

Golden boy

It has already been a rollercoaster ride for 30-year-old Zac Efron but, as **Jan Janssen** reports, Hollywood’s brightest star is now rising – and on the highway to immortality

Baywatch may have bombed, but don’t count Zac Efron out. The California golden boy has both the talent and the ambition to overcome tepid summer popcorn fare.

Having already established both his comic and dramatic credentials in the raucous Neighbors films, and more ambitious roles such as *The Paperboy* and *Me and Orson Welles*, it’s only a matter of time before he lands a long-sought career-defining project.

Efron, who turned 30 this year, may well have already discovered that game-changing propellant in the upcoming musical drama, *The Greatest Showman*, which traces the rise of P.T. Barnum. With Hugh Jackman as title character, Efron occupies the pivotal role of his partner who falls in love with an ethereally beautiful trapeze artist played by Zendaya (Stoermer Coleman). Also starring Michelle Williams and Rebecca Ferguson, the big budget film marks Efron’s

musical comeback after an introduction to Hollywood as the youthful star of Disney’s High School Musical trilogy.

“I grew up inspired by films like *Singing in The Rain* so my heart is never very far away from that genre,” Efron said.

“For me, there’s always a kind of magic to that kind of world because it enables you to let your imagination run wild, and there’s a special spirit that comes with those stories.”

The prospect of seeing Efron match his vocal prowess, against Jackman (*Les Misérables*) and Zendaya, already has critics touting *The Greatest Showman* as this year’s *La La Land*. It is poised for the same Christmas release publicity blitz that proved the springboard to an Oscar scoop for Damien Chazelle’s 2016 musical.

The deeply reflective and congenial Efron has always remained quietly confident in his abilities, despite those who doubted whether he could ever make the transition from teen sex symbol to respected actor. In his early twenties, he deliberately avoided roles that tried to exploit that image as a way of establishing dramatic credentials.

“I wanted to do something different with my career. Money was never the key thing for me. My goal was to do dramas and slowly build my career by finding good roles and working

Below: Zac Efron back to his best at the 2017 MTV Video Music Awards in California

with a lot of talented actors. That’s how you learn your craft and show people that you can do serious work. I’m very grateful that my earlier [High School Musical] films opened so many doors for me, but I always knew that it would take time to get people to accept me in a different light.”

The past decade has seen Efron struggle with both the failure of his indie film career to ignite – *Parkland*, *Charlie St. Cloud*, and *At Any Price* all disappeared without



a trace into a DVD abyss – and acknowledged struggles with alcohol and drugs that landed him in rehab in 2013.

