

The Strip's tease

The cops have their work cut out chasing a cashed-up Russian crime boss in locally filmed drama *The Strip*, writes **Lisa Simmons**

MEET the Mr Bad of Channel 9's new 13-part crime drama *The Strip* . . . Ivan Lazar is the Mr Big of crime on the glitter strip, but still has bosses he must answer to.

Lazar is a cashed-up Russian immigrant and former cop with Russian Army connections. The whisper is his construction company is a money-laundering front and his dirty deals range from drug, diamond and weapons trading to extortion, loan sharking and murder.

The owner of Gold Coast nightclub The Paradiso prefers not to be seen there. He prefers to distance himself from any deeds planned, connections made and deals done.

He's flush with cash and likes to show it off in the way he dresses, his ocean-front penthouse and his flash fleet of cars.

The kit and the clobber? That's been the real fun of playing Lazar, says Franko Milostnik, the Sydney actor and father of three who breathes life into the character.

"Everyone dreams they'll one day live the life of a millionaire. This is my chance to get an idea of what that life might be like," says Milostnik.

"Lazar's clothes, his jewellery, are the best money can buy. I filmed one early scene where Lazar arrives in his Rolls Royce – a car valued at \$1.1 million, if you can imagine that.

"Later, he appears in another Rolls – a convertible. His scenes at home are filmed in a real \$20 million mansion at Sovereign Islands. It has everything – including an indoor swimming pool.

"I've spent a day filming on a luxury yacht. Today, it's a chase. Lazar tries to make his getaway – in a plane.

"He gets the girls. He has everything. Things, which me, I'm scared to touch.

"I think I could get used to the lifestyle Lazar enjoys – minus the killing, of course."

Milostnik has a lilting European accent. His grandfather was Slovenian. His father spoke languages including fluent Russian.

Bad guys? He's played plenty.

"The truth is, I suppose, I do come from a different background. More than 20 years in Australia and still, whenever someone needs a crazy, psychotic wog, they call me," he laughs a good-humoured laugh.

"This is how I am stereotyped, I suppose, but it's a role I allow myself to be cast in. I can't complain. For me, it's been a good ride."

Viewers may not know Milostnik's name, but his face should be familiar. His credits include roles on the TV shows *GP*, *Wildside*, *Water Rats*, *White Collar Blue*, *East West 101*, kids' show *Don't Blame Me*, miniseries *Queen Kat*, *Carmel* and *St Jude* and the movies *Dead Letter Office*, *Race the Sun* and the recent *Two Door Mansion*.

Spot-on locations

► **LOCALS** will spot plenty to love in Channel 9's sexy new crime drama *The Strip*. The series, by Knapman Wyld, the makers of *Wildside* and *East West 101*, has filmed at some of the Gold Coast's most beautiful beach and bush locations. The iconic Surfers Paradise sign on the beachfront end of Cavill Mall is the setting for one of the first murders in the series. Another plays out at the night markets at Broadbeach. An office at landmark building 50 Cavill Avenue, Surfers Paradise, is home to Main Beach CIB. The action has been filmed on land, at sea and in the air, with one thrilling sequence filmed from a window cleaners' platform on Surfers tower the Q1. Locations range from a \$20 million Sovereign Islands mansion, home to the series' bad guy, to adult concept shop The Den. Southern Gold Coast locations include Snapper Rocks, Point Danger and Griffith Street, Coolangatta. "We're not portraying the Gold Coast as an awful place at all," says co-producer Steve Knapman. "Like any city, things happen that are bad, which is why we have police."

The years have also made him versatile, says Milostnik, who can also work behind the camera, writes and develops some of his own projects.

The next – his own – follows a veteran Polish judo champion on his travels to fights around the world.

"You take things as they come – a job's a job," says Milostnik.

"Any actor you speak to will tell you playing the bad guy is fun – and that's how I've found it as I've progressed along the way.

"I've found it rewarding work, work that's fun and fun that comes with rewards."

Milostnik's association with the makers of *The Strip* dates back to a role in *Wildside* more than a decade ago.

"They liked me as the character and brought me in on other shows, mostly one-off roles. Lazar, though, has a strong presence in *The Strip*. Somehow, many

crimes lead back to him. I appear in about seven of the 13 episodes."

Milostnik says he was attracted to the chance to play more 'than a bad guy'.

"Lazar has worked on both sides of the law – a policeman himself before his family were murdered in Russia, a family man who had hopes and dreams, but they were crushed. This complicates the character."

If Milostnik has one complaint, it's that he can't film his own stunts.

"This is a series with lots of action, lots of fighting. I try to do as much of it as I possibly can," he says.

"True, they have brought in a guy to be my double, but I don't want a double.

"There are very few times as an actor where you get to do real physical acting and martial arts is something I have practised for many years. I would like to kick the living s*** out of the double. Joke. I like to play about a bit with my character.

