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Sean Penn talks about the hurly-burly of Hollywood and why, despite his recent spate of great films, he wants to quit acting -- again.

BY PAUL SHERMAN | Sean Penn, the 38-year-old actor, director and writer once infamous for getting into off-screen scrapes, is now content to let his rebellion come out on-screen. Despite having delivered intense, memorable performances in movies such as "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" and "At Close Range," Penn vowed he wouldn't act again after his first movie as writer-director, 1991's "The Indian Runner." He returned to the other side of the camera a few years later with notable roles in "Carlito's Way" and "Dead Man Walking," and now takes a decidedly personal approach to choosing projects, often seeking out kindred spirits behind the camera. His recent spate of roles reflects this approach. In the film adaptation of David Rabe's play "[Hurlyburly](#)," Penn co-stars with Kevin Spacey and wife Robin Wright Penn, reprising a role he played onstage a decade ago. He also appears in the World War II ensemble drama "[The Thin Red Line](#)," renegade director Terrence ("Badlands") Malick's first film in nearly 20 years; 1997's "[She's So Lovely](#)," directed by Nick Cassavetes from a script by his late father, John Cassavetes; and the untitled Woody Allen comedy he's just finished filming.

Penn, who lives in San Francisco with his wife and their kids, Hopper and Dylan, has also recently completed Philip Haas' period piece "Up at the Villa," due out this year. But, once again, he would like to leave acting behind for writing and directing, and he is now readying his third film as writer-director.

So you live in San Francisco now?

Yeah. It had mostly to do with the kids. I'd always wanted to get out of [Los Angeles]. Los Angeles just ended like a ghost on every corner to me. I feel more productive up there. If I'm not off working, I'm there.

How did it happen that you're involved in Woody Allen's next film?

He's called me up before on things, but the timing wasn't any good. He called me up and said, "Look at this thing." I looked at it, it was a great part. And I like his movies. I really liked "[Deconstructing Harry](#)" a lot.

He was in top form with that. So I wanted to have the front-row seat, and work with this wacko. I like him very much.

You're the lead?

Right. I play a musician. I don't know how much he wants or doesn't want people to talk about it, but I play a jazz guitarist in the '30s. It's pretty much a marriage of tragedy and comedy in this man's life. Uma Thurman is in it, and Anthony LaPaglia, an actress named Samantha Morton -- did you see "[Under the Skin](#)"? -- and Gretchen Mol.

Why did you go back to acting after you'd already decided you didn't want to do it anymore?

I got on a kind of spin that I didn't intend, which had to do with two movies that I had been involved with a long, long time ago. Well, one in particular -- the [John] Cassavetes movie, "She's So Lovely," that I had been involved in with John before he died. It came back around at a time when I had decided to write and direct. So I felt very attached to that. Then also I had had an agreement with Terry Malick some years before [for "The Thin Red Line"], where I'd said, "You give me a dollar and point the way." Since those bookended in summers, I couldn't direct anything in between, so I ended up doing a whole rush of movies. And then coming out of those, there've been a couple of others. "Hurlyburly" was a similar thing, the way that I'd done the play. So I'm trying to get rid of all of them. Because I do want to stop. Hopefully, that will be soon.

You once compared acting to a bad addiction and said you wanted to get rid of it. Is that accurate to how you're feeling now?

Yeah, it's probably still, to a degree, an accurate way to describe it. The bottom line is I stopped enjoying it, and that's true still. "Hurlyburly" was different, probably because of the people involved and because the material was so good. But it was still very tough. It was a tough movie, we shot it very quickly. But the part of it that's me just doing things I want to do, I'd rather be writing and directing movies.

Did you ever think of directing "Hurlyburly"?

No. In fact, it was really director-generated. Tony Drazan had discovered the play around the same time I did, in the audience in New York. And he really dreamed of doing it for a long, long time and had worked with David Rabe, and then they came to me. So I was a Johnny-come-lately on it.

You played Eddie onstage long before doing the movie. Who else was in it with you then?

Mare Winningham, Belinda Bauer, Michael Lerner, Suzy Amis, Jill Schoelen.

Did you approach the character any differently a decade later?

The process is very different, just because it's a movie. It's the first time I've done that, bring a character I played before to film, where changes are made. You really have to go back and do it again. But I did find that there were certain lines that would make sense again, would click in again, after all these years.

It seems like when this was originally done onstage, it was very much of its time, with coked-up executives running Hollywood. Now that that's not so much a sign of these times, what do you think there is in the story that endures?

That was always a concern. And right around the time we started talking about it, everything we saw around us was the same. It had really come back. From casting directors on up to executives, there was tons of cocaine going around, again, now. So I think in a way it's plenty contemporary. And I never analyzed it beyond that, because it all seemed so familiar to me. They put that title on the movie at the beginning -- "a little while ago" -- but it's very, very contemporary to what I see out there.

