

# Give it up for Sean Penn

He is the most explosive actor of his generation, with a professional and personal life characterised by unparalleled intensity. But having turned 40, Sean Penn has become a non-smoking family man who likes boating and riding bikes with his kids. Just don't tell him he's not angry any more

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James Kaplan - The Observer

Sean Penn quit smoking on his 40th birthday, and at this moment, 26 American Spirit-less days in - nicotine patches are for wimps - he is as miserable as a happy man can be. Over lunch at an outdoor restaurant near his home in Marin County, north of San Francisco, he worries a hole in the paper tablecloth with his thumb, then works on enlarging it. His fingernails are bitten to the quick. He consumes two main courses - fried-calamari followed by a hamburger platter. Breakfast was steak and eggs and chips, coffee and Coke.

A little later in the afternoon, on the way to George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch to screen a movie by a young Israeli director who interests him, Penn stops at a drive-in for another hamburger. *'You're seeing the evidence of the post-cigarette bloat,'* he says with a wan smile, sitting down with his tray.

He's probably carrying a few extra pounds, but he looks good. With his Vandyke beard, big, square head, and long, strong nose, he bears a passing resemblance to Ezra Pound in his middle years.

These are Sean Penn's middle years: how amazing. His small, sleepy blue eyes, with their perpetual look of challenge or disbelief, are fringed with fine lines. It's an arresting, monumental, worrisome face: looking at him, you think, What else could somebody with a face like this do but be a movie star?

He takes off his black leather jacket, and under the rolled-up shirtsleeve on his left forearm, I spy a large, ornate tattoo of a shackled demon with the caption DELIVER ME in Gothic letters. Deliver me from what? Evil? The celebrity press? His own demons?

As we know well by now, Sean Penn, a reasonably public figure, has mixed feelings about public exposure. As the survivor of enough unwanted publicity to last a lifetime - primarily for his pugnacity with the press during his brief and tumultuous mid-80s marriage to Madonna - he is nobody's media whore. He has a long and sensitive relationship with paparazzi (in 1987 he spent 34 days in jail for punching an amateur paparazzo, an extra who tried to take his picture on a movie set). He gives interviews sparingly and reluctantly. Yet as a performer who has consistently taken roles in challenging films, as opposed to films that earn big money, he has effectively turned himself into an actor's actor, a remote star with a lingering air of menace and inaccessibility, all of which continues to make him an object of fascination.

Soon, Penn tells me, he'll begin rehearsals for a Sam Shepard play ( *The Late Henry Moss* ) that will run for six weeks in San Francisco; then he'll star in an independent picture called *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* ( *'That's a good story,'* he says, smiling). *'Then I should make another movie'* Penn says.

That's not make as in *'act in'* He's talking about his true love: writing and directing dark, quirky, performance-driven movies in which he does not perform. The problem thus far, however - if his first two pictures, *The Indian Runner* and *The Crossing Guard*, are any indication - is that filmmaker Penn's movies don't perform at the box office.

With his third film, *The Pledge*, Sean Penn is trying to rip out of the box - but by his own rules. Like *The Crossing Guard*, *The Pledge* stars Jack Nicholson and features Robin Wright Penn. Like both of his previous films, it is dark. And once again, Sean Penn will not appear in front of the cameras. Based loosely on the Friedrich Dürrenmatt novel, *The Pledge* is the story of a retired homicide detective (Nicholson) who can't let a long-closed child-killing case go. Tracking a suspect to the Sierra Nevada, he pursues his love of fishing while waiting to reel in the killer.

*The Pledge* will be distributed by a major studio, Warner Bros. It was financed by an independent production company called Franchise Pictures, was budgeted at a relatively modest \$30m - \$10m of which goes to pay Nicholson's full fee - and was shot on a shoestring in Vancouver. *'It's a retirement-crisis story disguised as a thriller, let's put it that way,'* the writer/director says. *'I didn't get the retirement-crisis story financed, if you know what I mean. But I got it shot.'* He grins.

Another quirky character study, in other words. But a quirky character study with a three-act structure and plot payoff at the end. Besides Nicholson and Wright, *The Pledge* also stars Vanessa Redgrave, Helen Mirren, Mickey Rourke, Harry Dean Stanton and Sam Shepard. Nevertheless, distinguished cast aside, Penn the filmmaker is realistic about the studio's involvement, and about why this might be his first project to win a wider audience. *'It's a very different kind of movie than my first two,'* Penn says. *'I think everybody considers it much more accessible.'*

As always, however, Sean Penn has his own version of accessibility.

