

Eric Braeden

BIOGRAPHY

In two decades of playing the magnetic, urbane and overwhelmingly charming Victor Newman, Eric Braeden has become daytime's most recognizable hero. In fact, in 1992, he won the first and only People's Choice Award for Favorite Male Performer in a Daytime Series.

Like his alter ego's modest beginnings, the Emmy-winning actor is a self-made man. Braeden was born Hans Gudegast in Kiel, Germany, a port city near the Baltic Sea. The third of four sons, his childhood was at times grim. "There were good times, but mostly deprivation," which may be why Braeden is "deeply appreciative of everything I have."

Salvation, however, came through athletics. In high school, he helped his team win the National German Youth Championship, with his own victories in the discus, javelin and shot-put.

Upon graduating high school, Braeden decided to leave his home for the potential he felt existed in America. "I saw America as a land of opportunity," he recalls, "but also as the land of adventure, the land of cowboys and Indians." Journeying by ocean liner, Braeden still vividly remembers seeing the Statue of Liberty on the horizon in the early morning light. He took his first American meal at the Empire State Building—and so taken with the fare, his diet remained hamburgers and chocolate milkshakes for months! Recalling that first journey, with only \$50 to his name, and nary a friend in sight, the actor admits that today, he is living the quintessential immigrant experience, and he couldn't be more grateful. "This is a country of immigrants, and has always been hospitable and open to new citizens." The United States, he believes, is always in the process of renewing itself. Braeden, who has long made his home in Southern California, cites the Golden State as "now defining the story of the melting pot. I love this state. I love L.A., I love the spirit in California, which epitomizes the American spirit. People here are always seeking new ways to do things in refreshingly unpretentious ways."

Braeden didn't stay long in New York, instead traveling by bus to Galveston, Texas, where his cousin, a doctor at a local medical school, helped him to land a job as a translator. Two months later, he hit the road again, this time traveling to a Montana ranch owned by a German expatriate. He hired

Braeden on as a cowboy, and the young man lived his American dream by working on the range. However, after tiring of such hard physical labor, Braeden knew he should tap his brain over brawn: He won a partial track scholarship to Montana State University (now the University of Montana), in Missoula. There he not only studied but worked the night shift on the "green chain" at a local lumber mill, and even managed to participate in predawn ROTC drill team practice.

When a fellow student invited him on a boat trip up the Salmon River in Idaho, Braeden signed on. What he didn't know was that the Salmon was dubbed "the river of no return." Yet, he and his partner, Bob McKinnon, became the

first men to survive the trip both up and downriver. They filmed their journey and called the documentary “The Riverbusters.”

The Heady Years

Braeden went to LA to find a distributor for their film, and so taken with the city, he stayed. He enrolled in political science and economics courses at Santa Monica College and joined a local semi professional soccer team. Hearing that German actors were being sought for TV and film work, he got himself an agent; Braeden had embarked upon a new career. His first role was in the Film “Operation Eichmann.” He followed that up with Kraft Suspense Theatre, and the same year, Braeden helped to open the Santa Monica Playhouse, where he played the Prince of Wales in Sartre’s “Kean.” In 1965, he made his mark on Broadway, where he appeared in “The Great Indoors” with Curt Jurgens, Geraldine Page, and Clarence Williams III. Only a few short years into his career, Braeden would land the role that would change his life—and to some degree, how Americans viewed German soldiers. He was cast as Captain Dietrich on “The Rat Patrol,” a primetime TV series featuring an Allied commando team sent to harass Rommel’s Afrika Korps during World War II. Braeden resisted the producers’ pressure to play the stereotypical Nazi, creating a relationship of respectful enmity between the team’s head, played by Christopher George, and Braeden’s Dietrich. After “Rat Patrol,” Braeden landed the starring role in Universal’s “Colossus: The Forbin Project,” with Susan Clark, making him the first German actor to play an American in a major Hollywood film. The studio, however, pressed Braeden, then still using his given name (Hans Gudegast), to change it. “Eric is a family name,” he explains, “and Braeden is from the name of my village in Germany. Changing my name was one of the most painful decisions I’ve ever made, so I needed to choose a name that I could still identify with.”

