

## *Penn is mightier*

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By Stephanie Bunbury

Sean Penn as Samuel Bicke in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*.

Despite his reputation as a humourless bad boy, Sean Penn just wants to make the world a better place. And he doesn't mind a laugh, either.

The latest line on Sean Penn is that he has no sense of humour. There have been a few dominant themes in the Penn celebrity profile over the years: he's the ferrety actor who was married to Madonna; he's the delinquent who hit photographers and went to prison for 60 days as a result; he's the hard drinker, the abusive husband, the faithless husband, like some character from a novel by his mate Charles Bukowski.

More recently, of course, he has been Hollywood's top un-American, the worst liberal of them all. Most controversially, he has made two trips to Iraq - one before the US invasion at the invitation of a human rights organisation, and one since - and he has written eloquently about what his country has done there. As a result, Fox News has dubbed Saddam Hussein "Sean Penn's buddy"; Penn, meanwhile, has described the Bush administration as neo-Fascist.

He is all the more pleased if the Right hates him. "My accusers are against everything I believe in, so, as in a schoolyard, if the bully calls you a prick you get a little bit happier," he said in Cannes, something of a safe haven for American mavericks. Even many of those who broadly share his views, however, are faintly embarrassed to have him as a fellow traveller these days. He just seems to take everything, especially himself, way too seriously.

For example, he did not laugh along when *Team America: World Police*, the film made by the *South Park* team, Troy Parker and Matt Stone, lampooned him as one of a listless group of liberals who go on a peace-making trip to North Korea.

"F--- you!" he said, signing off an online letter to the pair of avowed slackers. Then there was a postscript: an invitation to Stone and Parker to go to Iraq with him. "When we return, make all the fun you want."

This was not a popular move among the Sean Penn demographic. Picking on a couple of overgrown adolescent cartoonists was seriously out of proportion; worse, it was really uncool.

Then there were the Oscars. The presenter at this year's Oscars, Chris Rock, made some play out of the idea that the awards are given to highbrow films that the majority of multiplex patrons would never choose to see, starring actors they don't know. "Who's Jude Law?" he asked at one point, then went on to give Bush a lot of heavy stick. Rock, clearly, was another of those fellow travellers.

Bush stick notwithstanding, however, Penn just could not let the jibe lie. When he came up to present the best actress award, he prefaced his spiel with a little corrective. "Jude Law is one of our finest actors," he said balefully, his face stony. You could just imagine poor Jude cringing in embarrassment. As it turned out, it was the ceremony's only water-cooler moment; next day, millions of faces scrunched up with distaste as people agreed with satisfaction that, no two ways about it, that Sean Penn should just lighten up. Like, a lot. Case closed.

OK, let me slide into the witness box here. I'm with him. It simply isn't true that Sean Penn has no sense of humour. It isn't even true that he takes himself especially seriously, although he does assume a soapbox when talking about issues he thinks are important. His oratory style is a faintly folksy, looping series of comparative metaphors of an unmistakably American flavour: you can hear Mark Twain somewhere in there. "I don't feel separate from people, except in the sense that I'm luckier, more comfortable and I have more opportunity to voice things," he says. "But the more I voice things the more I experience. It's standing there with one coat on, looking at a mass of people shivering in the cold and saying, 'Well, who do I share the coat with?'"

There we go: Sean Penn as Young Mr Lincoln. But a few moments later, his mobile phone emits a few feral rings. He turns it off. Nobody he knows, he says, has the number, so he's not going to answer it. "There," he adds, "that was someone saying, 'I'm starving and I need a coat!' Sorry, man!" He snickers, inviting us to snicker too. There is no way he is not aware of his own pretensions.

It is true, however, that Sean Penn refuses to make light of the things he thinks should be taken seriously. "He's not a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky individual who just bounces along," says Woody Allen, who directed him in *Sweet and Lowdown*. "He thinks about the world and it causes him a correct amount of suffering."

He doesn't rub along with folks, either; there is no shutting Sean up when the conversation - including the public conversation - takes a sticky turn. This is, I think, why he just had to stick up for Jude Law, even though Law doesn't need anyone to stick up for him.

Sean Penn grew up in California, the son of a blacklisted director, Leo Penn. He has seen what it means to be forcibly shut up. And he has had a lifetime of the movie industry's idiocies, from the constant flow of stupid scripts to Hollywood's culpable refusal (as he sees it) to confront the real issues of the day. To me, that po-faced riposte at the Oscars was Penn's weary reminder to his peers that they were supposed to be celebrating excellence; that surely, just for tonight, they could stop pretending to be duller than they were. That they could pay respect to the craft.

