

Jack Thompson

... Conquering Pain

by Maggie Wilde

From Centrefold to Senior's Week - Jack Thompson talks openly about his journey from a wheelchair to life without pain!

Adopted at the age of 10, he spent six years in the Army Medical Corp., has a Bachelor of Science in Laboratory Technology and is a world renowned Thespian. He starred in everything from *Breaker Morant* to *Star Wars* and is an accomplished horseman, loving husband and devoted Dad.

In recent years Jack Thompson has traveled an amazing journey of excruciating pain and embraced a world of natural health alternatives. In agony he faced the dismal prospect of the end of his career. He was immobilised by intense lower back pain and used a wheelchair to move around. 'If I was home by myself and someone came to the door, I would crawl on my hands and knees to answer the door' he remembers with amazement.

This is Jack's story - Conquering Pain.

MW: Can you tell us where it started Jack?

JT: I've always lived a hard physical life and I've had my fair share of accidents. They say you're not a true horseman until you've fallen at least 7 or 8 times. Well I've done that. Once a horse reared and came down on top of me, I don't know why I wasn't killed. I had a hairline fracture of the pelvis. I remember a fellow stockman at the time said to me 'I understand you sustained a harebrained fracture Jack.' (Jack laughs as he remembers those days long ago).

JT: When I was about 23 my lower back went into spasm. I discovered then that I had crushed a disc in a fall from a horse when I was about 18 years old.

MW: How did you deal with the pain back then?

JT: I saw a chiropractor for years and became dependant on it. I've always maintained a very physical regime and I incorporated yoga stretching, old fashioned squats and standard military exercises into my program. In fact at one stage I used to jog up to 16 km a day. I discovered the benefits of Tai Chi years ago too and that helped me manage for quite some time.

MW: Did it affect your film career?

JT: Absolutely. For years I always rang ahead to make sure there was a chiropractor available wherever we filmed. Then about 20 years ago I was in a film called *Burke & Wills*. I needed to lose a lot of weight quickly for the role. Under medical supervision within three months I weighed less than I had at the age of 18.

MW: What happened after the film?

JT: I slowly began to put the weight back on but then it continued to increase. I tried everything. I knew it was going to be harder to lose it as I got older and it became a constant battle-of-the-bulge. I'd get the weight down and it would start to creep up even more. I tried health retreats, dieting, exercise but it was difficult to control.

MW: How has that affected your health and your back?

JT: The combination of the extra weight and the deterioration of the previous damage to the spine caused a piece of the disc to lodge against the sheath of the sciatic nerve. I was in constant agonising pain. A few years ago it totally seized and I did everything I could to avoid surgery. I saw chiropractors, osteopaths, I tried acupuncture and massage. I became desperate.

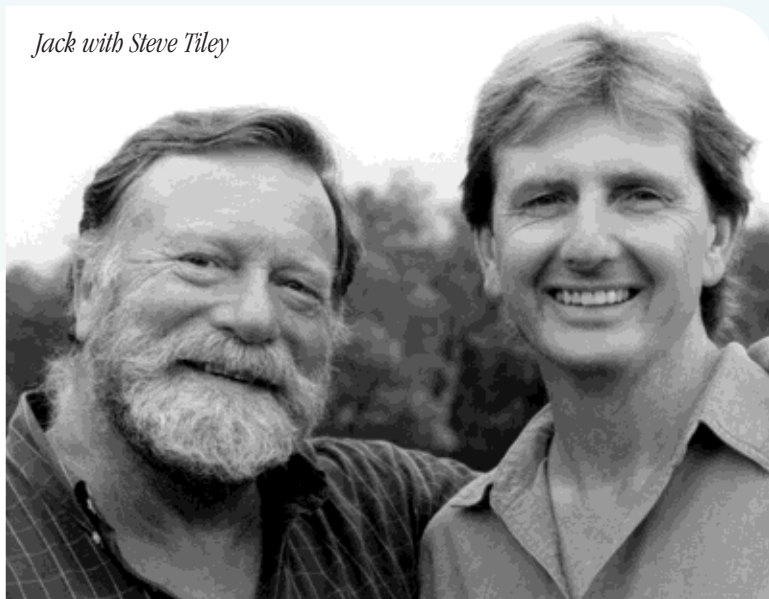
MW: What did that mean for your career?