There have always been demons. They were there before Penn fired a gun at press helicopters covering his 1986 wedding to Madonna; they were there before the many fist fights won and lost; they are, in the midst of his happiness, there still.

Sunset: we're driving back from the Skywalker Ranch screening - two hours of dark and quirky doings among Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, sort of a Sean Penn movie with yarmulkes. Penn is at the wheel of his black BMW, accelerating over back-country switchbacks in central Marin. He drives to relax, but he is not an especially relaxed driver. Seat-beltless, he leans over the steering wheel, his goatee jutting defiantly as he scans the road for enemies. Passing through a small town, we soon find ourselves behind one: a very slow Mercedes. *'Come on, sir,'* he moans. *'Where is it you think you're not going?'*

A long scar below his right eyebrow puts me in mind of a scene in *The Crossing Guard* in which Robin Wright asks ex-con David Morse about a similar scar on his forehead. Morse tells her he got it banging his head against the wall. *'You just couldn't stand jail?'* Wright asks. *'No, I just couldn't stand me,'* Morse says.

Penn wrote the line.

He is, by his own admission, *'a big drinker'* even though the court-appointed psychotherapist he consulted after getting out of jail determined he was not an alcoholic. He tells a story against himself: during the earthquake that rattled the counties north of San Francisco in early September, *'I'd had a couple of drinks,'* he says. *'I was in my editing room with some people, and suddenly everybody sat down. Fast. I thought that was odd.'* He smiles.

It is tempting to think of him as a perpetual rebel, an adolescent in arrest, rather than as a 40-year-old family man - husband to Robin Wright Penn, father to their nine-year-old daughter Dylan Frances and seven-year-old son Hopper Jack. But when I ask where he's headed this evening, he says, *'I'm gonna go home and read to my kids. I tried Harry Potter, but it didn't take. Plus it was too hard to act, doing all those voices.'*

It's tempting to remember all the bad behaviour, the indelible template laid down in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Bad Boys* and *Racing With the Moon* and *The Falcon* and the *Snowman* - the remote, sneering, mesmerising man-boy with the little, close-set eyes.

*'So how was turning 40?'* I ask him.

He laughs a little. *'Yeah-how about that?'* he says.

*'How'd it hit you?'*

*'Well, it was a disaster,'* he says. *'I had always told myself that I really should quit smoking at 30. OK, 35. Always, 40 was: there's no choice any more, you just have to do it.'*

*'Why?'*

*'It was time not to be a slave to this nonsense, you know? I mean, if I could smoke eight cigarettes a day, I'd smoke the rest of my life. But it's worse than that with me. I smoke four packs like that.'*

I ask if the birthday itself, as a landmark, was difficult.

He shakes his head. *'I don't really have a thing about that,'* he says. *'I'll go 50, 60 - I don't care. This is not an area of my girly sensibility. You know, there's that thing: what age do you see yourself as? Always felt I'm more like 76. That's when I'll say, 'Oh finally!' I'll feel old at 77.'*

He hasn't plucked that number out of nowhere. Penn's father, the director (and actor) Leo Penn, died at 77 - of lung cancer - two years ago. Sean, who was in the midst of shooting Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown* in New York as his father was dying, flew back to LA every few days to be with him.

*'I thought when he lost his dad, it humbled him,'* Robin Wright Penn says. *'It took the edge off a little bit.'*

Leo Penn's acting career ended in the early 50s when he refused to name names before the House Un-American Activities Committee and was branded a Communist. Blacklisted in the movie business, he turned to television directing. One of Sean Penn's boyhood memories is watching Elia Kazan - who did name names - shoot *The Last Tycoon* near the Penn family home in Malibu. One day Leo Penn walked his son down to see the set. *'My dad was a very warm, polite person, and Kazan said hello to him, and [Dad] just walked by,'* he remembers.

His father's example - in every way - left a strong stamp on Penn. Trying to move from acting to directing is just the start. It's too easy to write off Penn as a self-important punk without tracking the source of his demons. Hollywood is in his blood (his mother Eileen Ryan and his younger brother Christopher are both actors), and he's furious with Hollywood.

*'It just makes you angry, the idea that a guy that goes off, fights for his country, wins all kinds of medals by risking his life, and then four years later, the country says, 'You can't work here','* he says. *'And I am a total believer in: it can happen again. There's signs of it all the time. The one thing you can count on in Hollywood - across the board - is cowardice.'*

*'The thing that makes Sean special in Hollywood is that it takes great courage to do it on your terms, knowing you may not please the 10 guys in town that green-light pictures,'* says Art Linson, who got to know Penn when he produced *Fast Times* and has remained his close friend for almost 20 years. *'He's not going to put out silly, likable movies so an executive at a studio will say, 'Way to go, guy - let's have dinner'. That takes balls. Few people in this town have the courage to be good.'*

Linson is talking about both Penn's acting and his filmmaking. But none of this explains why he's always threatening to quit acting - as if it were cigarettes - when he's so brilliant at it.