"I did my study at an acting school with a French teacher who said many times that to act well, we must throw ourselves into every role . . . play like children. So that's always been my approach. Take the job, play like a child would play. Then, when it's over, go back to being yourself."

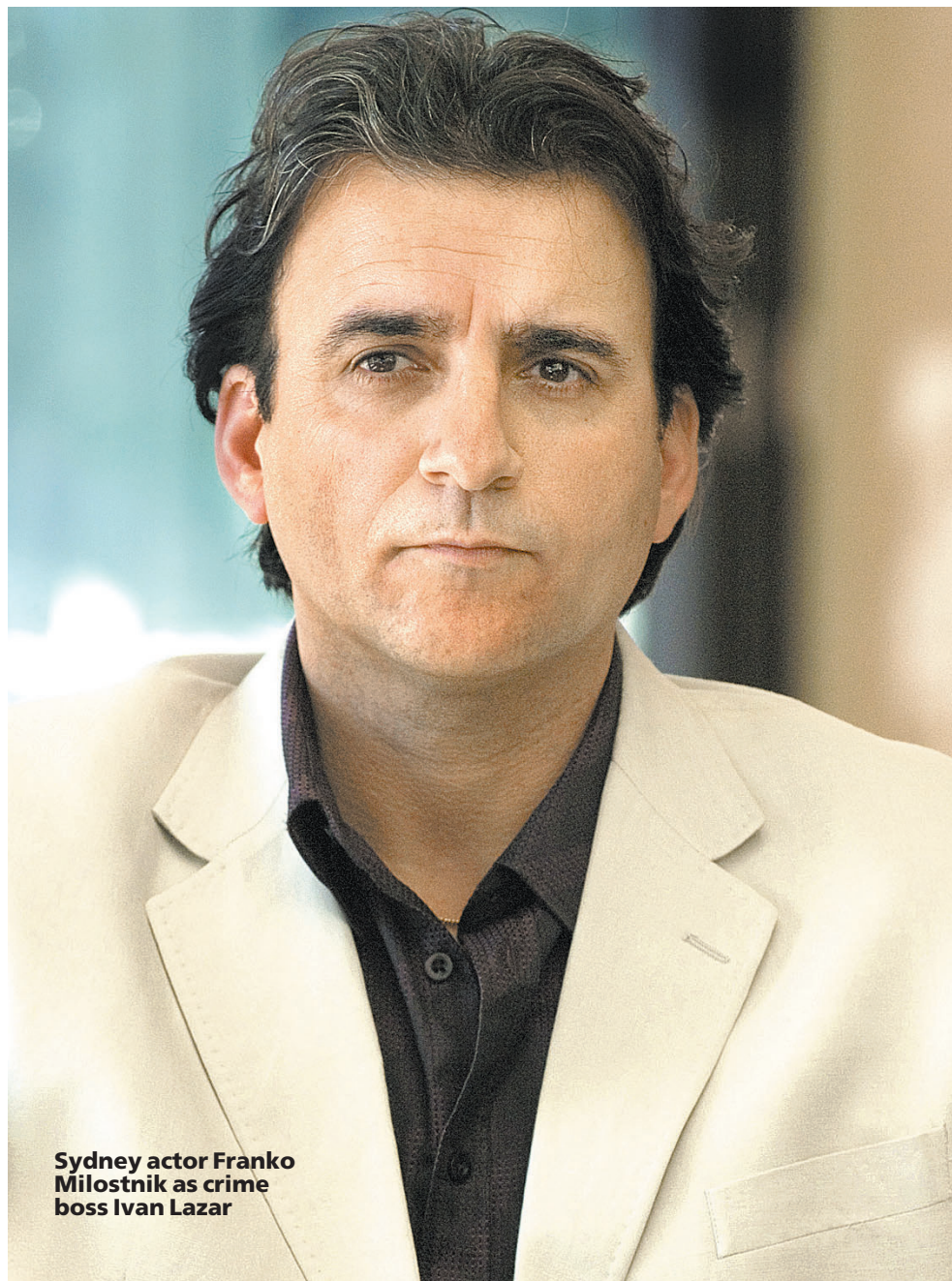
Milostnik will remain on the Coast until the end of filming and will attend the show's wrap party tonight. Then it's home to Sydney and the cold, 'a depressing thought'.

"I've fallen in love with this place – the weather obviously, but the rest as well. The lifestyle. Everyone is so relaxed," he says.

"I knew the Gold Coast was a beautiful place, but no one told me just how beautiful. From the coast to the mountains, the landscape, everything is just divine."

► **The Strip screens Thursdays at 8.30pm on Nine and NBN from September 4.**

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Sydney actor Franko Milostnik as crime boss Ivan Lazar