JT: It meant the end of my career as an actor or anything else. I couldn't move. I was in a wheelchair to get around or stuck lying in my bed in agony. I was so desperate I rang a friend who put me in touch with a surgeon. The surgeon said 'Jack can you walk?' I told him 'Barely.' He said 'When you can't walk anymore, give me a call and we'll try something.' All I could say was 'That's a bit bloody rough isn't it?'

Unfortunately the surgeon was right. He cited a maximum of a 20% success rate with lower back surgery. No-one could be certain that Jack wouldn't suffer nerve damage during the operation. If that happened Jack could end up incontinent or in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

I decided to wait for a miracle. I remember thinking 'If someone told me that drinking my own urine would cure me, I'd agree to that rather than risk the consequences of surgery.'

Jack with Steve Tiley



Jack eventually agreed to see therapist Stephen Tiley. It was a meeting that would change his life.

JT: When Steve arrived that first day I shuffled myself down the hallway in agony. At the end of a half hour I got up and walked down the hall where my family waited.

I'd suffered years of immobilising pain. I was overwhelmed. Tears filled my eyes and I said to my wife 'Look!'

The emotional release for Jack's family was intense. They had watched helpless for so long while he had suffered in agony and now there was hope.

Stephen Tiley also remembers that first session with Jack with warmth and emotion.

ST: I remember Jack walked down the hall with dignity. His whole family looked at him in awe; tears welled in everyone's eyes. It was one of those moments, there was silence. I will never forget it myself.

JT: It wasn't a miracle, but it was miraculous. Steve has a very real technique. He had been able to provide pain relief, but he had also given me something more. I would take it with me for the rest of my life. He had given me the understanding that I could do something about my pain. I was in control and I could change it. There is nothing more destructive than the sense that you've become a victim to your own pain. Now I had the key and I knew I could become pain-free.

Stephen's work is a combination of meditative focus, relaxation, breathing, imaging and deep tissue massage. He combines his hands on work with an ongoing program of stretches and meditative focus.

JT: I owe my mobility and I dare say a whole quality of life to Steve's ability. He was able to eliminate the pain initially and then teach me the breakthrough techniques for myself. My pain was for me to control and thanks to Steve, I am now pain-free.

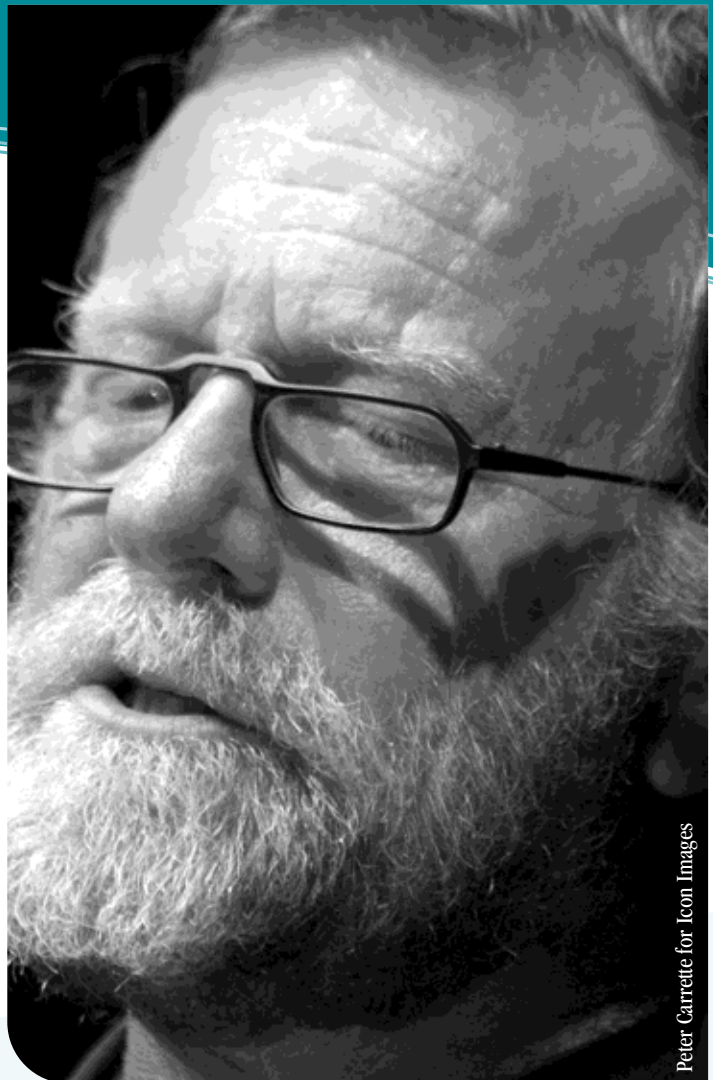
MW: Over the years you've embraced quite a broad spectrum of alternative practices. You practice Tai chi, Qi Gong, yoga and meditation. You've accepted alternative health solutions which many people of your generation find difficult. Did you grow up with strict 'religious or spiritual guidelines'?

