

DOWN from the high country and the battle that the stock-horse snuffs with delight comes John Waters, horseman, actor, singer, dancer, guitarist, and longtime favorite of the 'Play School' mothers, ready to cast aside his Clancy hat and display yet another of his talents.

The handsomely scarred Waters, who has been riding with the mountain men for a Kerry Packer telemovie, is to put aside the derring-do next Tuesday and Wednesday to narrate Ogden Nash's 'The Nutcracker' at the Melbourne Concert Hall, accompanied by the 43-piece Melbourne Concert Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite.

"It's a family Christmas thing and I'm looking forward to it," Waters says, looking fit and relaxed at his home in the Sydney suburb of Mosman. "Melbourne does stage these kind of events so much better than Sydney. It's part of that atmosphere of Melbourne that really is rather nice."

"I haven't seen the Arts Centre hall yet, haven't been there, but I do remember how much fun it was doing that free concert at the Myer Music Bowl with Jacki Weaver. It was the biggest 'house' I've played to... 20,000 people!"

Waters, of course, was seen recently diving into the Murray to impress Sigrid Thornton in the Seven Network's drama miniseries 'All The Rivers Run', and he has been busy battling through 'High Country', the telemovie that has already been dubbed "Son of The Man from Snowy River".

Yes, he always appears to be active, but isn't it a little surprising that there have been so few feature films?

"Well, it's really just sort of worked out that way," he says. "I started doing feature films at the very early part of our film renaissance, in the early 1970s, and haven't done anything much since except that cameo role in 'Breaker Morant' — 1978 or something like that, wasn't it?"

"That hasn't been such a bad thing, because I think our films have, with a few notable exceptions, gone through something of a slump. We were waiting for a good feature film, but there aren't that many roles that I think would have suited me or that I have missed by involvement with a play."

There are, however, projects he wants to see get off the drawing board. One is a movie called 'Going Sane', a black comedy about a businessman who decides to drop out of the everyday madness of the business world, worrying all his friends with his new approach to life. It needs backers.

Another yet-to-be-produced movie awaiting investors is 'Kimberley', a film written by the Australian screenwriter he most admires, Peter Schreck. It is set in the north-west and revolves around a stockman's resentment of the way the Territory is being taken over.

It was Schreck who wrote the screenplay for 'We Of The Never Never', not, Waters feels, one of the writer's greatest achievements, but a fine indication of what could be done with the adaptation of a book.

"The way Peter crafts a screenplay is fantastic," he says. "I can see it on the screen when I read it. He writes sparingly, but his dialogue is the best I've read because it is speakable, believable... real. Whether he consciously thinks about it or not, he uses powerful images all the way through his writing."

Given the chance, Waters would like to appear in "a really good, dirty spy movie". Not a James Bond-style spoof. He detests "the Mickey Mouse area into which Bond has gone". But to play a shabby spy living rough in a seedy South-East Asian scenario... well that would be exciting.

The spy genre appeals to him, and if nothing turns up, he says, he might even write such a screenplay himself.

John Waters is never far from music. In the corner of the front room of his house is a bass guitar; it is a reminder of youth in sixties England when he played around London in a moderately successful rock group called The Riot Squad. On a mantelpiece is a more obvious sign of musical recognition; he seems pleased to have his attention drawn to it.

Interview

Brian Courtis

"I'm one of the few actors to have a gold record," he says. "That's in recognition of 'They're Playing Our Song' [the musical in which he starred with Jacki Weaver]... a gold record for the show. I was just absolutely tickled pink by that."

"It meant more to me than the Logies or anything. It was so good to have that because I do enjoy music so much."

Waters has a particular, and well-aided, passion for the songs of Jacques Brel. Whenever he gets the opportunity (more often than not as the guest in a variety show) he will try to work in a Brel number. A one-man Brel show is something else he would like to turn to in the future.

But all these dreams will have to wait. Next year he is back on stage again, playing a teacher of the deaf in the hit play 'Children Of A Lesser God'.

The role will require immense concentration from the actor and he says he will prepare for it by being "monk-like" for some time before rehearsals.

"I won't be able to party on, get boozed, or do the sorts of things we sometimes like to do to ourselves, because you just can't afford it," he says. "You have to concentrate on the job at hand, and to get myself into gear for that will be more a mental exercise than anything else."

"Part of this job is looking at what is coming up and what is required of you, and preparing for it accordingly. I set out to make sure I'm at peak ability when we begin. That is something I take very seriously."

'High Country', the television film for PBL Productions, has left him tanned, trim, and pleased at his efforts back in the saddle. Apart from some trail rides with his daughter Rebecca, he had enjoyed little riding since his days on 'Rush'. The film, which may be a pilot for a series, has him enthused with riding once more.

"It was great fun to do," Waters says. "I enjoyed it immensely, but it also let me meet some fantastic people. Those mountain cattlemen are great guys with a fantastic lifestyle."

Versatility. That has been the essence of Waters's career in television as well as on stage. One year an axe murderer or child molester in 'Homicide', the next the smiling host of 'Play School'. In January he will be making more episodes of 'Play School' for the ABC. "I just love doing it," he says.

