

THE LOWE DOWN

ROB LOWE SURVIVES
THE RIPTIDES OF HOLLYWOOD
TO RIDE THE BIG WAVES OF CHANGE.

By Andrew Myers | Photography by Brian Bowen Smith | Styling by James Aguiar
Shot on location at El Encanto, Santa Barbara

Coco Chanel's dictum "elegance is refusal" encapsulates the 20th century's style zeitgeist most succinctly, but as far as a mantra for 21st century Hollywood goes, Rob Lowe's battle cry of "just say yes" is more likely to produce professional longevity and satisfaction.

"My family tells me I've always had it," says Lowe, sitting in his trailer during a break from shooting his fourth and final season as the maniacally can-do Chris Traeger on the NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation*. He is, of course, referring to his seemingly innate ability to enthusiastically embrace new situations and off-piste possibilities. "I've always been the person who jumps off the rock into the lake while hoping the water's deep enough and no rocks are right beneath the surface. But," he adds, offering what separates Lowe from the fools-rush-in thrill-seeker, "even if you get banged up, which is never fun, it's a win-win: Either it works out great, or you learn something for the next time."

Lowe's fearless mindset—born in optimism and refined by experience and reflection—has produced one of Hollywood's most multifaceted careers, which includes work on the stage and both big and small screens, and spans genres, from dark drama to physical comedy. This month it finds the actor playing a role political junkies across the Beltway will love: former President John F. Kennedy in *Killing Kennedy*, National Geographic Channel's telepic produced by Ridley Scott's Scott Free Productions and based on the best-seller by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard (airing Nov. 10 at 8PM EST). Lowe approaches every role by first inquiring of himself if there is "something special" he can bring to it. "Lately I've been taking parts I have no idea about—and that's the rush," he says, citing JFK as a case in point. "The challenge was apparent off the bat."



Barrington leather jacket, \$1,495, by Klett & Gurlen at Bloomingdale's; Simon Vose's Fender, \$119; and Christian cowhide boots, \$799, both at John Varvatos; sunglasses, \$520, at Louis Vuitton; Lowe's own jeans and gloves.

Next to process is a steep appraisal of potential collaborators, about which Lowe is ever mindful, as he explains, a project can head south for a wealth of reasons, lack of vision, resolve or flexibility among them. "I've learned to navigate the interpersonal better as my experience has grown. I'm happiest when I'm the least qualified person at the table, and I've had the most success when that's the case," he says, again nodding to *Killing Kennedy*. "O'Reilly, Ridley, my involvement? A room full of Type As is an understatement. But everybody was always on the same page about the movie we wanted to make, and everybody was also willing to embrace surprise, which, in this case, was the Jack-Jackie love story that at times eclipses the more obvious Kennedy-Oswald thriller aspect."

But wait. When any one of the following descriptors—teen idol, founding Brat Pack member and inadvertent launcher of the celebrity sex tape—might well have consigned Lowe to a short shelf life in Tinseltown, how is the 49-year-old actor not only still here, but professionally; bigger than ever?

In addition to starring as the iconic JFK, Lowe's preparing for the release of his second book, *Love Life*, this April (it's the follow-up to *Stories I Only Tell My Friends*, his 2011 autobiography that landed him on the cover of *Vanity Fair*). Also on the horizon is a rumored starring role as General Ulysses S. Grant in *To Appomattox*, an eight-hour miniseries, and, following the final season of *Parks and Recreation*,

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a number of series possibilities in the offing, where Lowe's credits could range from star to co-creator. And if that weren't enough, there's his role as part-owner of Miramax, which he, billionaire business partner Tom Barrack and other investors purchased in 2010 for \$660 million. "Tom's a partner in many things, and I'm Tom's partner in this," says Lowe, noting that while he has no interest in Miramax's day-to-day operations, he weighs in heavily on strategic planning. "An owner rather than an employee, finally," he jokes.

Lowe has come a long way by any measure. Born in Charlottesville, Va., and raised in Dayton, Ohio, he caught the acting bug early, at age 8. "I saw *Oliver!* and I saw kids my age onstage; I signed up for an acting workshop almost immediately," he says, adding that, although his mother and stepfather probably considered the interest transitory—next stop: baseball, basketball or Boy Scouts—"I knew this was it." Parts in productions at the Dayton Playhouse, the University of Dayton and on local television followed, experiences Lowe remembers as fun and formative, both as an introduction to his craft and to adult work in which careers and related concerns were foremost on the minds of his much-older co-actors. "Ah, Ohio, that factory for movie stars," he quips.

Ironically, following his move to Malibu at age 12, Lowe found the acting infrastructure far inferior to Dayton's. There was a lot of '70s counterculture, but no drama classes for kids, no community theater and no network, however nascent. "I was 45 miles from Hollywood, but I may as well have been 45 million light years away," he says, explaining

that 35 years ago Malibu was not the bastion of billionaires and industry power players it is today, but rather, filled with "firefighters, teachers and the odd burned-out movie star, especially in Point Dume, where we lived." Nor did the move have anything to do with hard-nosed Hollywood stage parents pushing a dream. Lowe's stepfather and mother had divorced, and destination Point Dume had everything to do with health issues. "Point Dume has [some of] the cleanest air in the country, and my mom had profound allergies," Lowe says.

