

# BEHIND THE LINES

**Alex Speed** meets enigmatic screen actor Noah Taylor ahead of his first solo art exhibition

**I**f you came of age in Australia in the 1980s, as I did, you will probably be familiar with the name Noah Taylor. You must also recall *The Year My Voice Broke*, the movie about sexual awakening, teenage angst and unrequited love in a country town that launched the acting career of a gawky-looking kid from St Kilda.

Shot around Braidwood on NSW's sweeping central tablelands, this autobiographical take on the youth of writer and director John Duigan won a slew of AFI awards in 1987. As an impressionable 17-year-old from the sticks, the film spoke to me. Two things remain vividly clear: the way Duigan used the landscape, and particularly clouds, to portray lonely adolescent feelings of isolation; and Taylor's remarkable performance as the tender-hearted misfit Danny.

*The Year My Voice Broke's* success propelled self-proclaimed high-school dropout Taylor into a film career, with supporting roles in 35 films, blockbusters, and indie productions including *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, *Almost Famous*, *Max* (in which he played Hitler), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* and 2011's hit *Red Dog*. And who could forget his brilliantly raw portrayal in 1996 of the adolescent piano prodigy David Helfgott in *Shine*?

Twenty-seven years after his breakthrough role, however, Taylor remains something of an enigma. Despite his acting accomplishments, he is a very private and modest man. He shuns the limelight and speaks infrequently to the media. On the occasions he has, his honesty about life choices and nonchalance about his natural ability have got him into trouble.

Sitting upstairs with Taylor in the Woollahra gallery of Sydney art dealer Tim Olsen a week ago, surrounded by artworks, it becomes clear that while acting is his bread and butter, it has never been Taylor's *raison d'être*.

Among his most personal loves are painting and drawing. Baring his soul to talk about his art might stick in his throat. But his first solo exhibition, 35 paintings in black ink and pastel on paper, opens here this month. And if there is one thing Taylor understands, it is the business of opening nights.

"As a child I was always drawing and doing little comic books and bits of illustration here and there. I was always doodling as a kid. Painting and drawing have always been for my own amusement, though, and I've just given them away to people, friends really, over the years.

"I'm not particularly great at describing my work. Probably because I don't have any formal art training, I'm not really well versed



**FOR ME THERE IS THIS SORT OF WEIRD CONNECTION BETWEEN DRAWING PEOPLE AND ACTING**

NOAH TAYLOR

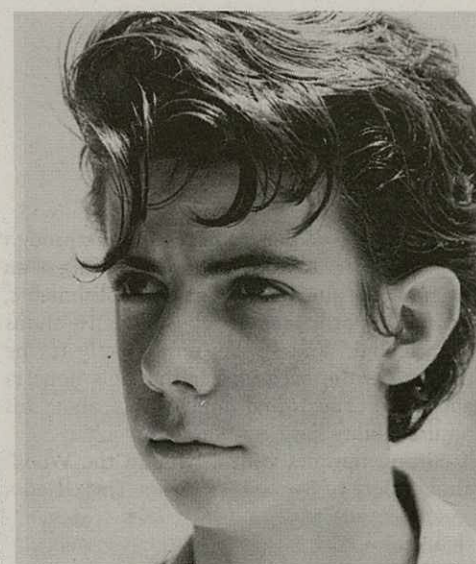
in the language of the art world, but in a way I've never really been a fan of long explanations of what work is supposed to mean. Black line drawing has always been the basis of what I do, simple figurative stuff. I did have a title for the show but I think they have just gone for *New Works*.

"I was going to go for *Dreamland*, which might sound a bit silly but the pictures are subconscious landscapes in a way, and I just like the word."

It's our second conversation in as many weeks. Before Taylor arrived in Sydney, he agreed to a phone interview from Brighton in England, where he lives with his wife, Australian Dionne Harris. He moved to Britain 15 years ago and although Australia is still



Clockwise from main picture, Noah Taylor with artworks that will feature in his exhibition; *Untitled* (2012) by Noah Taylor (ink on paper); a young Taylor in *The Year My Voice Broke*



DAN HIMBRECHTS

home, there are ties that bind him there; Martha, his five-year-old daughter from a previous relationship, lives nearby.

In the flesh, Taylor is as whippet-thin in stovepipe jeans as his responses are guarded and cautious. At 43, he has long outgrown the awkwardness that defined his acting roles as a younger man. His face now has a weathered veneer.

