

## Update

# The fight of his life

With the shock news that *Spartacus* star Andy Whitfield's cancer has returned, Sarah Lang recalls an interview days earlier in which he was celebrating the all-clear.

**L**AST SUNDAY, news filtered through that Andy Whitfield, who plays the fetchingly sculpted gladiator at the heart of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, had stood down from the hit show. His non-Hodgkin's lymphoma had returned.

When I interviewed the Auckland-based actor just 10 days before the announcement, he was upbeat, speaking of getting the all-clear from the cancer and getting on with the show and his life. Reading the news online, I felt shock and sadness. "It's with a deep sense of disappointment that I must step aside from such an exceptional project as *Spartacus* and all the wonderful people involved," said his statement. "It seems that it is time for myself and my family to embark on another extraordinary journey. Thank you sincerely for the support so far."

When we talked, Whitfield came across as a down-to-earth, lovely guy utterly unaffected by the trappings of fame. The 36-year-old with the hybrid Welsh-Aussie accent spoke candidly of what a shock that initial diagnosis was.

In February, he thought he was in the best shape of his life, with a smoking-hot career, young family and everything to look forward to. But just as *Spartacus* was breaking ratings records in America, and as the second season was about to start filming in Auckland, its star was diagnosed with cancer after a routine checkup.

Whitfield and life-coach wife Vashti decided to stay in Auckland, where *Spartacus* is shot and their 5-year-old son was starting school (their daughter is 2). "I went straight into chemotherapy and was in remission a couple of months later." A gruelling experience, but this guy has a knack for seeing the positive in everything. "You've probably heard this before, but it [cancer] is such a

perspective-giver that I don't regret it. I got so much out of it, I learned so much. You realise what's important." And that's soaking up every moment. "I got to spend months and months with my children, getting my son into school and my daughter talking, and how many dads get to do that?"

Whitfield spoke of his gratitude to executives of show producer Starz network for delaying filming and sticking with him through his ordeal. "They were left with a dilemma: we're about to start season two and what the hell do we do?" With cast, crew and giant Mt Wellington warehouses booked in, they hit on a bloody good idea. "To make a six-ep prequel which will keep the brand alive," Whitfield explained. *Spartacus: Gods of The Arena* is the back story of gladiator owner-operators Batiatus (John Hannah) and the lusty Lucretia (Lucy Lawless) before they buy Spartacus.

The plan was for Whitfield to be back at work shooting season two in October. Unfortunately that is not to be.

The question is, will the show go on without him? As Whitfield said of the decision to postpone season two, Starz could have

recast. "It's hard to ask an audience to accept a different person, but if they had no alternative..." Starz isn't commenting yet on what form, if any, the second season will take. Said Starz President/CEO Chris Albrecht: "Our hearts and prayers are with Andy and his family during this difficult time. He is an amazing human being whose courage, strength and grace in the face of adversity have inspired all of us." A little like the real Spartacus inspired his fellow men.

*Spartacus* is loosely based on the true story of a Thracian gladiator who from 73-71 BC led an uprising of 120,000 slaves against the Roman Republic. Spartacus the soldier is captured and condemned to

fight as a gladiator, thanks to nasty old Legatus Glaber (Craig Parker).

For Whitfield, a former photographer and model who'd been juggling engineer work with TV acting gigs, *Spartacus* was his big break. He landed the role after a global search for a gifted actor who'd so far flown under Hollywood's radar. Five auditions later, they said yes. "It was my introduction to America and that's never going to be a bad thing for your career." Not when there are nine million *Spartacus* viewers in the States alone.

It wasn't just a dream role because it led to decent pay, international fame and numerous work offers. "It's also because it's such a cinematic show, with such emotional complexity. You get to play characters who have enormous stakes: life and death."

High stakes accentuated by an almost-operatic aesthetic with its slow-mo battle scenes, surreal spurting blood, and moments frozen in time. "They really pushed the graphic-novel look so you're slightly protected from the gratuity [of the violence]," said Whitfield.

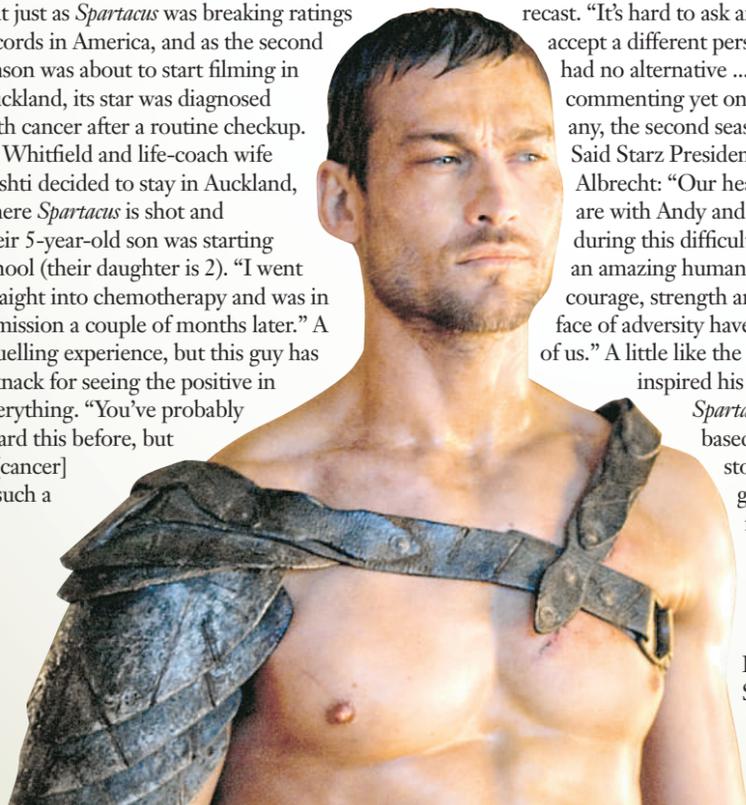
He had to sign up for a punishing training regime. Gladiator boot camp. Four hours a day of training with weights and stuntmen was emotionally and physically draining. "A month wasn't very long to get into Spartacus shape. We're naked pretty much, apart from that tiny Speedo." Yes, the steamy sex scenes took some getting used to. "There's all these people staring at you, so the best you can do is try to forget about that and submit to whatever is required."