*'Well, I don't like it,' Penn says. 'Sometimes maybe for a week or two I like it. But there's no comparison to being able to go out and make your movie as a director. It's already a crapshoot that it's something you're interested in - that it relates to what you want to create at all. It's somebody else's trip. And then you add your bit to it. It's a great craft, it's a great interpretive art, and I'm a fan of it, but it doesn't fill any kind of need to work; it certainly hasn't filled my bank account. I just want real creative freedom without worrying about, you know, car payments.'*

It's strange: his anger seems more abstract than it once was. I had expected - well, one actor who worked with him asked me, half jokingly, *'Has he punched you in the mouth yet?'* It's something that's in the back of your mind when you sit down with Sean Penn. But it's hard to find the hot buttons; he's looser about himself than I thought he'd be.

*'What do people get wrong when they write about you?'* I ask.

*'I usually read pieces about me and respond, 'That sounds like the last one;', he says, 'it's because I get off on the same thing every time, and it's redundant'. He laughs. 'I mean, it'd be more interesting to go on a fact-finding mission. Just pick the front page of the New York Times, and hop in a car, and let's really search it down. See who's fuckin' lying.'*

He did something very much like this recently, he tells me, mentioning a trip he took to Selma, Alabama, with a former Black Panther named Geronimo Pratt to encourage citizens to vote in the city's mayoral election. This is mildly astonishing: I hadn't heard that Penn had done any such thing. But shouldn't I have heard? Don't celebrities always make sure they make the news for their good works? There is no mention of Penn's trip on any newspaper or wire-service database: strangely enough, he went solely for the purpose of going.

*'Isn't there a potential downside in making a trip like that for somebody like you?'* I ask.

*'What's the downside?'*

*'Being perceived as a limousine liberal?'*

*'I am a limousine liberal,' he says.*

He stops the car outside my hotel. *'Look,' he says. 'You don't have to think the world of yourself or be a great activist to do anything like that. I mean, I'm not gonna avoid idiotic comments people want to make just because you try to do something good.'*

Sean Penn is trying to do something good. He's not trying to get more famous, or very rich - though he certainly wouldn't mind making enough money to stop doing the very thing we want him to continue doing. (*'Give me one cheque,' he says. 'Get rid of the acting; just make movies. Just that one cheque.'*) Look at the pictures he's done over the past five years: *Sweet and Lowdown* . *The Weight of Water* . *Up at the Villa* . *Hurlyburly* . *The Thin Red Line* . *She's So Lovely* . *Dead Man Walking* . He has frequently been magnificent. He has seldom been paid in kind. For *Sweet and Lowdown* , he earned scale (a little more than \$2,000 a week), like all actors in Woody Allen films. For *Hurlyburly* , he made a reported \$150,000. For *The Thin Red Line* , he was reportedly paid \$300,000, though his deal included back-end points should the picture earn money. (It didn't.) For well-distributed independent pictures such as *The Weight of Water*, he earns in the low millions - a quarter of what the blockbusters he regularly turns down pay.

He shrugs. *'I go broke all the time,'* he says. *'I can't do what I've been doing - I keep doing projects, and not getting paid for them as an actor, and then I go out as a director...'*

He trails off. And make even less is the unspoken thought. Penn developed The Pledge for a year before Warner Bros was involved; he invested a substantial amount of his own cash.

*'So why not just go and play a spy for 10 million bucks?'*

*'I'm too rich to justify that,'* he says. *'I mean, I've been the starving artist as a young actor. And if something like that was offered at the time, you know - anything, a TV series - I would've fucking done it in a flash.'* He laughs. *'But once you're able to get by and do what you do, I would recommend to myself or anybody else downsizing your life first. Because you gotta believe in it on some level, or don't take the dough.'*

But it's hard to downsize your life, even though fate may move it around on you. In 1996, soon after Penn and Robin Wright married, she was carjacked at gunpoint in the driveway of their Santa Monica home. The couple's two small children were in her Toyota Land Cruiser with her: Wright coolly negotiated with the carjackers to let the children go. She escaped unharmed; the crooks were apprehended. But that was it for LA.