What Southern California did offer Lowe was the chance to be a professional actor. "There was a girl who lived down the street who had a part on *Phyllis*; I got her number from the school directory and cold-called her," regales Lowe, who remembers asking her, "What is an agent? And do I need one?" Her answer to the latter—yes—prompted Lowe to call his father, a Midwest-based lawyer who'd repped somebody who was friendly with someone else who knew a small-time agent. "I was a relentless worker," Lowe remembers, adding that, while he is without regrets, he sometimes wonders what might have happened if he'd had a mentor to explain the basics—let alone the nuances—of the business. "Men don't mentor enough," he says. "That's something I enjoy doing now for younger actors."

Lowe's move to Malibu also meant proximity to peers with famous surnames, like Sheen and Penn, who became his friends. "We were not

the popular guys, the surfers and beach boys; we were these quirky kids with offbeat interests," he says. While none of these scions of Hollywood families were initially interested in acting—"Emilio was a track star; Chris was making 8mm movies; Charlie was debating everyone about everything"—that changed in high school, where Lowe created a core of friends and friendly acquaintances with shared interests and a laid-back but nevertheless competitive spirit. "The Sheens' house was like my second home," he shares.

But despite a starring role in the sitcom *A New Kind of Family* and success in after-school specials, the 17-year-old Lowe questioned whether he wasn't so much of a has-been as a never-will-be. Accepted at both UCLA and USC, he reexamined his Tinseltown destiny when, as he recounts in his autobiography, his agents called with an offer for one more reading. The audition was for Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders*, the 1983 hit that helped establish Hollywood's commercial penchant for youth-oriented movies. It also launched Lowe's teen idol career. In short order, the young actor checked into *The Hotel New Hampshire*, weathered *Oxford Blues*, lit up *St. Elmo's Fire*, learned *About Last Night* (still one of his favorites) and joined *A Masquerade*.

But as the decade progressed, so did Lowe's drinking. Then, following his involvement in a sex-tape scandal (an adult videotape made the night before the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta), he checked into rehab. "All my life choices since are based on being in recovery," says Lowe, sober for over two decades. "I learned to focus on



Strouss for Henneke in charcoal, \$212; by Kent & Curwen at Bloomingdale's; NIG sunglasses in Cedar tortoise, \$430, at Oliver Peoples.



STYLING: JESSICA HUNTER/OPEN

Washed denim shirt, price upon request, at Barfuti; Prince of Wales trousers in grey and cream, \$285, by Kent & Curwen at Bloomingdale's; skinny silk tie, \$125, at John Varvatos; brown leather knee-up derby shoes, \$1,650, at Dior Homme.

Grooming by Rosie Johnston for solourists.com and SK-II Skincare

what's real rather than imagined; on not letting feelings drive the bus; on being courageous and honest; on putting my total effort into something and not worrying about the result. My whole world view was infused."

This extends to all realms. After having high-profile relationships with the likes of actress Nastassja Kinski and Princess Stephanie of Monaco, in 1991 Lowe married Sheryl Berkoff, a successful Hollywood makeup artist he'd met in 1983. More than 22 years on, smiling photos of the couple and their two boys, Matthew (an undergraduate at Duke) and John Owen (a high schooler who, Lowe proudly reports, "tested into Stanford's Summer Humanities Institute"), fill the actor's trailer. Less stable, albeit intentionally, is Lowe's professional trajectory. After hosting *Saturday Night Live* in 1990, an episode in which he mocked past misadventures and bonded with cast members such as Mike Myers, Lowe found himself—funnily—a comic actor. First came a starring role in *Woyze's World*, followed by the *Austin Powers* trilogy, all four films written by Myers. During the same period, he also returned to TV, starring in the miniseries *The Sandlot*, based on the novel by Stephen King, and in a full slate of TV movies ranging from *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* and *Midnight Man* to *First Degree* and *Atomic Train*.

While achieving film-TV duality is often a goal for actors today, in the 1990s Lowe was swimming upstream. "There were many actors who were only 'film' actors and wouldn't even consider TV," he remembers. "This never made any sense to me at all, definitely not if the quality was there." Cue *The West Wing*, the capitol drama created by Aaron Sorkin on which Lowe starred as Sam Seaborn from 1999 to 2003. Capitalizing on Lowe's longstanding interest in politics and its culture—"I sold Kool-Aid for McGovern and worked the phone lines for Howard Metzenbaum before I could read," he says—*The West Wing* also catapulted his career to new heights.

It wasn't, however, a mountaintop from which Lowe was afraid to descend. Disappointed with both the direction of his character, as well as his treatment from the network, he exited *The West Wing* after season four. "People very often mistake kindness for weakness, and when that happens with me, I remind them that I'm the guy who quit one of the most successful TV shows of all time, which makes follow-up my middle name," says Lowe, who advocates not getting too comfortable or complacent professionally, especially as the one constant—particularly in Hollywood—is change.

Post-*West Wing*, Lowe was bitten in *The Lyon's Den* and woke up with a bad industry hangover after *Dr. Vegas*; both TV series were canceled in short order. He also hit the stage in a London West End production of Sorkin's play *A Few Good Men*, earned acclaim for his work in films such as *Thank You for Smoking* and returned to the familial fold of high ratings with *Brothers & Sisters* and *Parks and Recreation*.

Most recently, he's also had standout roles in such wildly disparate fare as last year's Lifetime production *Drew Peterson: Untouchable* and this year's HBO hit *Behind the Candelabra*. "It was a big swing, the kind you either strike out or hit a home run," Lowe says. "But I've learned the best I can do is give my total effort, without denial and with total honesty. And if I do that, I don't worry about what somebody else thinks."

And there it is, the sentiment that, in a nutshell, serves as the Lowe down for moving forward—whether on stage and screen, or surfing with his sons. It is the power of a prudent "yes." ■