

From a land down under

Once upon a time in Australia, a young woman called Margot Robbie set her heart on an acting career in Los Angeles. Harold von Kursk tells her story from a farm in Queensland's hinterland, to leading Hollywood actor and producer.

It took the collapse of *Pan Am* to launch Australian actress Margot Robbie on a trajectory to stardom.

Not the legendary airline that went bankrupt 30 years ago, but the namesake TV series that was cancelled in 2012 after only one season. That freed up Robbie, one of the stars of the ill-fated show, to play Leonardo DiCaprio's tempestuous trophy wife in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*. What eventuated was a film that marked not only her American screen breakthrough, but also established her as a rising star in the industry.

Since then, Robbie has gone on to collect two Oscar nominations, establish a thriving production company, and become a cult favourite with her portrayal of the *Suicide Squad*'s deliriously deranged Harley Quinn. "In Hollywood I often feel like a little girl in a candy store," Robbie says.

"Growing up I never knew that acting was a realistic career option. I was a little girl from Dalby [more than 200-kilometres inland from Brisbane, in country Queensland] who thought that only Americans could become famous actors, even though there were several major stars who came from my country.

"What's also funny is that when I started acting my family thought it was a hobby. It took them a few

years to understand that it's a real profession, and only when they came to visit me in New York, and I showed them the giant poster of *The Wolf of Wall Street* in Times Square, that they became convinced that I was never going to go to university," she recalls, laughing.

Robbie has proven to be an unstoppable force in the film industry. When she was having trouble finding grittier roles owing to her glamorous image, she decided to start developing and producing her own projects. Together with her London flatmates (including aspiring director Tom Ackerley, whom she would later marry), she established LuckyChap Entertainment in 2014. The company's first major venture was *I, Tonya*, the film that starred Robbie as disgraced U.S. figure skater Tonya Harding.

Not only did that project earn her a best actress Academy Award nomination but it also allowed her to avoid being trapped in more glamorous kinds of roles. She even mocked her *Wolf* image with her sensational appearance in

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The Big Short, director Adam McKay's inspired adaptation of Michael Lewis' eponymous book on the 2008 global financial crisis. In a brief but memorable scene, Robbie is shown sipping champagne while relaxing in a bubble bath where she is called upon to explain the mechanics of subprime mortgages while staring into the camera and speaking directly to the audience.

Producing *I, Tonya* served as a crash course on film financing for Robbie, and that paved the way for the gradual expansion of her company to the point where the film industry's leading publication, *Hollywood Reporter*, anointed her as one of its "Producers of the Year" in December 2020. The honour came in recognition for LuckyChap's *Promising Young Woman*, one of last year's most critically acclaimed movies that saw Carey Mulligan earn an Oscar nomination for a role that Robbie chose not to take on. "We never started a company to be a starring vehicle for me or to be a platform for me to chase my dreams," Robbie said.

"It was really that we wanted to expand what female stories and female storytellers could do in this industry, and I don't

Right: Margot Robbie at the L.A. premiere of *The Legend Of Tarzan* at Hollywood's Dolby Theatre in 2016

need to be onscreen for that to happen.

"But it's a wonderful position to be in, since my platform can also open some of those doors. And especially at the beginning, there were a lot of first- and second-time filmmakers that we wanted to work with, and you can't get something greenlit without a bankable name attached. I'm so lucky to fall into that bracket [of bankable names]. But I'm not right for every role."

Robbie does, however, tend to soar in virtually every part she gets to play. A prime example was her portrayal of Sharon Tate in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Her performance was so compelling that Tarantino was forced to defend himself against critics who argued that he had short-changed both Robbie and audiences by not giving her more screen time compared to that of the film's male stars, Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt.

Although Tarantino likely underestimated Robbie's magnetic appeal, the actress herself downplayed the controversy – even though she only appears in 30 minutes of the sprawling 160-minute film. "The moments that I got on screen gave me an opportunity to honour Sharon and the likeness. I don't think it was intended to delve deeper... The tragedy was ultimately the loss of innocence, and I think I got ▶





a lot of time to explore the character, even without dialogue specifically.”

Robbie however occupies a far more prominent place in her latest film, *The Suicide Squad*, the summer blockbuster that marks the reboot of the franchise and allows her to indulge in Harley Quinn’s most wicked, scene-stealing impulses. “I’m drawn to her sense of humour,” Robbie explains.

“She loves to provoke the people around her using her knowledge as a psychiatrist is such a fun aspect to her. I also love how unpredictable she is, it kind of gives you the leeway to react any way you want from one scene to the next. The fun of acting is getting to do and say

Above: Margot Robbie with Rodrigo Santoro and Will Smith at the L.A. premiere of *Focus* in 2015

what you can’t in real life and Harley definitely has no filters.”