Because it is certainly true that Penn takes the craft just as seriously as anything else, which is to say very, very seriously indeed. While he uses his fame to push his politics, he doesn't use it to sell watches or do commercials in Japan. "Every day in Hollywood you see people who put all their spirit into selling the game, you know?" he said to *Time Out* magazine in London. "I could name a list of 10 actors and actresses who, if they're not every week selling something for a movie, then they're selling cosmetics or whatever. I think there's a cynicism that comes with that, a lack of protection of whatever their gifts are, a lack of respect for the work they do. It's never served me well to be around that. It's a contagious thing."

He cannot bear the word "career"; perhaps "oeuvre" would be better, something suggesting a collection of works. He first came to notice in Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), arguably the best teen movie ever made, as the class stoner Spicoli. It was a brilliant comic creation that gave a type to the language; Spicoli was the surfer dude who set the benchmark for all subsequent surfer dudes, in films or in real life. He fell to pieces in front of our eyes as the drug smuggler in *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985); was the ultimate slimy lawyer in Brian de Palma's *Carlito's Way* (1993); burned inner conflict at a whole new level in Alejandro Inarritu's *21 Grams* (2003).

One of the lines on Sean Penn, one of the nicer ones, used to be that the best actor in the business had never won an Oscar. Not that he seemed to care; for years, he flatly refused to come to the ceremony, letting his nominations for *Dead Man Walking* (1996), *Sweet and Lowdown* (2000) and *I Am Sam* (2002) get on without him. Whether or not he knew he would win, he did turn up in 2004 when, finally, he scored for his role in Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River*.

"Why did I come?" he muses. "Well, partly because we had a family that made that movie and whatever other thoughts I might have had, I was not going to be the spoilsport. And I didn't want to be perceived to be making some kind of statement about something like that, considering what is going on in the world that is so much more important."

The statuette is in a closet on the Penn ranch, he says. "But if I say that, you won't have a picture of the closet it's in. It's a nice closet. It's not closed or in the dark or anything."

In his new film, *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, Penn plays a little man lost in the American success culture. His Sam Bick decides to make his mark on the world with a gun. Niels Mueller, a first-time director, says he spent his first few days on set dumbstruck with astonishment as he watched Penn disappear into the skin of this real-life would-be assassin. "I've never seen anything like it, the way he transforms himself. He just disappears into a role and I loved watching that." It took Mueller a couple of days to remember that he, too, had a job to do.

But there was something else about Penn that amazed him: his personal commitment. Penn says it took him about 10 minutes to decide he wanted the role. "I didn't know how I was going to do it at all. I could see that it worked, but it was a very nuanced thing. But I trust myself as a reader (and) I don't want to be in this game if I am not able to do what I know is there."

Mueller was unknown, however, and it took five years to get the money in place. Deal after deal fell through; each time, Penn would call Mueller, who was by now his pool buddy, to affirm that he was sticking with it.

If anything, it was Mueller who wavered, especially after September 11; should he be making a film about an assassin who hijacks a plane? But for Sean Penn, it was in part the clear parallel between the '70s and the present that convinced him that the film was essential. "I look at it like this: whether it's making political comment or social comment, or writing fiction or writing fact, acting in a movie or painting a painting, if you're not going to address what's going on in the world around you at that time, then it's artless. And I think most of the movies made and most art today is silent on that and for me totally irrelevant. And the artists that created it are irrelevant. For me."

Penn has never had much tolerance for, among other things, wasting time. Choice made, he doesn't need to be the star; he was quite prepared to take smaller roles in films such as *Before Night Falls* or *The Thin Red Line* because he admired the work. "I've been doing this for 25 years," he says, "largely in hotel rooms away from family and everything else, where you start looking at the ceiling above your bed a lot. If you're three weeks into a shoot and you think, 'What the f--- am I doing here?' you know you're in trouble. So you try to do things where you're not focusing on that strange ceiling."

He has made mistakes, he says, but he doesn't dwell on them. Penn, perhaps luckily, is not inclined to regret. Of his bad-boy past, he says simply: "It is what it is. I've only got what I've got now because of that. I might have had more. I might have had less. Who knows?"

Every now and then he says he wants to stop acting altogether, that he would rather be writing or directing - his last film, *The Pledge*, was remarkable - but then he finds a role he likes and he's off again. Ultimately, he says, he sees all forms of creative expression as a kind of writing, because they are all ways of bearing witness.

"Acting and directing are all part of one thing," he says. "I don't feel a difference between going to Baghdad and going to Wisconsin to shoot a movie. It's all one flow for me."