



felix mallard

Words by NICOLE MOOREFIELD Photos by CATHERINE POWELL

AT JUST 20-YEARS-OLD, FELIX MALLARD is unexpectedly insightful, which his rapid success over the past year reflects.

Felix grew up in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. He never considered acting until he was scouted by a modeling agency at 13. They got him an audition for Ben on popular Australian soap opera *Neighbours* and conveyed that, while he wouldn't get the part, "it's just good to network," Felix remembers. Much to the agency's surprise, he was hired for six episodes.

With a fast-paced shooting schedule and an experienced, supportive cast, *Neighbours* was a great learning experience. The show's large audience taught him that "what you put out in the world is going to be seen regardless of whether you want it to be," he shares. "There is a sense of being a role model." But it is responsibility, not pressure.

At first, Felix was unsure about acting professionally, but advice from director Declan Eames changed his understanding of the job. Felix was trying to understand why 14-year-old Ben was grieving for his father, who passed away when Ben was young. Declan helped him grasp the character better, but also explained that Felix's job as an actor was to convey to kids watching *Neighbours* who were growing up without a dad "that it's okay to go through that emotional journey," Felix recalls. Ever since, Felix has favored roles with important messages.

Felix's love of meaningful stories continues with his most recent project, CBS's *Happy Together*. "It's about finding an unorthodox family," he explains. Felix plays Cooper James, an Australian pop sensation who moves in with his accountant, Jake (Damon Wayans Jr.), and his wife, Claire (Amber Stevens West). *Happy Together* "is such a nice thing to have on TV," Felix says, because unlike most sitcoms today, the

show portrays marriage and family optimistically. "That's what sets it apart," he adds. Viewers get to "be happy for 30 minutes." The show didn't have a name until the network's Upfronts presentation in May, but *Happy Together* perfectly sums up the message, as well as the set dynamic. "[Everyone working on the show is] so hardworking, but they're so happy," Felix observes.

The sitcom is loosely based on a true story: at the peak of his One Direction fame, Harry Styles was living with *Happy Together*'s executive producer, Ben Winston. "We took the concept of Harry living with Ben and then made it our own," Felix tells. Cooper isn't based on Harry at all, allowing *Happy Together* to write storylines without affecting Harry's reputation. "I didn't watch any of [Harry's] mannerisms," Felix reveals, but instead drew inspiration from people he knows "who are like human Labradors." Cooper is "endlessly happy, and he doesn't take things for granted," and Felix can't always match his unrelenting optimism, "especially in the morning," he jokes.

At the same time, playing Cooper has made Felix more grateful for his own life and privacy. Although Cooper has found wild success and possesses an internal pride and happiness that Felix strives for, "he doesn't quite know who he is yet," Felix notes. Cooper moves in with Jake and Claire to find normalcy and human connection in a new, unfamiliar world of agents and fangirls. Originally American, Cooper was rewritten to be Australian when Ben Winston heard Felix's accent, and "it informs the character so much more that he's so far away from home," says Felix.

Felix's next big role is Roamer in the film adaptation of Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*. Shifting from the mindset of a lovable pop-star to a big-

oted bully takes a lot of mental energy, but Felix enjoys "finding out why those characters behave the way that they do."

"[Roamer] is really an antagonist through the film," Felix explains, "but from his perspective, he's being antagonized by the person who has taken his girlfriend." He doesn't understand the pain he is inflicting and just wants to protect Violet (Elle Fanning). "He wants her to be okay and doesn't know how to deal with that in himself."

Felix hopes to make Roamer's internal turmoil evident such that viewers will understand him and "love to hate" him. He wants to show that Roamer is not just "a dick because the plot needs it," but that "he's really going through a hard time."

Many characters in the film are similarly struggling. *All the Bright Places* tells the important story of teen suicide in hopes of destigmatizing depression and showing viewers that they are not alone. "It's okay to seek help and it's okay to go through these things," Felix expands, "but you are loved." He commends the entire cast and crew for their "incredible job in portraying that everyone has their own journey to go through and [hardships] to deal with."

While Felix has flirted with comedy and drama, his dream role would encapsulate both. "So much of life is the good with the bad," he elaborates. Felix recently ran into this balance in his own life when his grandfather passed away. The pain unified his family, teaching Felix the duality of emotion. "It was all of us staying in the one house, all of us going through the grief of losing someone, yet, at that time, I'd never laughed with my family more." Felix's ideal part would highlight life's bittersweet moments. "It's finding the dark in the light and the light in the dark, and that's what I love." **NO**