His star rose, as he costarred with some of Hollywood’s most renown: “The Ultimate Chase,” with Britt Ekland; “Morituri,” with Marlon Brando and Yul Brynner; “Honeymoon with a Stranger,” with Janet Leigh and Rosanno Brazzi; “A Hundred Rifles,” with Burt Reynolds and Raquel Welch; and “Escape From the Planet of the Apes,” with Roddy McDowell. Braeden has more than 120 TV guest-starring roles (see credits link), as well as several movies of the week. He starred with Bette Davis in “The Judge and Mrs. Wyler”; and with Suzanne Somers in “Happily Ever After”; and Tyne Daly in “The Cry of the Rooster.” He costarred in Jackie Collins’ miniseries “Lucky,” with Nicolette Sheridan, and most recently, played John Jacob Astor in the megahit “Titanic,” which he describes as featuring “one of the most frightening professional moment of his career,” he recalls. “When I drown! That was 150 tons of water coming at us. You bet we did it in one take, and I was profoundly relieved to be breathing!” Even with the physical danger, Braeden is glad he signed on with the film. “After reading the script, I told my wife that this picture would make a lot of money. Of course, I don’t know why they sent over a script. There wasn’t much in it for my character. But my wife and son urged me to be a part of this film because of the director.” He remembers that during filming, James

Cameron turned to him in the middle of a scene, and suddenly shouted: “Never!” Braeden was confused and asked “never—what?” ‘You know,’ he responded, ‘the last line in Colossus: The Forbin Project.’ He was a fan of the film!”

The Newman Years

In January 1980, Braeden made a decision that would forever impact his professional life. He took the role of Victor Newman on CBS’ *The Young and The Restless*. “Initially, I didn’t want to do this role. I thought, ‘I don’t want to do daytime.’ I thought it was too confining.” However, after celebrating his 20th year as the man America respects and admires—and wishes it knew personally!—Braeden himself has respect for the medium he works in each day. “Having done Y&R for so long, having traveled across the United States, Canada and overseas, I’m no longer as arrogant about what people like. People want to be emotionally involved, have their hearts tugged as I knew they would when I read the ‘Titanic’ script. That was the element that would capture an audience. It is a primordially tragic story: a love affair that ends as all good love affairs do: tragically!” After so many years of walking in Victor Newman’s shoes, Braeden admits that there is much of himself in his alter ego. “If you watch Victor closely,” he notes, “you see a lot of Eric.” They have much in common. Both are complex, intellectually curious, and if pushed too hard, come out fighting. “Victor is very charming until someone crosses him,” Braeden notes. “Then, he turns nasty.” Braeden himself can only be pushed so far before his hackles rise. “I can’t stand it when someone uses his power to mistreat someone else. I would rather go against figures who have more power than I have, either physically or financially, for instance. Certainly, that comes from my early experience of struggling against something or someone more powerful than I was,” he says referring to his childhood in World War II Germany. That early experience is indelibly stamped on Braeden. “Underlying it all is a deeply hurt boy,” he offers. “Because of the pain of my early years, I think it’s fortunate that I’ve been blessed with a reflective and empathic nature. “I’m basically a soft touch,” he admits.” Which might surprise his fans. “If you approach me the right way, you can have almost anything. There is an enormous sense of wanting to protect someone who’s been hurt, or those who are the underdog.” The actor cannot define his character’s appeal. “You would have to ask the viewer. It’s really better sort of left unsaid, undefined.” He hesitates. “I’m not being falsely modest. I just don’t really know what it is about Victor and his audience. Braeden takes a pragmatic view of his character’s partnership with on-screen wife Nikki. “Overall, I think there is something inherently tragic about these two characters. Victor is a self-made, extremely wealthy but ultimately distrustful man. He grew up in an orphanage, and because of his interrupted relationship with his mother, he has never really trusted women.” Braeden views Nikki as equally flawed. “She allowed him to try to mold her into something she wasn’t. But both characters have metamorphosed together, which is why I think they will always be bound to each other.” While he adores actress Melody Thomas Scott and their storylines over the years, his favorite is actually when Victor met his mother for the first time. “There are moments as an actor where you don’t know how you will play

the scene even five minutes before they say action. Yet, because of its deeply conflicting emotions, it turned out to be one of my most memorable scenes.” Braeden also points to Dale, his wife of more than 30 years, whom he met in college, as an enormous influence and blessing. “Because Dale is so private, people don’t realize how much she influences what I do or don’t do. I make many decisions only after consulting her. She has been a supportive and calming influence in my life,” he explains.

