

Interview with Sean Penn

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Having turned 40 last August, Hollywood's eternal bad-boy Sean Penn is finally showing signs of growing up, having marked this sobering milestone by quitting his four-pack-a-day smoking habit - a homage, of sorts, to his father, Leo Penn, who died of lung cancer two years earlier.

'My birthday was a disaster,' he concedes. But not in terms of looking in the mirror and noting any additional wrinkles around those small, but mesmerizing blue eyes. Those same eyes that previously enchanted Madonna to make Penn her first husband in 1985; their ill-fated marriage lasting just three years, and earning them nickname of 'The Poison Penns' along the way. No, Penn's Big 4-0 dilemma was more in the sense of having to honour a promise he made to himself years ago: I had always told myself that I should quit smoking at 30. OK, 35. But always, 40 was, there's no choice anymore, you just have to do it.

'So turning 40, as an age, didn't bother me in itself. I'll go 50 or 60 and still not care. I've always felt I was more like 76, so that's when I'll say, 'Oh finally!' I'll feel old at 77,' says Penn whose father, unsurprisingly, died aged 77.

'Watching my father die was the clincher. My father was the only guy everyone knew who had no enemies. He was the noble thing,' he says, discussing how his father was blacklisted during the McCarthy era for refusing to name names. He was sick for a while. So it was coming as much as you can consider something like that coming, but it's still displacing, says the actor who claims that giving up nicotine was far easier than quitting acting.

Still hell-bent on quitting his career as an actor, he says today: *'I don't take a lot of enjoyment from it. At the same time, however, I've tried to make a point of doing things that push me one way or the other. I feel that my tool kit has grown and I can build a character better, but I don't get excited about it anymore. I try to do the best I can, but it's a job, as opposed to directing, which I find thrilling. Acting is always a struggle, and now it's more of an emotional struggle because I don't enjoy it so much. I feel melted down after every movie. I love acting. I just want someone else to do it.'*

I wish I could direct more, but I found I am not a very prolific writer. It's hard to come up with what you want, then spend years developing it and hustling for money. Financially, movies bleed you. That's why I keep acting; it's largely a financial matter, trying to keep afloat during the downtime when I'm trying to make my own movies,' says Penn who has been threatening to give up acting since 1991 when he wrote and directed Indian Runner, The (1991) going on to direct Crossing Guard, The (1995) in 1995.

'If you want entertainment, you get a couple of hookers and some cocaine. People very happily and proudly say there's room for entertainment strictly for its own sake, but I disagree with that. Film is just too powerful a medium to be just that. There's gotta be some kind of human sharing in it and some kind of journey and risk-taking so it's exciting not only for the audience but also for the participants,' says the actor, who fortunately returned to acting to appear in such films as Carlito's Way (1993), Dead Man Walking (1995) and The Thin Red Line (1998).

Stepping behind the camera for a third time, Penn's latest directing effort is quirky thriller, *The Pledge*, (2001) which once again stars his favourite actors, wife Robin Wright and long time drinking buddy Jack Nicholson, heading an impressive cast which includes Helen Mirren, Vanessa Redgrave, Sam Shepard, Benicio Del Toro, Harry Dean Stanton and Mickey Rourke.

Nicholson plays a retired homicide detective who is haunted by an old unsolved case, and becomes dangerously obsessed with tracking down a serial killer who has been murdering little girls.

And while the Penn and Nicholson have forged a strong friendship over the past ten years, the older actor's salary still accounted for a full third of *The Pledge's* relatively-low \$30 million budget. Refusing to discuss the three-time Oscar-winner's \$10 million fee, Penn has only praise for the veteran actor, who in many ways is a mentor to him: *'This shoot wasn't easy on anyone, shot on a shoe-string in cold and bleak locations. I mean, Jack was staying in a roadside motor lodge with no cable,'* he laughs.

Encouraging Nicholson's artistic input on the film, Penn reveals how the two men would enjoy getting together in local bars rather than posh restaurants, during script discussions, both feeling more comfortable in down to earth environments.

'In all of our pasts there's a corner bar we used to drink at. In different company we're just more comfortable going there than Spago. Jack and I meet down at the corner bar. It's the one that he was at before I was born. It was the one I went to before I met him and it's our territory together.'

Discussing *The Pledge* (2001), Penn says: *'It's a very different kind of movie than my first two. I think everybody considers it much more accessible. It's really a retirement-crisis story disguised as a thriller. I didn't get the retirement-crisis story financed, if you know what I mean. But I got it shot,'* he grins slyly.

By his own admission, Penn's wife was not his first choice for the role of a truck-stop waitress with a young daughter and an abusive ex-husband, casting her just a week before shooting began. I was talking to a lot of people, and there were people who I was very serious about, but I felt they would need more of me than I could give in these circumstances, so I just decided that I needed somebody that I knew could handle the emotional stuff and go head-to head with Jack Nicholson. So Robin was the one. And I'm glad it happened, because it worked out, and now I can't imagine it any other way.

'But as parents, there were difficult moments on the set for both of us. It effects the whole mood when you're shooting a scene of police standing around the body of a young girl. Obviously, it's on people's minds, and they start tailing off into their own experience or terrors about that sort of thing. But we both try not to bring that stuff home with us,' says the actor who admits to a soft spot, relishing the opportunity to shake off the bleakness of the film's subject by coming home, making dinner for the kids, and putting them to bed.

