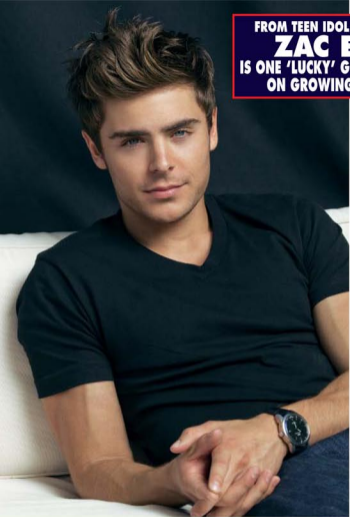


FROM TEEN IDOL TO LEADING MAN
ZAC EFRON
 IS ONE 'LUCKY' GUY AS HE REFLECTS
 ON GROWING UP IN PUBLIC



At 24, Zac (above) is already used to life in the public eye and has had to grow up fast in Hollywood. His latest role in romantic drama *The Lucky One* (left) is a far cry from his days as the teen star of *High School Musical* (below)



He shot to fame as a teenage in-candy hit film. *High School Musical*, but Zac Efron showed he has matured into a fully fledged Hollywood heartthrob as he walked the red carpet at the London premiere of *The Lucky One* last week.

Accompanied by his costar Taylor Schilling, Zac, 24, oozed grown-up glamour as he calmly navigated the hostess of press and screaming fans to talk about the romantic drama based on the best-selling novel by Nicholas Sparks.

And he made light of the bandage on his left hand, having been treated at a London hospital earlier that day after accidentally cutting his hand with a knife, reportedly in a fruit-related incident over breakfast.

"A fan bit me," Zac joked at the premiere, which was held at the BFI's Odeon Cinema. Speaking to *HELLO!* earlier in the day, he said: "It's so nothing - it's just a tiny nick. Just get put this huge bandage on it."

The actor is more vocal about his new film, in which he plays a US Marine who finds a photo of a woman (Taylor) while serving in Iraq. He vows to find the girl he credits with giving him back during three tours of duty - and in the process falls in love.

"It's amazing," Zac says. "The characters are so soft and damaged at that point, you really want them to get together."

"I enjoy romance. I think that's why we're here. It's one of the best feelings you can have, falling in love. It doesn't always have to work out, but when you're in it, it's still the best feeling in the world. I think I'm a grand gesture guy. I've done things like write a song for a girl and I like to point," he says. "For me, personal things like that are about the best."

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The actor famously dated his *High School Musical* costar Vanessa Hudgens for four years before splitting in 2010, and earlier this year he was linked to *Alvin* musical actress Lily Collins.

But Zac, who was looking dapper at the premiere in a slick, dark grey three-piece suit, says living in the public eye means he has had to learn to manage the interest in his private life.

"I think it's the same strategy that most people employ, which is just to keep your personal life personal. It fights you creatively to have too much of your personal information out there. I know the actors I personally admire - people like Tom Hanks - are the ones I know the least about, who keep their heads down.

"The work - I say work, but it's what I love to do - is what I want

"The work is what I want to focus on. I would love to be well known for that. Not for what I do on a Saturday"

to focus on," he adds. "I would love to be well known for that. Not for what I do on a Saturday." Zac admits he has to make sacrifices in terms of what he does or where he goes, but insists he finds it easy to look at the big picture.

"I go through ups and downs as anybody does," he says. "If you think hard enough about anything, you can dig yourself into a rut, but I just try to remember back when I was auditioning for musical theatre or community theatre with hundreds of other kids who were just like me. Man, I'm very grateful to be here. I've got very small problems right now. I think."

Consequently, *The Lucky One*'s look at the role plays in people's lives - does Zac believe in luck or destiny?

"I don't know where fate ends and luck begins, but I do have those moments," he says. "I think fate has maybe opened a lot of doors for me in life, where I know I'm in the right place and things are going great, but all that does is motivate me to work even harder to make sure that I stay on that path. Maybe fate opens the doors and free will gets you there."

SPORTING CHANCE

Zac was director Scott Hicks' first choice to play the part of the marine, but the sporty star - who loves football and watched Arsenal take on Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium in North London last weekend - still had to bulk up for the role. The pair also worked closely with screenwriters to flesh out the character of Logan.

"I knew it was going to be a big undertaking, but that's what I set out to do," says Zac. "Preparation is one thing I'm very good at. That's where I thrive. I want to make it the best that anyone's ever done it."

In addition to his physical transformation, the former teen idol had to psych himself up for some raw scenes with his 22-year-old costar.

"Lucky was unbelievable," he says. "I can't believe we found her in this film. I think she just shines. She has incredible integrity. I'm happy I was in a film with her so early on because she got such a huge career ahead of her. I'm just blown away. She reminds me of, like, Meryl Streep. I am so lucky to work with her."

Zac makes no secret of the steps he has taken to make the transition from teen star to leading man. The Californian actor has a small role in the comedy drama *Lateral Arts* with *How I Met Your Mother*'s Josh Radnor - who also directs the film - and stars opposite Nicole Kidman in Lee Daniels' thriller *The Paperboy*, which will premiere at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

"There were several premises I could've gone after. *High School Musical*, but I looked at the long term," he says, hinting that he has turned down roles that weren't quite right for him.

"I want to be doing this for a long time, so I wanted to make this transition slowly. It didn't seem so much about keeping the fans, but about making sure I was able to focus on my craft and really take a step back, work hard, work with great directors and have a graceful transition.

"It was slow, but I look back at every director I worked with on these films and they are guys that I've learned so much from," he says.

"I didn't cash in or take the easier route, but really focused on learning as I grew. I'm still learning. I'm just very lucky."

INTERVIEW MICHELLE JOHNSON

The Lucky One is in UK cinemas from 2 May.



Zac and his co-star Taylor Schilling at the premiere of their film *The Lucky One*. In real life, the actor acknowledges the role fate has played in his successful career, saying: "Man, I'm very grateful to be here"

PHOTOS: GARY MALKIN/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR