

Sean Penn's true colors

The actor deserves respect for his talent and his patriotism

By Jack Mathews – New York Daily News

I have never met Sean Penn but I owe the guy an apology.

Nineteen years ago, I wrote a hideously ill-conceived column about him in the Los Angeles Times that embarrasses me to this day and that I'm sure accounts for Penn naming me to another writer as one of only two people on Earth he hated.

What I wanted to say in that 1986 column is that a young actor being heralded as the new Marlon Brando should take a cue from Brando's early career and use his clout to work with directors who could teach him something. Brando started out working with such giants as Elia Kazan, Fred Zinnemann and Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Penn's early list included Jim Goddard, Rick Rosenthal and James Foley.

Though I had set out to offer constructive criticism, I wrote the column in the voice of an agent trying to hustle money for the movie Penn would do after "Shanghai Surprise." He co-starred in that debacle with Madonna, whom I referred to as "the blond doing the Brooke Shields impression."

At the time, Penn was married to Madonna, so he may have had trouble seeing constructive criticism in my trashing his wife. And it got worse! The next Penn movie that my imaginary agent was trying to sell was to be directed by his father, Leo Penn, who'd had a successful TV career but had directed only one other feature.

In the space of a few paragraphs, I had managed to insult Penn, his wife, his father and all the directors he had worked with.

I'm moved to write this now because I have come to admire Penn not only as the great actor he is, but for the humanity he has learned how to embrace and the courage he has shown in expressing it. He had the image of an off-screen thug in the mid-1980s, and when he went to jail for slugging an extra in 1987, I considered myself lucky that he hadn't had the opportunity to review my column personally.

The 45-year-old Penn who joined the early rescue efforts after Hurricane Katrina is a different person. Cynics have accused him of literal showboating in New Orleans, exploiting a disaster to promote his next movie, "All the King's Men," which was partly filmed there. They're the same people who ridiculed him when he bought a \$56,000 page in The Washington Post in 2002 and published an open appeal to George Bush not to go to war in Iraq, and when he made visits to that country - before and during the war - as a reporter for a San Francisco paper.

I like that he did all those things, not just because I agree with his politics, but because I feel certain of his sincerity. Every politically active celebrity knows that taking strong stands on issues is likely to do more harm to their careers than good.

It's odd to me that movie stars who take left-wing stands are dismissed as airhead dilettantes by conservatives. I don't recall them laughing at Ronald Reagan, and they're not laughing now at Arnold Schwarzenegger. But Penn, George Clooney, Tim Robbins, Angelina Jolie and the perennial target, Barbra Streisand, are red meat to right-wing commentators whenever they open their mouths.

"I don't care what celebrities think about the war," a conservative friend tells me whenever one of them speaks out.

It's doubtful that many celebrities think they're going to change people's minds by what they say about issues. They're just using their ability to draw media coverage to get the ideas out there. Penn couldn't have imagined his open letter to Bush would change the President's mind, but with leading Democrats failing to speak up for an anti-war view shared then by about 40% of Americans, he at least brought attention to it.

It was an act of patriotism that some called treason, and for that and Katrina and all the rest, I say to Penn, you have my respect, man.

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Sean Penn helped rescue efforts following Hurricane Katrina.