If Dale Braeden has been his rock, their son, Christian, has been his joy and pride. “I love being his father. I still love it even though my son is grown.” Braeden smiles when he recalls the scenes of Victor teaching Victor Jr. to box—scenes that helped cement his Emmy nod this year. “Yes, I was thinking of my own son, when I taught him to box. He was 6 or 7.” In the

intervening decades, Christian has since moved on to Brazilian jiu jitsu, which Braeden describes as “the most efficient form of fighting.”

He says about his son, who retains his original last name Gudegast, that he is very much a combination of his parents. Like his mother, he sees things very visually, very artistically. Like me, he loves sports, loves a good intellectual debate. “He has embarked upon an extremely promising career as a screenwriter, doing something I’ve always wanted to do but never had the guts to pursue.” Family seems to ground the man who lost or left his own so early in life.

“My father died when I was 12,” he says solemnly. “My greatest regret is that neither he nor my mother were alive to see and experience my success.”

Braeden has three brothers, who still live in Germany. Parted by thousands of miles, they are closely knit. “We speak on the phone frequently. In fact, if

I added up my phone bills, I could probably buy another house.” While he left Germany, Braeden does not avoid his country’s troubled past. He speaks passionately about what happened during World War II. “The experience fills me with an impotent anger because there was nothing I could do about

it. There were people who railed against the dictatorship, those who sympathized, those who worked in it. But clearly, it’s too simple to condemn an entire population. Volumes have been written, and you have to do all of the reading to really understand what happened. The notion that Germans have a genetic predisposition for anti-Semitism, for example, is pure nonsense.

“But after all the soul-searching and pain, what I’ve taken is that there is no such thing as collective guilt. That’s too simplistic and based on intellectual laziness. What we must learn is that we can never allow our democratic rights to be abrogated—not by anyone for any reason because the crimes of the Nazi era would never have been committed in an open democracy.” While he eschews the concept of collective guilt, the legacy of Germany’s

past deeply troubles Braeden. That remorse is palpable as he honestly addresses what it is to be German, to be cloaked in the stereotypes. The only

way to shed the legacy was to reach out. “Many in my generation moved to Israel to live on a kibbutz, to work.” Braeden did what he knows best. “I

played soccer with the Maccabees, the Jewish team that won the 1972 National

Soccer championship. I did so proudly because I would not acquiesce in the assumptions regarding Germans. I will not have my image defined by the Nazis!"

The Honors

In 1987, the former German ambassador to the United States, Dr. Juerjin Ruhfus, appointed Braeden to the German-American Advisory Board. He was the only actor among an esteemed group, including Dr. Henry Kissinger, Katherine Graham, Gen. Alexander Haig, Steffi Graf and former Federal Reserve chair Paul Volker. "I felt a deep need to connect with those who were so horribly victimized between 1933 and 1945."

Four years later, Braeden was awarded the Federal Medal of Honor by the president of Germany, in recognition of his achievements promoting a positive, realistic image of Germans in America, while advancing German/Jewish dialogue. He cofounded the German-American Cultural Society for the same purpose. In the summer of 1999, Braeden lent his considerable support to the first

American staging of Bertolt Brecht's "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui," at UCLA's Freud Theater. The performance marked the Berliner Ensemble's final appearance on the international stage. "I wanted the American audience to see how satirically and critically a German playwright and theater company dealt wit this darkest period in German history."

On the professional front, Braeden won the 1997 Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actor, and while he was not at the ceremony, looking back, he would have thanked many. "I could have gone on and on, thanking so many people who supported me over the years. I would have started with my wife, who has always been critically positive and encouraging. She has been extremely loyal and supportive from the beginning of my career. I would have also thanked my son." Braeden notes that the speech probably would have run over his appointed time, as there are so many people who have been instrumental in his success. "I've met so many wonderful people in my professional life." Of course, his Y&R family would have been high on his list of mentions. "I would have thanked Bill Bell and Kay Alden for having given me a wonderful role. It's a symbiotic effort, since storyline begins with the writers. I've been surrounded by good actors whom I would have thanked: Peter Bergman (Jack), Heather Tom (Victoria), Joshua Morrow (Nicholas), Signy Coleman (Hope), too, who did a wonderful job and most of all Melody Thomas Scott (Nikki)." Braeden had special words for the on-screen love of his life. "It's been a delight to work with Melody Thomas Scott all these years. I have a deep affection for her, and think we've both been very lucky, in that we've enjoyed our pairing." He would also have said thank you to producer Ed Scott, whom Braeden calls "the best producer/director for any actor." While the veteran of five Best Actor nominations regretted not having been in New York to receive his kudos in person, he had already committed to doing his one-man Shakespearean show wherein he bravely takes on 14 of the Bard's incredible monologues. "Of course I would liked to have been there," he admits, "but I was deeply happy to have won."

