

• THE miracle. musical

Wrangling kids for a school musical is tricky enough, but what if they were scattered across the outback and had to rehearse over the air? Somehow the Longreach School of Distance Education pulled it off, and drought-devastated families from all over western Queensland flocked to the sell-out show. **Susan Horsburgh** gives it a standing ovation.

PHOTOGRAPHY by SCOTT HAWKINS

On a parched Longreach floodplain it's 43 degrees and "Superstan" is encased finger-to-toe in skin-tight polyester. His castmates aren't much better off, with their acrylic afros and lurex leggings, but no one's complaining as they pose for *The Weekly's* photo shoot. They're too pumped about their school musical tomorrow night – and they don't seem the kind of kids to whinge anyway. A riot of sequins and top hats, they bound over the spiky dead tumbleweeds at their feet, seemingly oblivious to the drought-ravaged moonscape around them, flat and dusty in every direction.

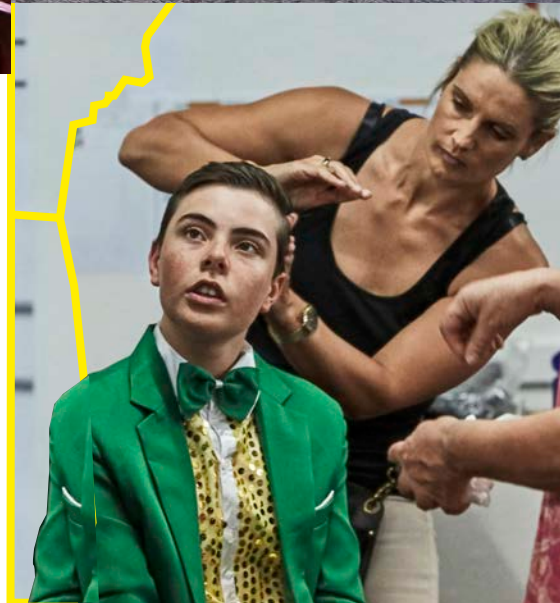
Reuben Hollingsworth, the 16-year-old in the superhero suit, has been up since 4am, feeding the pigs, dogs and cattle at Ulcanbah Station before making the four-hour trip into town for today's dress rehearsal of *The Amazing Adventures of Superstan*. As the eponymous star, Reuben is jittery but determined to "go big or go home," he says. "It's my last year at school so I might as well go out with a bang."

According to his mum, Linda, Reuben is a musical fanatic who has *Oklahoma* and *Calamity Jane* on high rotation. "He's not your typical 16 year old," she says. "He likes Johnny Cash and Slim Dusty. No matter where he goes – down the main street – he's always belting out a tune. He's not a trained singer, but that's the way he can express himself." →





School musical superstars Dominic Faggotter (left, with mum Rachael and sister Lucy), Thomas and Jennifer Scholes (right, with mum Kathy).



Without *Superstan*, he might never experience an audience, so the chance to perform in front of 600 people is priceless. Reuben and his 89 fellow performers from the Longreach School of Distance Education (LSODE) all hail from far-flung sheep and cattle stations, spanning an area twice the size of Victoria. Aged five to 16, some can go months without seeing anyone outside their families.

The closest school can be hours away, so they learn online through LSODE, a School of the Air, with the help of web conferencing and their “home tutor” – sometimes a governess but usually their mum. Just covering the curriculum is a full-time job, but try coordinating 90 kids for a musical, with only four-and-a-half days of face-to-face rehearsals. “For a tiny school, it’s amazing – the kids love it and the families embrace it,” says mum Rachael Webster. “You can feel the anticipation through the whole town.”

Rachelle Moore, LSODE’s deputy principal, is the dynamo behind the show – the producer, choreographer and costume designer who had the

moxie to tackle the school’s first musical in 2012. Everyone thought she was mad: “I had mums and dads saying, ‘Good luck tonight, you’re going to need it,’ and I knew from the dress rehearsal I’d blow them away,” says Rachelle, a Brissie girl who moved to Longreach as a young

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teacher 24 years ago and married a local. “It was a standing ovation.” The LSODE musical has since become a biannual tradition and a red-letter day on the Longreach social calendar.

Rachelle recruited Brisbane-based actor-producer-director Sean Dennehy when he was visiting Longreach in 2011 with Opera Queensland, and he has gone on to direct all four LSODE

musicals, flying out for the rehearsals in September, the cast camp in November and the big night in December. “Kids don’t get the opportunities out here,” says Sean, “so Rachelle works tirelessly – she realises how important it is.”

For Rachelle, it’s a year-long logistical feat that starts with auditions in term one. Kids raid their dress-up boxes and fashion capes out of bed sheets, paint backdrops and make props to try out for their dream roles. This time there were 72 audition tapes for 43 speaking parts sent in via email or posted on YouTube. Once the show is cast, Rachelle choreographs the dance numbers and sends out the routines on DVD, along with CDs of all the songs.

This may be a country-town production, but Rachelle – a can-do one-time aerobics instructor – refuses to play small. She scours the internet for stage outfits from all over the world and enlists her crafty mum to fill gaps in the costume department, this year devising a colour scheme of orange and purple for the evil characters and primary hues for the good guys.

The kids, meanwhile, run their lines while fixing fences and mustering cattle – and every Monday afternoon in 44-way LSODE conference calls.