'Being a parent makes me more concerned about flying, which I do a lot. I've become very vulnerable to a lot of things because of my kids, things you don't see coming. The worst lawsuits I could face prior to being a parent are nothing in the face of that,' says Penn whose relationship with Robin has survived affairs with pop singer Jewel and supermodel Kate Moss; clocking up six years of marriage this April.

'But being a parent has made everything better. And then there are the surprises of it: just when you think you know what it is, then, oh my God, they do some kind of magic. My wife and I find ourselves lying in bed, chuckling at the various exploits of these two kids. They're the most interesting people in your life,' says Penn who lives in conservative Marin County, California, with his actress wife and their two children, nine-year-old daughter Dylan and seven year-old son Hopper.

As if to prove his point, his countenance greatly brightens as he begins to relate some of his kids' jokes: *'Did you hear about the brave grape?'* he asks. *'An elephant trampled on it full force, and it just let out a little wine,'* he says, laughing aloud like it's the first time he heard it.

While some Hollywood parents protect their children from the grim reality of some of the roles they play, the Penns refer to share the details of their work, sharing with them the gruesome aspects of *The Pledge* (2001) child-killer story, although refusing to show them the actual film. *'We told them what it was about. But they're not allowed to see those scenes. It's fragile ground,'* says Penn who reveals his nine-year-old daughter recently saw his sexy teen movie, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. But I fast-forwarded past all of the provocative parts.

Dylan is particularly upset by violence. *Dead Man Walking* (1995) really messed with her, even though we didn't let them see the rape and murder, or the end. We didn't let them see those things. But we let them see the drama between the two characters, between Susan Sarandon and I. And the pain and the discussions of what had happened. And they found it extremely depressing. Very sad.

'The only movies I've made that I really don't want them to see is anything that's a bad movie with bad acting. And I've been in a few. That's the obscenity in American film. It's bad work,' he laughs. *'I watched Sam Peckinpah growing up, and I didn't kill anybody,'* he says referring to the director whose violent themes and name would forever define his films and reputation: *Bloody Sam* (*Straw Dogs* (1971), *The Getaway*, (1972) *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) *'Clearly, it's bad acting that makes kids kill people. But I won't name names,'* he laughs, sardonically.

For an actor who constantly threatens to quit acting - Penn will star in no less than four movies this year - *I am Sam* (2001) with Michelle Pfeiffer; thriller *The Weight of Water* (2001) with Elizabeth Hurley and Catherine McCormack; comedy *The Beaver Trilogy*, (2001) with Crispin Glover, and *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (2001), based on the true story of a bumbling salesman who blames all his problems on the former U.S. president, as well as narrating the documentary, *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001).

Unimpressed by his two Oscar nods - nominated for *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and also for Woody Allen's *Sweet And Lowdown* (1999)- he spits: *'With the Academy Awards, if you're standing up there and looking out, you're not going to see many people who can find their butt with their hand. So what does their opinion mean? The Academy Awards is merely an opportunity to be an extra in a TV show, and maybe twenty seconds more than that if you win. If there's anything more disgusting in the movie business . . . it's the whoredom of my peers. It's a guy's arm coming out of the screen jerking you off. I prefer to do it myself at home than to have some guy contriving wet dreams for me.'*

If he still comes over as a bad-tempered sulky teen, then he has relaxed considerably from his 20s, when he regularly turned up in the newspapers - and the courts - for brawling with photographers who he claimed were stalking him. The poster boy for bad behaviour during his marriage to Madonna in the 1980s, he even wound up in jail for a short stint. Ask him how he's changed since those days, he says: *'I get tired more easily, and I get tired of being tired more easily. I'm also a father and that changes things a lot,'* says Penn who wishes he'd met wife Robin earlier thereby saving him from his disastrous short lived union with Madonna.

Despite the volatile nature of the Penns' relationship, this hasn't stopped the couple from working together to great acclaim, co-starring in *The Crossing Guard* (1995), *She's So Lovely* (1997), *Hurly Burly* (1998), and now, their latest film, *The Pledge* (2001) If the Penns may be perceived as Hollywood's weirdest couple, then they take their parenting responsibilities seriously.

'I'm a guy who's been in a lot of physical altercations over the years, many which I initiated, and I can you that as soon as somebody throws a punch, it's just a pathetic stage of life. But they fucking deserved much more than they ever got. Those people who go around hunting people with cameras are not people to me, they're just tow jam molded into the form of a man who is given a machine so he can live in his mother's back room'

'We've all heard about human spontaneous combustion, but I don't think anybody's seen it. I'd love to be at a movie premiere, or drive by a movie premiere, and see them all out there, all of a sudden they blow up. That's my private little fantasy,' says the actor who admits he still takes comfort in alcohol, and still has a temper, although he believes he has learned to cloak it.

'Provoked into something physical?' he says. 'It was there. It happened a lot. I'm extremely careful about that. The jail thing - I've done that, and it's terrible bore. On a general principle, I would always like to move toward non violence. But most important, I don't want to go away from my kids. Anyone can have a career, but making a home's another thing'.