In short order, the Penns moved to Marin County and renovated a 6,000sq ft house to Sean's very specific specifications. The house already had a swimming pool and a tennis court. But, most important, he wanted a film-editing studio, and he wanted security. *'What I did is, I built a compound,'* Penn says. *'I took every bit of money I've ever earned in my life, put it all into it. And I built a wall around it, and it's great. I mean, what I am is a parent in a small town.'*

Which is true, more or less. He's out of town a lot when he's working, but when he's around, he's around. What's he like as a dad? *'Direct, honest, loving,'* his wife says. *'He's a softy with his girl. But he's a disciplinarian - thank God, cos I'm such a gimp in that department.'*

Robin Wright Penn compares his parenting to his moviemaking. *'You must teach and give examples to your offspring, as you would as a director,'* she says. *'On his set, there's so much confidence in his quest, his vision. Usually there's so many filters running through a director - the studio, the producers, the crew. With his movies, it's Sean's show, always. It's very thought out - you never feel unsettled. It takes an enormous amount of stress to make him stressed, when you and I would be dying.'*

*'I never saw Sean blow his top, ever,'* says Aaron Eckhart, who plays Nicholson's former partner in The Pledge. *'He was always polite. There were some things where I thought, He's gonna lose his mind - we had a lot of weather problems. But he'd sit there, and say, What can I do?' The quintessential captain of the ship.'*

Penn has brought me out to the marina where he keeps his real ship, a 34ft, twin-screw, white, aqua and purple speed demon, with a mean, rakish silhouette and a good, corny, poker-playing name on the transom - complete with a picture of a poker hand. He grins with raffish pride as he looks at it. *'I took my master sailing course this summer,'* he tells me, *'and I have to say, what a bore! It's all tacking, this way, that way. It's like golf.'* He shakes his head. *'People say, 'Oh, it's so peaceful, so quiet.' If I want quiet, this thing' - he nods at his boat - 'will go 45 knots. I can go to the middle of the bay and turn the engine off. It'll be quiet.'*

*'Is that when you're most at peace?' I ask. 'Out in the bay?'*

*'Nah. I don't know... you're asking me a very short time after I quit smoking.'* He laughs.

*'You miss it, don't you,'* I say.

*'I miss this.'* He mimes a long, luxurious inhale. *'You know, look at me - I'm chewing on ice ! But I'm comfortable, I think. I'm basically not tortured right now.'*

He shakes his head. *'But I think sleep is a big waste of time.'* He laughs. *'It's like school. I mean, when I'm not, like, building something - whether that's writing, or with my kids, teaching them how to do something, or making a movie, or whatever - when I'm not building something, and I'm not driving, and I'm not fucking' - another laugh - 'what am I doing? Unless I'm just hungover as a son of a bitch, then I can lay in a bed pretty good and do nothing, you know? Cigarettes were great for that. That's what they're for.'*

But cigarettes are history. His short temper is history. His outrage is another story.

*'Um, let's put it this way,'* Penn says. *'I am not disturbed by Ronald Reagan's Alzheimer's.'* He looks puckish. *'You know, there's not a lot of cleaner pictures of karma in the world. I mean, it's not a very Christian way of thinking - I do stray sometimes'* He laughs. *'But I go right from him mocking the farm worker and eating grapes on television during the boycott to him dribbling today. And I feel a sense of justice.'And I am sure that'- another laugh - 'I'll end up dribbling later on behalf of something I did, too.'*

I can't stop feeling intrigued by Penn's curious relationship with money. And so I call him one night a couple of weeks later to ask some rude questions. Is he making anything close to his full fee for his next acting gig, The Assassination of Richard Nixon?

*'That's an awfully darn good script with a first-time director,'* he tells me. *'I'm not gonna be buying my house from that deal.'*

I ask what his director's fee was on The Pledge . *'It's hard to say, since it's been significantly compromised in an effort to get the nuts and bolts together,'* he says. *'Look, if you start playing with the jingle in your own pocket, you better have a lot of jingle, which I don't, and it's best to play [after you've been paid], which I didn't.'*

There are children's voices and a small dog yapping in the background.

*'I've made less money than anybody who does what I do,'* Sean Penn insists. *'Meaning, I think I do it pretty well and work pretty hard. Believe me, I'm not boasting when I say that - I'm smiling not to cry.'*

*'But you live well,'* I say, as gently as possible.

He's cupping his hand over the phone to talk to somebody for a moment. Now he's back. *'I got a kid here who really wants to go for a bike ride,'* he says.

He is as happy as a miserable man can be.