What does he still want from his career? What of his skills have still to be allowed their full potential? Writing and directing, perhaps. That is an area he would like to explore. He is testing out his writing talent by working on a screenplay with a friend.

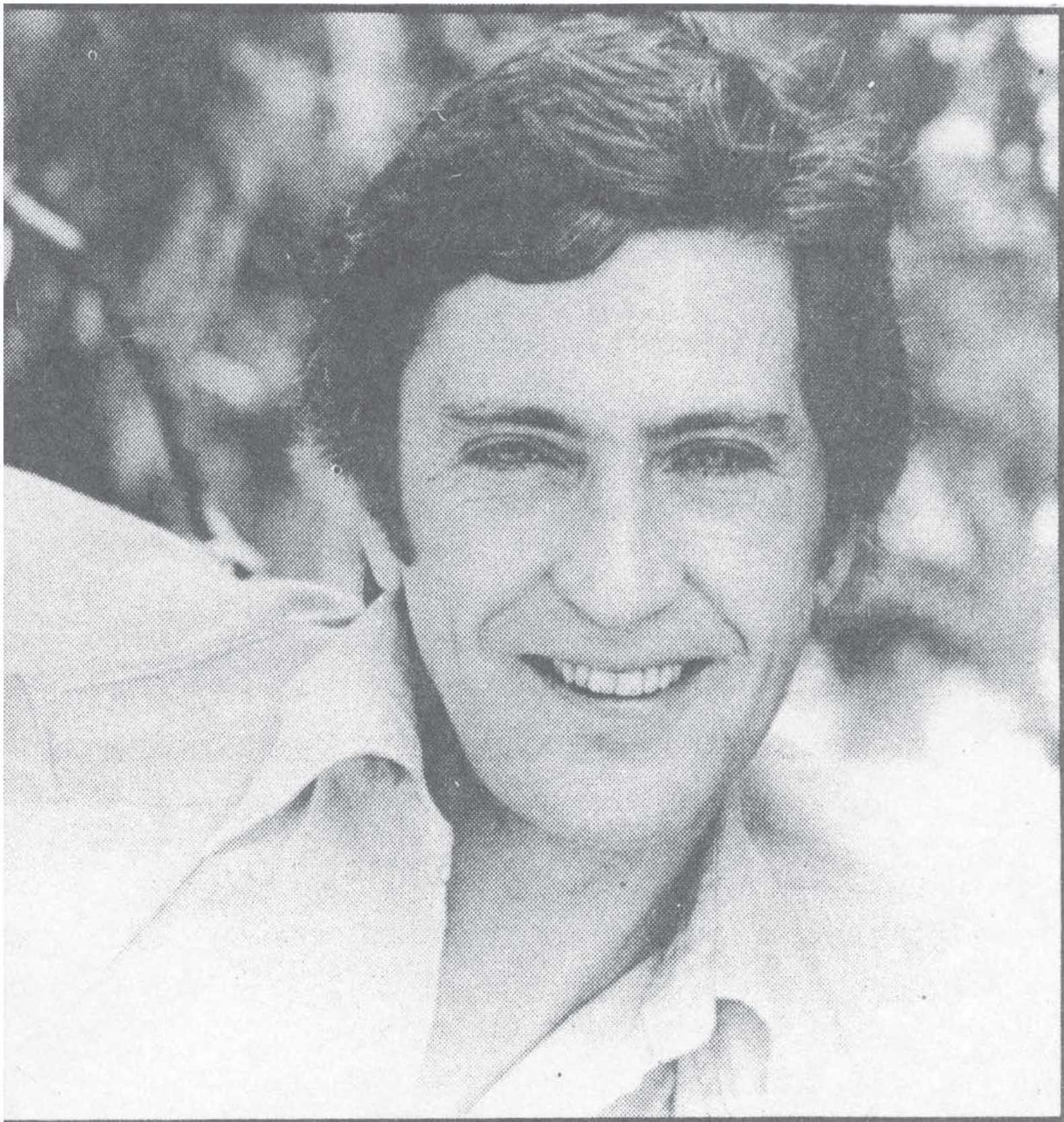
"After a while as an actor, I suppose, you get to feel you would like to hold the reins," he explains. "I'm no exception. I would like to envisage, create, and actually put into effect something I've thought up. If someday I can be accepted that way as well as for my acting, that would be fine."

He is, however, quick to acknowledge that show business has been rewarding. There are not here the six-figure contracts of which American performers boast, but, well, work hard and be lucky and you can be comfortable. And there are other values.

"I'm hooked on performing," Waters says. "I don't want gongs, financial rewards and plaudits, but I do drink in that applause when I appear on the stage. That is the most incredibly satisfying thing you can ever have done to you, and people who have never enjoyed it have missed out on a great buzz."

"When 'They're Playing Our Song' went on for two years, people said to me it must be getting tedious. In some ways it was, but, still, every night Jacki and I walked out on to a stage and convulsed 1500 people with laughter, entertained them... well that applause, what they gave us, was a feeling that was just like walking on clouds."

"That is what this is all about."



John Waters: never far from music.