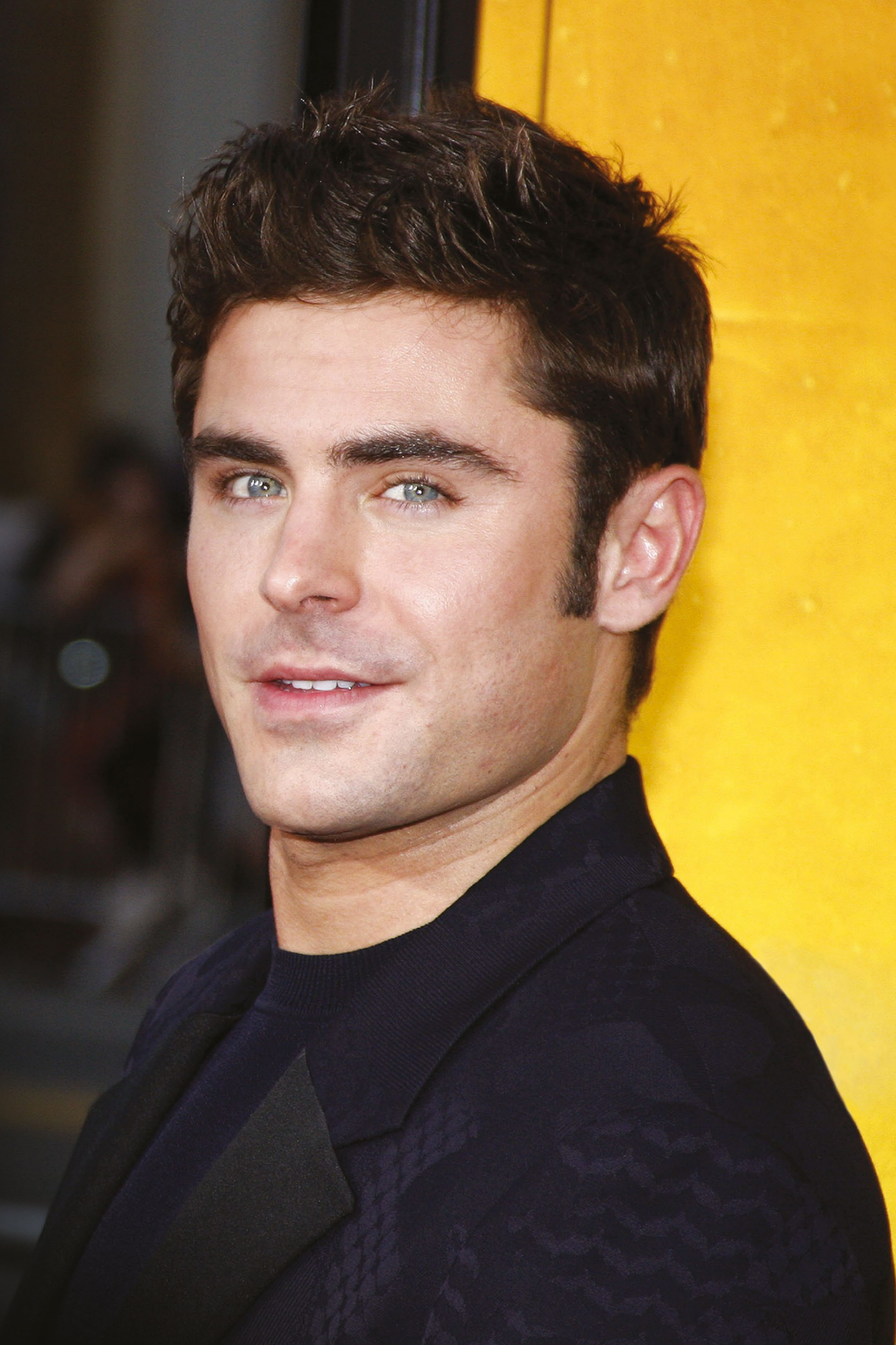
He confessed to suffering from a mild form of anxiety and despairing of fame. But after going to therapy and rekindling his relationship with his family, Efron was able to get life back on track.

“I was drinking a lot, way too much,” said Efron about that personal dead zone he experienced: “But it’s never one specific thing. I mean, you’re in your 20s, single, going through life in Hollywood, you know? Everything is thrown at you.

“I had done films back-to-back-to-back. I was burnt out. Work started to become the reason to go anywhere, the reason to talk to anybody... my hobbies went out the window... But going to therapy changed my life. I’m much more comfortable in my own skin. Things are so much easier now.”

Immediately, Efron went on a massive fitness kick that saw him transform his physique while embarking on a parallel journey of committed self-reflection and a fresh new outlook. Ironically, the film that dragged him out of the slump was *Neighbors* – the raucous Seth Rogen comedy that saw him play an arrogant, outrageous frat leader. Critics loved Efron’s return and the film went on to become the surprise summer hit of 2014.

“I probably had more fun working on the original *Neighbors* than I have on any movie,” Efron observed. “It’s hard to pull off that kind of raunchy comedy and not go too over the top. But Seth is one of the great comic geniuses in our business and the atmosphere he created on that film was ➤





Above: Zac Efron admits to experiencing tougher times that landed him in rehab in 2013, but working on *Neighbors* with Seth Rogan after therapy marked a genuine turnaround

one of the reasons that audiences loved it so much.

"We never expected it to be that big of a hit and I don't think anyone anticipated it to do so well. But Rose [Byrne] and Seth were so good in it and it was the kind of role that allowed me to get back into comedy after trying to prove myself in a lot of dramas. It was while I was working on *Neighbors* that I realised how much I loved comedy."

Efron had stumbled upon his niche as a skilled comic performer and over the last three years, he has appeared in one raunchy studio film after another; *Dirty Grandpa* (opposite Robert De Niro), *Neighbors 2*, *Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates*, and... *Baywatch*. Though the latter may have been a horribly

misguided attempt at recapturing the spirit of the original television series, Efron felt inspired by working with his hulking co-star Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson.

