices to see if the actor really was at fashion store World or Ponsonby hotspot SPQR.

While Gosling may not have been privy to the way his supposed presence drove a nation into frenzy, it wasn't long before word of his Down Under 'appearances' reached him.

"You know, I'll tell you what was annoying about that: my friends in New Zealand were very upset with me that I didn't come and say 'Hi,'" he tells *Sunday*. "I spent a lot of time convincing them that it wasn't me and they were like, 'But there's pictures!' And it looked like I was lying... so it was a very unfair situation."

Rewind 13 years and it wouldn't have been too uncommon to see the young Canadian walking the streets of Auckland while living in New Zealand during his stint on *Young Hercules*. The series was the spin-off from Kevin Sorbo's *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and Gosling relocated here for two years to play the younger version of the heroic character.

If Gosling's local star wattage has increased since then, it's only in keeping with what the actor and musician has had to adapt to on a global scale since leaving these shores.



Reflecting on how one photo could set off a storm of interest in his whereabouts, he says the level of intense and inescapable recognition and attention he experiences on a daily basis is still “extremely surreal”.

“I have this friend whose grandmother – and this is the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard of a woman doing – she bathes a lobster in vodka before she boils it. She gets it a little drunk, puts it in the pot then slowly turns up the heat. And then it never knew what hit it.

“I feel like in that analogy I’m both the lobster and the old lady. I kind of somehow did it to myself and now I’m cooking.”

What ignited the showbiz bug in a young Gosling? Watching women fall at the feet of his performer ‘Uncle Perry’ who moved in with the family when Gosling, the youngest of two, was six.

“I remember he started making this big, white jumpsuit then sequinning and bedazzling it. Then he started wearing it around the house. Then he was doing an Elvis voice and singing in the mirror.

“What I didn’t realise at the time was he was becoming an Elvis impersonator in our living room. I was six-years-old watching this happen and it was certainly the most interesting thing going on in the house so I stuck to him like glue.

“Suddenly family members we never saw were coming by and were in the act and I was the head of security – with a gold jacket that said, ‘Elvis Perry Security’. Next thing we’re at this big concert hall in town and the Elvis music starts playing and we’re on stage, there’s people screaming and I’m handing him teddy bears for the ‘Teddy Bear’ song. Then it was over. Everyone went back to their lives and I didn’t know what had just happened.

“In some weird way he taught me how to act because I watched him build the character and I saw what it was like when your life melded with what you were working on – and that your life could be work and your work could be life.

“He had a huge influence on me – his style, theatricality and all those things. He had a moustache, big birth mark, no hair and looked nothing like Elvis but I’ve seen a lot of Elvis impersonators since and he was the best.”

Gosling was spellbound by the possibilities of the entertainment world. By 13 he was on the Disney Channel’s *Mickey Mouse Club* alongside Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears. Helping provide financial support for his family, he went on shows including *Goosebumps* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*



Above: The young Gosling starred in the New Zealand-made *Young Hercules* in 1998 and 1999. Left: In 2006’s *Half Nelson*.

before moving to New Zealand at 17 for *Young Hercules*.

While several movies came afterwards, it wasn’t until director Nick Cassavetes cast him in the 2004 film adaptation of the Nicholas Sparks book *The Notebook* that Gosling’s life took an unexpected turn.

“At the time it was so shocking to me that Nick wanted me to play that part,” he recalls. “Up until then I had played Jewish Nazis, a psychotic killer and weirdos. The idea of playing the romantic lead was not anything I had ever imagined myself doing.

“I’d never been sent for auditions for [those roles] and people who had seen my headshots were like, ‘No.’

“I had tried getting commercials and they thought my face couldn’t sell anything. I was convinced I was going to be a character actor so that’s what I focused on doing, then suddenly Nick Cassavetes wants me to play this romantic lead. He said he wanted me to do it because I wasn’t a handsome leading guy and that’s what he liked about me.

“But then movies brainwash you, and



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Above: As a mysterious stuntman and driver in 2011's *Drive*.
Right: Playing Sergeant Jerry Wooters in *Gangster Squad*.

suddenly I'm being considered one of those guys because of that movie."

Leading-men-of-the-moment come and go but nine years on from *The Notebook*, Gosling has shown staying power, remaining a firm favourite among audiences, co-stars and directors. While he continues to make women drool with *Dirty Dancing* moves in romantic comedies like *Crazy, Stupid, Love* he has also selected roles he can sink his teeth into, such as 2010's indie flick *Blue Valentine*, last year's crime drama *Drive* and his latest offering *Gangster Squad* – which has just opened in New Zealand.

He stars as Sergeant Jerry Wooters, a young cop reluctantly recruited into a secret Los Angeles Police Department squad out to take down the city's notorious gangsters in the 1940s and '50s.

Gosling smoked five packs a day during filming, quitting by the time the shoot was completed. "When Sean Penn hits the punching bag in the movie – that's what it felt like was happening to my lungs. When the movie was over I never wanted to have another cigarette.

"I'm yet to find out if it also works with drinking."

His next project, the Thai boxing film *Only God Forgives* also sees him take a few beatings. "I trained for four months just to get my ass kicked for the entire movie."

Perhaps it's all that blood and violence that prompted the actor, who's dating Hollywood beauty Eva Mendes, to revisit a safer pastime recently – his childhood love of ballet.

It's a move he's well-aware will attract a few frowns and causes him to shift uncomfortably in his Beverly Hills Four Season's Hotel seat when asked what made him start up again.

"I used to do it when I was a kid and always felt like I chickened out. I put the time in but I never saw it through so I tried to go back and keep doing it, but



it's still embarrassing because I'm so bad at it. And I have to take it with little kids and it ruins it for them because they're having this really pure experience and looking at me and I'm ruining everything. They just want me out of the class."

He may not feel welcome in ballet class but there's no denying Gosling is a wanted man in Hollywood. "I used go down the street and see billboards of guys they're trying to sell as leading men and think, 'That guy's not a leading man. No one's going to buy that.' And then suddenly the guy's a huge deal.

"And now I'm the guy on the billboard who's, like, you know... living the lie." ●

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