



## Live Man Talking

*The Reclusive Sean Penn Emerges To Discuss "Dead Man Walking"*

Since his 1981 debut in "Taps," Sean Penn has been in 15 films, the latest "Dead Man Walking." It's his first appearance since 1993's "Carlito's Way" and only his second since 1990's "State of Grace." In recent years, the 35-year-old Burbank, Calif. native son -- of director Leo Penn and actress Eileen Ryan -- has mostly forsworn acting to move behind the camera, having written and directed 1991's "The Indian Runner" and Miramax's 11/15 opener, "The Crossing Guard," a project on which he spent three years.

Penn's tabloid-driven public persona is as a man of his fists, but a sign of his artistic standing in Hollywood is the eagerness of two of the industry's best -- Jack Nicholson and Angelica Huston -- to act in his sophomore filmmaking effort. Surprising only to those unfamiliar with his intensely dramatic work (e.g., "At Close Range," "Casualties of War") since his goofily charming turn as an L.A. stoner in 1982's "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," Penn comes across as a serious man whose life creed is relentlessly humanistic.

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**BOXOFFICE: Before discussing Dead Man Walking, address what drew you to "The Crossing Guard."**

**SEAN PENN:** That was the story that interested me at the time. I wrote it, so I had a direct involvement. Jack Nicholson was an angel on my shoulder. He's been a director and writer himself, so he knew what was involved.

**BOXOFFICE: Your acting work is so infrequent. Describe what about "Dead Man Walking" made you say, "This I must do."**

**PENN:** When I read the script, I felt lucky to have been tapped by such a gifted and passionate filmmaker. You could tell that Tim [Robbins] really gave his all. The tears were on the page. You know, the only good experiences I've had in film are with directors who have acted themselves. That's so invaluable -- it means they know what you as an actor are facing.

**BOXOFFICE: "The Indian Runner" also had tears on the page, and both "The Crossing Guard" [about a drunk driver who kills another man's daughter] and "Dead Man Walking" seem to share a similar depth and darkness. Are you attracted to stories that have, as you say, tears on the page?**

**PENN:** I don't think any of them are dark. I don't go for dark films. To me, dark films have a lot of fireworks on the screen, but when the people leave the theatre they walk out more troubled than they were before. That's what most Hollywood films are -- dark. I'm more interested in the light.

**BOXOFFICE: How about a common theme of redemption?**

**PENN:** I'm a hoper in redemption. I can't say I'm a believer in redemption. I respond to films that show how to face irrevocable loss and keep on living. Sort of like Eric Clapton, who has his son go out the window and then reaches the point where he needs to write about it. There are a lot of nightmares in life, and I'm interested in movies that can exorcise demons and nightmares.

**BOXOFFICE: "The Crossing Guard" is your first movie in what was to be a three-year deal with Miramax. Is that still in effect?**

**PENN:** No. I walked away from Miramax. The ties that bind bound my wrists too tightly. So I'm a loose cannon now.

**BOXOFFICE: Now that you're "loose," what is next for you?**

**PENN:** The next thing is going to be another acting gig. It's the life story of Brendan Behan, Ireland's premier playwright of this century.

**BOXOFFICE: Irish and plays that sounds like a dark mix.**

**PENN:** There are no dark Irish. They're too full of life to be dark.

**BOXOFFICE: Any plans after that?**

**PENN:** I'm on the typer now, in the middle of something I'll write and direct. That'll be my next project after the Brendan Behan. I can't say anything about it, though -- it would sap the energy driving me on it. –

*Kim Williamson - [www.boxoff.com](http://www.boxoff.com)*