

Citizen Penn

Sean Penn, star of the "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," speaks out about politics, patriotism, and letting conscience be his guide

By Ty Burr, Globe Staff, January 9, 2005

Ty Burr can be reached at tburr@globe.com.

© Copyright 2005 Globe Newspaper Company.

For a man who out of his acting generation best embodies the inarticulate, searching legacy of Brando and Dean, Sean Penn has an interesting relationship to words. He wrestles with them. He walks around them to gauge them from all angles, kneads his sentences into shape like a sculptor with recalcitrant clay, builds cadenzas of abstract ideas that sometimes hold together and sometimes drift away like the guilty smoke from the cigarettes he has never managed to quit. The man's a method talker.

Its late October, and last year's Oscar winner for "Mystic River" is in town with his latest film, the not-at-all-provocatively-titled "The Assassination of Richard Nixon." Written and directed by Niels Mueller, the drama costars Naomi Watts and Don Cheadle, but it's basically a one-man show about the last weeks in the life of Samuel Byck (spelled Bicke in the film), a disillusioned Philadelphia salesman -- think Willy Loman gone homicidal -- who in 1974 was killed while attempting to hijack an airplane and crash it into the White House.

Needless to say, there are parallels with more recent events, and Penn is happy to address himself to them, in his painstaking way. Director Mueller is in Boston as well, but he's mostly still pinching himself on landing an actor of this caliber for his debut feature. "You can't imagine where he's going to go," Mueller tells a reporter in a separate conversation. "You can't imagine what involuntary movements of muscles in the forehead are going to communicate to you. Like when Sam's quitting his job and he has that despairing explosion -- that's not on the page. And there were two other takes that were hugely different. It was a *much* harder editing process thanks to Sean."

Sitting in a downtown hotel room, looking ruffled and wary, Penn struggles to edit his own thoughts about this role, about how the film relates to our current state of affairs, about the rules and responsibilities pertaining to an actor with a conscience, and about how, no kidding, he really can do comedy. (An expanded version of this Q&A can be found at www.boston.com.)

Why Sam Byck? Why not John Wilkes Booth, say, or Charles Guiteau? What's the movie using this man's life to say?

Well, as far as I'm concerned, there are certain realities of the society at large as it relates to Sam Byck's life. *I'm* approaching him as a purely fictional character, but we're using that character to poetically tell, as films do, the story of something that occurred relative to our society that seems to have very pressing applications today. It's that simple to me.

OK. What are the social realities his life addresses?

The realities of disappointment. The way in which an elite structure can squeeze the possibility of hopes and dreams. It's a very common American story of a man in rowboat in a hurricane. This is an experience that a lot of people go through; they may not bring their rage to the same conclusion, but I think there's a common sense of alienation.

How much of this was articulated on the set?

I don't get very analytical. And to the degree that I *do* get analytical, I don't feel that it's productive to share that stuff. Maybe in the form of some questions here or there.

What do you do with directors who do try to articulate it too much?

I count the number of hairs growing out of their ears.

Until they shut up?

Yeah. And I don't know if Niels has any because he doesn't do that.

I know the final script was written in 1999, before George W. Bush was elected, but the political anxiety level in the movie does seem to be remarkably similar to this past year.

There's an interesting parallel between Bush and Richard Nixon. While Nixon was clearly a superior statesman and in many ways a more intelligent politician, what they share is a kind of boldness in how they emote their insecurities. What we're finding with George Bush -- part of what's familiar to people and that adds to his likability for many -- is that there's a commonality of deep insecurity and his handling it with a kind of bravado. What they both did is handle things with a similar certainty -- certainty being the "disease of kings."

Have politics affected your acting over the years, and vice versa -- has acting affected your political beliefs?

I think it's all one thing. We get up in the morning and face our life and our work and our parenting and our politics and whatever it is.

Do politics affect what roles you take?

Not really, because I don't consider myself specifically political, you know? I think of working as an actor as being a human thing. The concerns I have that fall into politics are human concerns. Anything that's a polemic, be it a movie or a speech, is just bad work. So I'm certainly not looking for any message beyond the possibility of things changing.

You took a lot of flak for going to Iraq . . .

Twice.

How do you feel about people who say actors shouldn't take stands?

I wrote a letter to the Washington Post a couple of years ago before we went into the war. The very things I was criticized for saying then are now being reported by Bill O'Reilly. I was criticized for suggesting the possibility there were no weapons of mass destruction. But the bigger issue is that it's an absolutely stupid notion that you should take the title of someone's profession and attach it to what they should not do. It has nothing to do with citizenry. I think they should shove it with their hypocritical Ronald Reagan standard

On the flip side, is a public figure obligated to state their beliefs?

I think so. Yeah, I absolutely think so. It's part of the story that we tell.

In your growing up, was there a political watershed moment that put the light bulb on over your head?

Watergate. I was in junior high school, so I was, let's see, 14.

You followed it in the papers?

Every second.

I know your dad [actor Leo Penn] was blacklisted. How did that affect your growing up?

I don't know if it did. What had an impact on me growing up is the result it had on him. There was no bitterness. He was a big patriot. He really loved this country, was first generation, so he had instilled in him the values of this country. And that maintained; I think he saw that the blacklist was a wrinkle in the cycle.

You've also criticized the film industry over the years, but the fact is you play very well within it and have been rewarded by it. Is there a contradiction?

There *is* contradiction in it. There's compromising. The line for me is when the dominant aspect of the thing applies to telling truths as I understand truths to be. I've always operated under the notion that audiences don't always know when they're being lied to, but that they always know when they're being told the truth. And if there are what I think are unsung truths to be talked about in a film -- through a character, through a story -- and that dominates the piece, that's the key for me. I think the biggest thing is to not participate in the damaging, lying cinema.

How often do you have to turn that down?

A lot.

Any examples?

I always put it the same way: If the primary statement of the film is that if you have good abs it's OK to kill people, I pass.

Are there films you've done in the past that you wish now you hadn't?

Yeah. *Oh*, yeah.

For instance?

No. (laughs)

"Fast Times at Ridgemont High" is available this week on DVD. What would you say to that young actor playing Jeff Spicoli today, to prepare him for what's coming?

(laughs) It's a good question. Probably a little too personal. What do I have regrets about? I have regrets about any time I embarrassed or hurt anybody. But even then, it's all part of the deal, so I think probably I wouldn't want to give him a head's up.

I was looking at your filmography, and outside of "Fast Times," there's not much comedy there.

I don't know if that's true. I just got done with an episode of "Two and a Half Men." Woody Allen's thing has a lot of funny stuff in it.

"Sweet and Lowdown"? Oh, come on, that's a character drama.

Yeah. Maybe most of the people who make funny movies are afraid of being associated with me.