In "Hurlyburly," you've got Mickey [played by Kevin Spacey] on one end of the spectrum, who's pretty self-aware, and Phil [Chazz Palminteri] on the other, who's pretty self-deluded. Eddie's somewhere in between. He's an elusive character. What's your take on him?

To me, Mickey perhaps is self-aware, but to me he's pretty much the horror of the piece. He is the horror of the piece. He's the least connected to anybody outside himself. The way I've always described it is that these people are afraid that they might be dead, and they're striving to find some window in all the mess of it, in all the hurly-burly of it. I see Eddie as the most connected but most disorganized of the group. There's no sign, even by the end, of the possibility of any kind of joy in Mickey's life. So I feel very connected to a character like Eddie, who there are no answers for, but within the mess, he tries.

Is Eddie just an extreme case of what everybody working in that system has to go through to some extent, as far as trying to be creative and maintain some sort of self-respect?

I think there's a lot of people that end up in that hole. Not everybody, but a lot, particularly if the drugs come into play. He's certainly typical of a whole section of people that you run into or see throughout any kind of a career in Hollywood. And this is about Hollywood, there's no question about that. So, yeah, it's a pretty typical phenomenon. And for somebody who's actually trying to connect in it, trying to keep in touch to some degree with their humanity, it's a pathetically heroic struggle.

You were also in "The Thin Red Line" -- were you always an admirer of Malick's work?

Yeah. Have you ever spoken to him? He's a very gentle, terrific guy, and that just makes you want to do something with him. So I did. But it's a strange process. The way Terry works is unlike anybody. You really don't know. You go along because it's Terry. He's a Rhodes scholar and all these things, and it's all in here [he points to his head] and you really don't know what's the movie he's going after. You just try to be solid.

So when are you going to direct next?

Spring. It's a script I wrote. I've got a couple of others that I didn't write, too. I hadn't thought I would end up doing something I didn't write, but I found that I wasn't good at adapting things. There are a couple of books that I got adapted that I might do, but after this one in the spring.

Weren't you talking about doing a Jim Thompson book?

At one time I was talking about doing "The Killer Inside Me." And I had tried to adapt a Harry Crews book, "The Knockout Artist." I wrote for two years, but I couldn't come up with anything. What I do, it's got to be very much of my own stuff.

This one you're shooting this spring, is it going to be drama like the others?

Yeah.

And have you cast yet?

I think I'm going to do it with Eddie Vedder.

Did you have some special sense about "Fast Times at Ridgemont High"? It could have easily been a terrible movie.

What happened is, I read the book and I met the director, and everything seemed kind of unusual -- the people around it. I met Cameron [Crowe]. To be honest, I recognized a character in it that I had seen a lot of, and one that I hadn't seen in the movies. So I thought that was valuable -- or a curse, one or the other. But there was something about that that seemed definitely worth pursuing, and that it would be a lot of fun to do. That I could do it, and it could be something that I could improvise a lot with, because I knew the character, the rhythm of the character. Did I know the movie would be its own unique thing? I'm not sure about that. That was more about the character.

Was there a time you realized that taking a conventional Hollywood route was not for you?

I always felt like I had certain kinds of stories I wanted to tell, both as an actor, and later as a director. It seemed pretty clear to me what was not interesting to me, what was no contribution, where plenty other people were

doing it, and doing it very well. Every year there's a whole flock of people who are charisma artists, and that applies well to those kind of things that are more mainstream. There was nothing of value in my doing anything like that, other than if I just wanted to be famous and get money. I certainly liked the money part of it, but I make a good living doing what I'm doing. And I expect to continue to.

It just seemed silly. Most of those movies that I think you're talking about, there's a silliness to that I just can't get by. I'm not sure how much movies mean to people, finally, anyway. On a good day I think they are moved. But I can't sit there in a hotel room away from home and family, looking at a cottage cheese ceiling and be two weeks into a movie and say, "What am I doing here?" I think that's what I avoid -- that feeling of going through life making money and being famous. It didn't seem like much of a life.

When did you realize that?

I think right off the bat. Because I started out doing plays. And you find a real process as an actor doing that, where the process of acting itself can be a really satisfying thing. So if you're in something that really violates that, you feel it. And you lose track of everything you get into it for.

Do you think you were always more aware of that trap because your father was in the business, and was blacklisted? Did that make you a little more cautious?

I think all of those things had an effect for a certain kind of double check, on just what's right and wrong. But in this case, the right and wrong of it had to do with what it would cost a person creatively. So there are certain actors who can mix up a career, for money or whatever reason. For me, the cost would be too high, to do something that I really felt I couldn't believe in. So by necessity I've gravitated to other things. Some of them don't work as well as some of the commercial movies that other people do. Sometimes you fail at the things you believe in, too. I've had a natural need to stay away from certain things.

So the opportunities were there, at least when you were younger?

Yeah.

So if Jerry Bruckheimer ["Armageddon," "Enemy of the State," etc.] called you up ...

That call has come. That call has come. And we know we're in two different businesses, I think.

(Paul Sherman writes about movies for the Boston Herald and the Improper Bostonian)