Dominic Faggotter, who plays Mayor Doughnut, busts his moves in the shearing shed of his family’s Mount Victoria property. “It’s a giant wooden floor so it’s easy to dance on,” he says. The second of three kids, 11-year-old Dominic used to be the reserved one, but his self-assurance has grown with each of the four productions he has been in. It’s all about making an audience laugh: “It makes me feel like I did something,” he says.

For 10-year-old Jennifer Scholes, acting is “scary and fun”. For the 2016 musical, she played a waitress with just two lines, but this time she landed the lead part of sassy DC. With 45 lines to learn, she’s been practising on the lawn of her family’s organic cattle property outside Blackall,

accompanied by her dog, Dusty. Now in her third production, Jennifer is certain acting has boosted her self-confidence. She even supplies evidence: “After the first two musicals,” she says, “I helped my mum and my guvvy [governess] kill a snake.”

Her brother, Thomas, has also taken to the stage with gusto, and now harbours dreams of Hollywood. In fact, Thomas decided months ago that the show needed some star power – so he doorstopped Malcolm Turnbull when he was in Blackall last June and handed the then-PM a letter, inviting him and wife Lucy to *Superstan*. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity,” wrote 12-year-old Thomas, “to witness the greatest and most hilarious very special production played by children from all over outback Australia.”

Turnbull couldn’t make it but Thomas went on to invite the Governor-General, the Queensland Governor and Jessica Mauboy, all of whom had to decline. Undeterred, Thomas decided to go for broke: his idol, Hugh Jackman. His enterprising mum, Kathy, worked the bush telegraph and managed to get an invitation to the man himself. “It’s amazing because my favourite movie is *The Greatest Showman*,” says Thomas, “and now the main actor

in my favourite movie has heard of me!” The musical, says Kathy, has given her kids a sense of possibility: “I think they’ve found the world is really quite small – you can contact anybody and do anything.”

While the kids have their dress rehearsal in the civic centre, Kathy heads across the road for dinner with a group of mums at the motor inn. Living on isolated properties, without the daily interaction of the school gate, the women relish the chance to catch up. “It’s a bit of a love-in,” says Rachael, with a laugh. “The families are all really good friends.”

Seeing each other is even more important in the seventh year of drought. “All the people in the school are affected somehow,” explains Linda. “Some mums and kids have cut their hair short because if you’ve got long hair you need more water to wash it. Mentally we’ve had a really bad time. We had a lot of poddies – baby cattle – and half of them got sick, so the kids were dragging them away to our dead heap. That was just soul-destroying.”

On top of it all, her family’s century-old Queenslander burnt down four years ago and they lost everything. Although they were insured, the money has gone feeding cattle and they are now living in the workers’ quarters. Apparently it’s just shy of 50 degrees on their property today – and there is no air-conditioning. →



The musical gives the mums (pictured with teacher Rachelle, centre) a chance to catch up in Longreach.



Pint-sized performers give their all. Below: A riot of colour on stage.



With a blast of orchestral music, the show begins – fun panto fare with back-to-back puns, dad jokes and fart gags. “Bogeyman is a great name,” says Superstan to the slimy green villain. “Did you [dramatic pause] pick it yourself?” The kids dance to a series of catchy tunes, the most infectious about “fantastic, elastic anti-gravity pants” – all jazz

For these couple of days in Longreach, though, families can put the drought behind them. “Yes, we are having a hard time but this is a fun time,” says Linda. “We can have a long shower with clean water, and the kids are away from it as well – away from the stress of Mum and Dad worrying about how they are going to feed the cattle. They can get their faces painted and put their wigs on and just have fun – be kids.” Adds another mum, Lou Brown: “It’s a real lift to the spirits.”

The morning of the big night, the musical makes the local ABC radio news and some of the mothers head to the hairdresser’s. As the final rehearsal wraps up in the hall, director Sean gives the kids a pep talk. “You guys are excellent,” he tells them. “Give yourself the permission to shine tonight.”

Finally, it’s show time. In the courtyard of the civic centre, under the town’s landmark water tower, it’s still sweltering, but the pre-show mood is jubilant. The women are frocked up and the men, in regulation check shirts and jeans, nurse stubbies of Great Northern, while the caterers dish out butter chicken and beef strog.

Just before the curtain goes up, Hugh Jackman appears onscreen with a surprise video message. “I’ve always wanted to go to Longreach,” says Hugh. “Unfortunately I can’t make the date of the very, very highly anticipated musical *The Amazing Adventures of Superstan*. I am hoping to catch it somehow, somewhere, maybe when it transfers to Broadway, but for now I just want to say, ‘Chookas!’ That’s what we say in the business for good luck.”

hands, air punches and step claps. The sequined preppies are a shambolic bunch, wildly out of time, some staring at the floor and others just frozen, but coordination is always trumped by cuteness. Of course, the sell-out crowd is delighted.

As Sean says, it doesn’t matter if these kids never set foot on stage again; performing can have a powerful impact. In Reuben’s case, he looks forward to a life on the land this year, but the memory of starring in a stage show in front of hundreds of people will stay with him. Says Sean: “It flicks some little switch that says, ‘If I can do that, I can do a lot more.’”

It might be my imagination, but as everyone applauds and ascends to their feet, the teenager in the sweaty superhero suit seems to stand just a little bit taller. **AWW**