He also had to get used to stares offset, though the attention in Auckland is nothing compared to America. "I was in LA recently and I couldn't walk anywhere without someone harassing me. That was kinda freaky."

But he said: "It's not a real world. People get attached to my character, not me."

But fans are attached to the actor who is facing his own life-and-death struggle. Since the first diagnosis, Whitfield was blown away by the support from fans. And after last week's news, hundreds more messages were posted on fansites, such as this from Angel in Washington D.C.: "Andy has a strength that I know will overcome. You have captured our hearts Andy Whitfield, and I know you will be back."

*Spartacus: Blood And Sand* screens Sundays on Sky's The Box (digital 5) at 9.30pm and repeats on Fridays at 10.30pm.



## Cover story

**I**T TAKES a while, sometimes, for an actor to accustom himself to the set of a film.

For Ryan Reynolds, however, the primary set of his new film, *Buried*, was particularly hard to get used to.

That's because at just over 2m long and made of thick pine wood, it was a coffin in which the 1.88m actor would spend most of the film.

"It's strange to be a healthy young man who willingly is on the precipice of his own demise," Reynolds says. "My biggest concern was the thick lid. It was bad enough to get in the coffin, but I didn't want some slow sliding-closed of the lid. I said, 'Just go for it. No slow immersion. Bury me.'"

The 33-year-old Reynolds scored with last year's romantic-comedy hit *The Proposal*, which starred Sandra Bullock, but Rodrigo Cortes' *Buried*, set to open October 7, may kick his career to a whole new level.

The film casts him as Paul Conroy, an American truck driver struggling to get by until he is enticed by the chance to make three times his salary working in Iraq. Things seem to be looking up until he is yanked off the street during an ambush, buried in the aforementioned coffin and held for \$1 million ransom. If his company doesn't pay within a few hours, the kidnappers will let him die underground.

In other words, he had no choice but to get used to the coffin, because he was going to spend the entire movie there.

"I couldn't take it," he recalls. "I started to hyperventilate the minute the lid was closed. I started breathing so heavily that I passed out for a few minutes. That happened several times during filming."

Conroy's only resources are a cellphone and a Zippo lighter.

"Opening the Zippo actually made things worse," the actor reports, "because now I could see the very few inches of space around me. The walls were literally closing in."

Reynolds sighs. He attended the *Buried* debut at the Toronto Film Festival the night before this interview, and it had left him both exhausted and exhilarated.

"I watched the film for the second time at the Toronto Film Festival," he says, "and, when we walked out, my suit was in completely different shape. It was all wrinkled and twisted, because watching myself in a coffin twisted me up inside. I got emotional and started twisting the sleeves of my suit. I don't know if I can watch myself again in this film."

Watching the film gave him bad flashbacks, the actor admits.

"The biggest freak-out moment for me was when I actually turn myself around in the coffin," he says. "I had to look away. I finished the take and said, 'There is no way I could do that again. I hope you got it.'"

The film's reception at Toronto surprised and gratified Reynolds, who was raised in Vancouver.

"I didn't think anyone would ever see

## Showbiz

## Blackballed in Hollywood

Indian actors only play terrorists or geeks, says *Slumdog* star. By Anita Singh.

**H**OLLYWOOD IS institutionally racist, according to Dev Patel, the *Slumdog Millionaire* star, who claims Indian actors are limited to roles as terrorists, taxi drivers or geeks.

When the film about the Mumbai slums became the surprise hit of last year, winning eight Oscars, it was expected that Patel's career would take off.

But the 20-year-old Londoner, who shot to fame in TV's youth drama *Skins* and currently stars in *The Last Airbender*, has been frustrated by the lack of decent roles on offer.

"For my second film, I wanted a role

that would stretch me, but all I was getting offered were stereotypical parts like the goofy Indian sidekick. Indian actors tend not to be sent Hollywood scripts that are substantial or challenging. I'm likely to be offered the roles of a terrorist, cab driver and smart geek.

"I want to show that I have versatility. You have to remember that, before *Slumdog*, the last film about India that went big at the Oscars was *Gandhi*, as played by Ben Kingsley. The fact that me and Freida have any kind of platform in Hollywood is a big step forward."

Freida Pinto played Patel's love interest in *Slumdog* and is now his real-life girlfriend. The

Indian-born former model has had more success than Patel, winning a role in Woody Allen's latest film.

*The Last Airbender* is based on a children's television cartoon in which the main characters are Indian. The US\$137 million (\$187 million) Hollywood adaptation has white actors in the leading roles. The Indian actors, including Patel, are limited to playing villains.

When the film premiered in America there were protests at the cinema.

*The Daily Telegraph*

*The Last Airbender* is in cinemas now. Review, p10.