

# LIFE begins at...

## Downton Abbey Star – Charles Edwards is Down Under



Charles Edwards is a highly accomplished and popular English star of stage, TV and film. He is perhaps best known for his role as London editor, Michael Gregson, or as the character is more commonly known, Lady Edith Crawley's lover in the hit TV series *Downton Abbey*. *Imogen A Rose* sat down to have a chat with him about his ventures Down Under.

Edwards is currently in Australia performing the lead male role of Professor Henry Higgins in the Brisbane and Melbourne performances of the 60th Anniversary Production of *My Fair Lady*.

*My Fair Lady* is one of the most remarkable, enduring and popular plays in musical theatre history. Based upon the 1913 play, *Pygmalion*, written by George Bernard Shaw, it has been described as "the perfect musical". Notably though, Shaw – for well documented reasons – was himself intractably opposed to the notion of a musical version of his play.

When the play premiered on Broadway in 1956, its female star was a 21 year-old Julie Andrews. Today, Dame Andrews is the director – a circumstance that only adds to a remarkable atmosphere of great excitement for all, including the cast.

When asked about working with the almost fabled Andrews, Edwards commented upon her expert ear and "feeling for music" as well as her tendency to question and encourage the actors to explore new possibilities. In terms of her being Julie Andrews, he says "you can't imagine a more thrilling thing to be doing."

The symbolic legacy of *My Fair Lady* is such that for many there is an emotional attachment to either the 1964 film starring the captivating Audrey Hepburn or indeed, to the images of Julie Andrews or Rex Harrison, each of whom cemented the stage roles on both sides of the Atlantic. Certainly, the character of Higgins has been synonymous with the legendary Harrison.

Of Harrison, Edwards remarks good-naturedly, "I've got him on my shoulder, but I like to flick him off every now and then."



With an impressive resume, Edwards has good reason to trust his own judgement.

He has mastered countless memorable stage roles including the lead in the Tony Award winning Broadway version of Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, as Shakespeare's Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, as King George VI in the much lauded stage version of *The King's Speech* and opposite a sprightly 91 year-old Angela Lansbury in Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.

His TV work such as *Downton Abbey* is well-known and he has a string of film credits, including, *An Ideal Husband*, *Mansfield Park*, *Batman Begins*, *Diana*, and the highly regarded *Philomena*.

In person, Edwards is, perhaps not surprisingly, courteous and charming. He is expressive, dedicated and has an enthusiastic earnestness. He also appears able to commune success with normality.

He seems content with life, personally and professionally, and clearly enjoys the life he has worked to achieve. He is "very happy with the way things are going".

By about age 6 or 7, Edwards knew that he wanted to pursue a career as an actor.

Although acting was not a "familiar" vocation in his family, Edwards says that once it "made its presence felt", he received much support and encouragement.

One detects a strong sense of honour and pride in his chosen profession – a circumstance perhaps born of his appreciation of family and tradition. He is one of four boys and credits both his mother and maternal grandfather as "great role models".

He knows that his parents are proud of his achievements and this is important to him.

"The first person you want a pat on the back from is your Mum and Dad," he says,

adding, "I do feel a sense of honour about what I do, because I take it very seriously and work very hard at it and I want it to be absolutely right. So yes, I am pleased when they're pleased."

There is a magic in performance, an inescapable power within truly great literature, theatre and film to create wonder and hope – indeed, to inspire, even change individuals and therefore lives.

Edwards can attest to this. In fact, he shared the story of how he became friends with a woman, a member of the British Stammering Association who would hand out leaflets in the theatre foyer during the London stage performance of *The King's Speech*. It was a friendship that developed as a direct result of the positive, life-changing impact of the play upon this woman.

"When I first met her she was so crippled by her stammer, and now she is giving talks on stammering, she is travelling to America, appears on television talking about stammering," he says.

This lady has oft said to Edwards, "You must understand the effect that that play had on me". And Edwards does. He is "honoured" to find himself in such a position. Adding that "to be connected with something that has changed someone's life in some way is very, very touching."

Edwards seems to have a knack for playing iconic roles and then making them his own. As the film had already been made, he was filling the Oscar winning shoes of Colin Firth in the stage version of *The King's Speech*.

Now Charles Edwards has successfully liberated Professor Henry Higgins from an impressive, imposing history by creating his own Higgins – an immensely entertaining take on the role. The character remains true to the material, yet is also original. It will certainly meet the necessarily high expectations of audiences.

*My Fair Lady* is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy this exceptionally gifted actor whose character and talent will charm audiences around the nation!

*My Fair Lady* will play at Brisbane's Lyric Theatre, QPAC from 14 March, Melbourne's Regent Theatre from 12 May and Sydney's Capitol Theatre from August 24, 2017.

### About Imogen

Imogen A. Rose is a writer based in Brisbane. She is a Director of Rose Media [www.rosemedia.com.au](http://www.rosemedia.com.au)