"No one can match Dwayne's energy and dedication – the man is unstoppable... But once you've done [the intensive training], you feel a great sense of accomplishment and you want to be able to keep pushing yourself like that. That's another reason I have so much respect for Dwayne; he has such incredible drive and an optimistic spirit that is truly inspiring. He's awesome!"

Baywatch also pushed Efron to set the bar even higher on an already prodigious fitness regimen that underpins his post-rehab wellness. Getting into other-worldly shape reinforced a belief that his reinvigorated state of mind owes much to the feeling of achievement that has come with his near-obsession with working out.

"I've discovered that I can push myself harder than I thought was possible," Efron said.

"You have this incredible sense of confidence in your body and what you feel you're capable of."

His fitness fetish has rekindled the youthful sense of determination he displayed as a teenager growing up Arroyo Grande, a small town on the outskirts the central California city of San Luis Obispo. Efron's father, David, an electrical engineer who graduated from the California Maritime Academy, was a man who tried to impress a tireless work ethic upon Zac and his younger brother Dylan. Meanwhile his former secretarial mother, Starla, provided the kind of nurturing and "very loving" attention that imparted much of what his fans perceive to be his sense of gentlemanly graciousness and generosity.

Efron's performing career took shape after his dad overheard him singing Michael Jackson word and note-perfect.

Worried about his son's disdain for school sports and similar character-building extra-curricular activities, David pushed

him to take singing and acting classes as a way of developing discipline, as well as an obvious talent for performing.

"My dad's a rock," said Efron. "He is in every sense a 'man's man'. He raised us with a firm hand and instilled in us that, 'If you're going to do something, do it right.' With him behind me, I could excel at anything. He was very driven, very motivated. He always had us doing something. You could say he was strict. But to this day, there's nobody that I go to more for advice. He's probably the best guy I know."

"I was very lucky that my family was so supportive of me. When things would get chaotic, I could always turn ➤

'AS YOU GET OLDER, YOU NEED TO FIND GOOD FRIENDS WHO ARE REAL... I ALWAYS HAD CONFIDENCE FROM KNOWING THAT I HAD MY FAMILY BEHIND ME'
ZAC EFRON



to them to keep calm and stay grounded. That's very important when you're getting a lot of attention and still figuring out who you are. Then as you get older, you need to find good friends who are real. Friends you know you can count on. But I think I always had the kind of confidence that comes from knowing that I had my family behind me."

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Oddly, Zac's artistic ambitions seemed stalled after he appeared in a local production of *Gypsy* that ran 90 performances. Subsequent auditions for other plays and TV shows led to nothing until his mother dropped him off in her mini-van "somewhere in North Hollywood" where she had read they were casting for a studio film.

That film turned out to be Disney's *High School Musical* which would turn Efron into the hottest young star in America and also led to a romance with his co-star, Vanessa Hudgens.

Curiously, Zac has never found another woman who has been able to match the intensity of that first great love of his life. His most recent relationship with model/stylist Sami Miro fizzled

out after two years in 2016 amid *Baywatch* preparations and Efron has admitted that his typically serious, romantic side makes it difficult to commit "to being in a relationship that I can't be 100 per cent there for that person all the time."

Not that things are likely to become any easier in the near future. Efron will soon begin work on arguably his most difficult acting test yet – playing serial killer Ted Bundy in the upcoming thriller *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. It's the kind of extreme role that he hopes will satisfy his interrupted mission and long-standing ambition to do serious drama.

True to form, Efron's thoughts are informed by that same boyish sense of earnest ambition that has stayed with him his entire life.

"I like to think I'm pretty adventurous and I set the bar as high as possible for myself.

Left: Efron at the *Baywatch* premiere in May 2017 Below: A 22 year-old Zac Efron with *High School Musical* co-star and then-girlfriend, Vanessa Hudgens, at the 81st Annual Academy Awards

"Earlier in my career, I probably took my responsibility towards my work – and all the young fans I had – too seriously. I put too much pressure on myself and now I try to be more present each day and be more open to what I'm doing rather than worrying about everything else that comes with my work.

"But I'm so grateful for the kind of life that performing and acting has given me. I will always appreciate how much people have enjoyed my work. I chose this life and it gives me a lot of joy to know that I have fans who have been very loyal and supportive of me over the years." ■