With tattoos and black attire, it is not much of a stretch to imagine him, guitar in hand, strumming frenetically in one of the bands he plays in. Noah Taylor and the Sloppy Boys released a record in Australia, *Live Free or Die!!!*, last year. He also plays in psychedelic punk/country and western band the Rhinestoned Immaculates in pubs around Brighton. Fellow expat Nick Cave is a mate and neighbour in Brighton. Taylor says he has given him a couple of pictures over the years.

"For me there is this sort of weird connection between drawing people and acting. Often if I'm doing a character in a film, one of the first things I will do is sketch how the character looks, and that gives me an idea of how they are physically but also internally, and I've often discovered how to play a certain part via drawings I've done. In the same way when you are drawing a face, you have to feel the emotion of the person you are drawing, and that sort of informs your hand."

From time to time Taylor exhibits his work in Brighton alongside other local artists. He paints mostly in oils or in black ink, in a studio around the corner from his house. When he is not away filming, he can usually be found there. The need to pay bills, he says, forced his hand to begin exploring the possibility of getting more serious about his art.

"To be honest I needed another source of income because acting wasn't paying the bills all the time. Not that I was really looking at my paintings as a solution for a second career, but you have a lot of time on your hands as an

underemployed actor, and I thought I have to start taking other things a bit more seriously. I really hate being bored and doing nothing, so I decided I should focus on things I really love doing. I mean, I enjoy acting but I wouldn't say it's the love of my life or anything. I enjoy doing it but you are dependent on other people to initiate projects. Painting or making music is down to you."

Taylor grew up in St Kilda with parents Maggie and Paul and younger brother Jack. He has memories as a young boy of watching his mother doodle pictures of beautiful women's faces as she talked on the telephone. In contrast, Taylor has always doodled mountains and striking cartoon-like figures. The loneliness of the solitary figure is a recurring theme in his work. His paintings have a naive, slightly unsettling quality; they are seemingly as much about his own introspection as commentary on what he sees around him.

"I was influenced by everything from the Modigliani print above the toilet in my parents' house, to work in the National Gallery [of Victoria], to Mirka Mora's work, which was everywhere in Melbourne when I was growing up."

According to Taylor, he never really intended to become an actor; it was something he simply fell into as student at Melbourne University High and then Swinburne Community School, when he joined some mates in a youth theatre company. He left school at 16, filmed *The Year My Voice Broke* and moved to Sydney.

"In a way my life is dictated by circumstances I fell into as an adolescent. These things in life are often unplanned, especially when you are young and you sort of go along with it."

"I mean, I am not particularly trained in any field. But I have always tried to make my lack of skill my strength because you can be resourceful and work within the parameters of

your lack of expertise, and that can be an advantage in terms of your stuff will look or sound different to other people's."

Taylor has his friend, actor Claudia Karvan, to thank for his first commercial foray into the art world. He shared a flat with Karvan's husband, Jeremy Sparks, in Sydney in his younger years. The three remain close, and it was Karvan who first asked Tim Olsen to take a look at Taylor's work.

"Noah is very reserved and unassuming about his art and in everything he does — it's part of his persona," Olsen says. He adds that he believes an element of uncertainty in Taylor's art, like his acting, is a strong part of his appeal.

"He is really someone who is a voyeur of

emotions in the same way Edvard Munch was able to look at the human condition. He could see straight through the bullshit of people, and Noah has the same kind of thing," Olsen says.

"As an artist he has got away without having to go to art school because the courage and honesty of his work has not been polluted by ... trying to be over-stylistic or sophisticated. There is a naive quality to his painting and yet they have a lively freshness. You sense they are largely autobiographical. They also provide a minimalist social commentary, so there are all these paradoxes at play."

Accustomed to film critics, Taylor says he is ready for public opinion on his painting. Nonetheless, he says he is pleased family and friends will be present on opening night. He only hopes he doesn't get mistaken again for his old friend, actor Ben Mendelsohn, who also played in *The Year My Voice Broke*.

"I got asked if I was Ben Mendelsohn for times the other night in the same pub. I don't know if he is asked if he is Noah Taylor a lot, but I hope so, because it is bloody annoying."

Straight after the art show's opening, Taylor flies to Georgia, in the Caucasus region, for another movie set: the film *Epic*.

"When I was younger, fear of people's reactions stopped me doing things I really loved doing. And then I just got older ... I did this for myself, really. If people like my stuff that's great; and if they don't, I'm not over concerned. I think you just have to let the work speak for itself."

**New Works by Noah Taylor**, Tim Olsen Gallery, Woollahra, Sydney, January 29 to February 17.