Harley is merely the latest amongst several intense characters that the 31-year-old Robbie gravitates towards. Apart from channelling the tormented Tonya Harding, she threw herself into playing Queen Elizabeth I, one of England’s most illustrious and longest reigning monarchs in 2018’s *Mary, Queen of Scots*. Robbie confesses to having had doubts about taking on a role previously inhabited by one of her screen idols, Cate Blanchett, in the 1998 film, *Elizabeth*. “I was terrified about playing a character that has been played by some of the greatest actresses in history, including Cate Blanchett, who is my absolute acting idol,” Robbie says.

“I was also worried about playing a Queen and I thought it

would probably be better if they hired another actress who came from a theatre school background and had done a lot of Shakespeare. But in the end it was the kind of challenge that I decided I should take on.”

Raised by her physiotherapist single mother Sarie Kessler (Margot’s father left the family when she was a baby) on a farm in the mountainous hinterland of Australia’s Gold Coast, Robbie thrived on spending most of her day outdoors.

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“It was a perfect environment for kids. My siblings and I went boar hunting and surfing, and I grew up learning more about agriculture and animal husbandry than you could imagine. It was not the kind of upbringing that you could ever have expected would lead anyone into acting...”

Margot was an independent-minded and often stubborn child who liked doing things her way, even when it came to making her own school lunches when she didn’t like the way her mother prepared her sandwiches: “If I wanted something a certain way I just did it myself. Mum says that sums me up”.

She also remains devoted to her mother and regards her as the best role model any young woman could have. “My mum has been a great example for me. She was a single mother raising my brothers ▶



and my sister and I by herself and we didn't make life easy for her. We were always fighting and my mum had to be a very strong woman to hold things together. She's an amazing woman... a saint who put everyone else first."

Robbie admits that her mother's spirit and determination has helped fuel her own relentless ambition. After moving to Melbourne aged 17, with no verifiable acting credentials, she spent several months pestering the producers of Australia's long-running *Neighbours* series into casting her. She would spend three years learning her craft on the show and impressed everyone with her natural-born acting talent. By 2011 she had enough money to finance the Hollywood dream, quitting *Neighbours* and boarding a plane to L.A. five days later. "[It] wasn't scary for some reason," she recalled.

"I think that was because I was financially set up by then. If anything went wrong I could always pay for a cab to the airport and buy a ticket to go back home."

There is little doubt that Robbie is not only naturally driven to succeed, but is also highly skilled at putting herself in a position to accomplish her goals. "I'm the kind of person who if you tell me that something is impossible, I'm going to do everything in my power to prove you wrong and make it happen. Even when the idea of a girl from the Gold Coast [Australia] making it in Hollywood seemed like a wild dream, that made me want to succeed a thousand times more."

Her LuckyChap production outfit is well positioned to fulfill that quest. She's also managed the difficult task of running a company together with her husband, despite the inherent risks that entails. "I've been told my many people in showbiz that it's usually a pretty bad idea to work with loved ones and close friends. But I don't see it that way. I think it's a huge advantage for me to work with Tom because we love each other and know each other so well that we enjoy being able to develop and work on projects together..."

"We wound up making *I, Tonya* instead of going on our honeymoon [because] we were committed to pursuing our dream of doing the film. But as soon as the film was over we made up for it and it was great!"

Their commitment has paid off handsomely. Fresh from the success of *Promising Young Woman*, which earned five Oscar nominations, LuckyChap is now producing the forthcoming *Barbie* adaptation directed by Greta Gerwig (*Little Women*, *Lady Bird*) which will star Robbie in the title role.

Given the feminist spirit that infuses both Robbie and Gerwig, the film will certainly not be your mother's vision of the iconic children's dress-up doll. "We like the things that feel a little left of centre," revealed Robbie.

"[We're giving] fans something totally different."

Above: Robbie at the *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* Cannes photocall with DiCaprio and Pitt

The production is merely one of 20 projects currently in development at her company which has first-look deals in place at Warner Bros. (for feature films) and Amazon Studios (for TV series). Robbie regards her parallel evolution as a Hollywood mogul as an extension of her commitment to giving women a greater voice in the industry. "My goal is to collaborate with many talented women of my generation and as a matter of policy our production company is 50 per cent women and 50 per cent men..."

"Women are often seen as competing against each other for the best roles and the best jobs and I think that's ridiculous and absolutely not true.

"I would like to prove that a group of girls of the same generation can work together and accomplish great things."

Judging by Margot Robbie's implacable sense of ambition and determination, we would expect nothing less. ■