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Dyslexic youth discovers talent as an actor

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BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. -- When Luke Ford was diagnosed with dyslexia as a child in his native Australia, the last thing he expected was that it would launch him into an acting career and pave the way for a major role in a big Hollywood film like *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*.

In fact, this tall, handsome Aussie tends to take all the current buzz surrounding him with a grain of salt -- despite the fact that he's getting a major Tinseltown launching as Brendan Fraser's son in the latest instalment of the lucrative *Mummy* franchise.

Maria Bello, who plays his mom in the movie, thinks the 27-year-old Luke has stardom written all over him.

"Young women are going to fall all over him after this movie," Bello predicts. "He's so charming and handsome and such a good actor."

But Ford says he's not ready to deal with this kind of hype -- "I'm not really prepared at all" -- and is determined to assert his normalcy in the bluntest terms.

"Look, I live my life," he says matter-of-factly. "I pee . . . like everyone else" But he does believe that if good fortune comes his way, he has an obligation to use it properly.

"If you get the chance to have a power, you use it for good, so I'll try my best But I'll also just go and live my life and see what happens."

By now he knows he thrives on challenge. When he learned he had dyslexia, he was told that one of the best ways of dealing with it was to make his brain work in new areas.

"So I went and tried to be a musician and that didn't work," he grins. Then he tried to become a painter and discovered he was pretty untalented in that area as well. "So then, I thought, 'All right, I'll do this drama class.' And they told me I was really good and I got an A -- and then the next thing they did was to drop drama in high school!"

Ford's response to that was to quit school and try to become an actor professionally. Television roles soon followed before he made it onto the big screen with a movie called *Cloner*. But he says his real break came with his performance as a young victim of autism in the Australian film, *The Black Balloon*, which went on to win this year's Crystal Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival.

His last name has led to the assumption in some quarters that he's related to Harrison Ford. Not true, says Luke, but when he was a kid he used to pretend that it was.

"I used to always say that he was my uncle," he confesses. "I'm no relation to Harrison whatsoever. But he'll always be one of my all-time favourite actors, and I admired him when I was growing up."

Furthermore, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was Luke's all-time favourite movie and *Indiana*

Jones was his hero.

"Everyone would dress up as Batman and Superman and play in the street, and I'd go in mother's leather jacket and my dad's old hat and get a piece of rope and I thought I was a super hero."

But then, while he was still at high school he saw a trailer for The Mummy and shortly afterwards saw the actual film and Brendan Fraser's performance as Mummy-fighting Rick O'Connell -- and another super hero entered his world.

So, of course, when he started work on the current film, he was naturally intimidated.

"It was very hard for me with Brendan because I grew up with Brendan. When he took his shirt off, it was -- oh god, look at that. He's a very good-looking man."

The new film abandons its previous Egyptian locales and shifts to China where the youthful Alex O'Connell is conducting his own archeological expedition which inadvertently resurrects a 2000-year-old menace in the form of the ruthless Dragon Emperor (Jet Li) who has been consigned to eternal slumber by the curse of a sorceress (Michelle Yeoh). The reawakening of the Emperor and his massive Terracotta army from their clay entombment threatens the world with disaster -- and that's a cue for the intrepid Rick O'Connell (Fraser) and wife Evelyn to join forces with their son to destroy this indestructible enemy.

Ford felt the pressure at the start of shooting in Montreal and also later in China. He dealt with it by treating The Mummy "like any other role."

"You're only as good as your last film," he says. "And the work kind of helps you deal with the pressure." Besides, his co-stars and director Rob Cohen were a continuing support.

"Brendan and Rob just really embraced me and made sure that I was taking the reins and being responsible as Alex O'Connell and stepping up to the plate as that character. I tried to keep him as child-based as possible. Children are the best actors. They have the best imaginations. They believe they can fly."

Ford was impressed by Fraser's professionalism.

"Brendan has a very good way of showing what he has to show in front of the camera. He has a great way of 'finding' the camera lens, which is a bit of a weakness on my part. The writers gave a basic outline of who the character was, and then Brendan flowers it and colours it and makes it beautiful. I learned a lot from him, very much so."

Luke gets the film's main romantic interest when Alex is drawn to the shy young woman who is guardian of the Emperor's tomb. Nineteen-year-old Chinese actress Isabella Leong makes her Hollywood debut in this role, and she and Ford soon hit it off despite the language barrier.

"It was very difficult at first because Isabella didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak a word of Chinese," Ford remembers. "But the good thing is that in the audition, she had to kiss me, so that helped the physical contact element . . . we kind of really clicked!"

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