JT: When the Thompson family adopted me they were very liberal, free-thinking people. I was encouraged to be open to all possibilities.

MW: What about the concept of God, Divinity or Creation? Were you guided to think a certain way on this issue?

JT: The Thompson family gave me an understanding that there is a 'creative energy' and it is called various things by various people. I was introduced to comparative religion very early. For me there has always been a sense of a 'Creator Force'.

When I was younger I involved myself wholeheartedly in the traditional Sunday school thing at school. Later when I came to look at other religions like Buddhism or Taoism there was no conflict for me.



Peter Carrette for Icon Images

I was able to embrace a broader picture.

MW: Hmmm. Are you telling me Jack, there's no man up there judging us?

JT: I'm afraid so. There's no man or woman. It's all here within us...

MW: It's all inside you Jack...

JT: Yeah, and you...

MW: What about the afterlife, any thoughts?

JT: I'm a bit inclined to quote Phillip Adams when it comes to that.

He was asked 'Aren't you worried about what happens when you die?' 'No,' he said. 'I know what's going to happen to me when I die.' 'What do you mean? You can't know what it's going to be like when you're dead' they said. He replied 'I know exactly what it's going to be like when I'm dead. Exactly like it was before I was born.'

MW: Does that mean you're happy to leave it up to whatever it is when you get there?

JT: Absolutely! I don't fear death; it's like fearing tomorrow morning. I was there when my parents died.

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I've been with friends when they were dying; it's a transitional state from this state to another state. I don't know what that state is but I kind of embrace that. At the age of nine I was able to quote a poem by a 19th Century English Poet called Walter Savage Landor. He wrote it in his 90s. It's like an epitaph.

*I strove with none,
for none was worth my strife
Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art:
I have warm'd both hands
before the fire of Life
It sinks; and I am ready to depart.*

JT: I don't know why I memorized it back then but it's become more pertinent over the years. My dear departed mother used to say, 'The trouble with getting older Jack is you know more and more dead people.'

MW: *I did hear on the grapevine that you were Ambassador to Seniors Week earlier this year. Was that a new experience for you? The old 'pin up boy' now representing Senior Citizens Nationally?*

JT: Yeah, from centerfold to Senior's Ambassador... (Jack laughs) I don't know how that came about, do you?



MW: *I'm sure you were the sexiest one there!*

JT: (Laughing) It happened overnight for me. Life happens very quickly doesn't it? But it's very exciting.

MW: *Are there any regrets?*

Jack's wife Leona answers that question for me...

Leona: Jack quotes an old proverb about losing 21 days of your life if you regret. If he regrets something he says 'There goes another 21 days. I'd better re-think that one.'

Life continues in the fast lane for 64 year old Jack Thompson and his family. His career moves from strength to strength but he can now embrace his world pain-free.

If you wish to contact Stephen Tiley about his successful work with alleviating back pain please phone 02 6656 2592 or email stevieji@optusnet.com.au