“It’s really a roll of the dice. But winning was really a great feeling, and I was honored to be given this kind of prize by my fellow actors,” Braeden says. And to have won this award brought his adventure in America full circle. “I arrived in that great city as an 18 year old with \$50 in my pocket and not knowing a soul. Coming back here, where I started my life in America so trepidatiously, with the acknowledgment of my fellow actors, is a deeply gratifying experience. “In these moments of honors and awards, he allows, “you become reflective of so much. That’s why speeches have to be cut short.”

FYI

Eric Braeden’s Passions: “My job, auto racing (“I won second in the Long Beach Pro-Am Celebrity Grand Prix; ah, the roar of an engine”), soccer, boxing, Shakespeare (“I feel compelled to do these one-man shows; but doing Shakespeare is as scary as anything I’ve ever undertaken”), being a father, California, Belgian chocolate, Italian food, sushi, and good sex!”

EXTRA QUOTES:

On director James Cameron: “He is one of the brightest people I’ve ever met, with an enormous grasp of the physical aspects of filmmaking. He attends to every detail. He undertook a gargantuan effort and would not be stopped—not by studio execs or naysayers. I have enormous respect for him.”

On Leonardo DiCaprio: “He impressed me as a brilliant actor, not so much with his performance in the film, which I thought was very good, but by observing him on set. He would imitate people, Nicholson, for example, brilliantly, unconsciously. He is one of those people who was born to act. He is who he is without any self-consciousness. Like Brando,” which whom Braeden worked in *Moriturus* in 1965.

On Woody Allen’s films. ““He’s one of the few filmmakers who talks to us on an intellectual level. His appeal is in the combination of his incisive wit and utterly sophisticated humor.” Braeden last saw *Deconstructing Harry* and loved it.

Eric Braeden (Victor, Y&R) returned to his German hometown of Bredenbek (from which he took his Americanized name, and where his father was once mayor), just outside of Hamburg, in August, to be made an honorary citizen in a ceremony in the town square. Braeden admits that he was not wholly prepared for how profoundly the trip would affect him. “I was shaken,” he admits. “I hadn’t been back for a long trip for about four years. And what I took from this special journey was a sense of my roots, a sense of my own mortality. I became acutely aware of how much time has passed. I was also reminded of the enormous discrepancy between what I know Germans to be like and the images of them one sees in popular culture. It’s disheartening, and it saddens me. I wish non-Germans knew how warm, how good the German people can be.”

Braeden notes how deep the war’s wounds run. “I again reflected on the extraordinary damage those f___ing Nazis did. The hurt is so great.”

While the Emmy-winning actor is a confirmed Californian, the trip to Bredenbek also underscored how far he is from his place of birth. “Part of me is here, but part of me is there too. I miss it. I wish I could travel there

more often. I feel such a connection, one this trip reminded me of. I think I'm sometimes homesick."

He gave a brief speech (click on full speech text in German) in which he noted the town's long-standing families, "people whose farms I had worked on

as a boy, as I was trying to raise money to help my mother after my father died."

In spite of his melancholy, Braeden was able to enjoy himself. He spent days riding a bicycle over the beautiful countryside, often with his older brother

Horst, whom he describes as "a surrogate father. He is eight years older, and when my father died, he took that role. Riding that bike everywhere made me

feel as I had as a boy; that's how I got around, to the farms, to the fields and haystacks, to the secret places where I rendezvoused with girls, to the

lakes where we swam. "I will cherish the moments of this trip, of seeing old friends, of remembering old times. I can't seem to get enough of it; I feel the need to talk about the past."

In the evening chats in the homes into which he was invited, Braeden learned what happened to some of the local boys who had fought in the war and did

come back from the Russian Front "with only one leg, or no legs, or no arms, or blinded, for example."

Braeden was aware that few who turned out for the ceremony knew him from his Y&R role of Victor Newman. In fact, old and young alike wanted to know about "Titanic."

"They don't get Y&R in Germany. They really know me from my movies." Braeden says he plans to return soon, for another dose of scenery and old

friends. "Although America, and specifically California, have been my home for many years, I still feel the deep need to connect with my life as a boy in Germany.