



## Father and Son Sean Penn plots a way forward through manhood and myth

**I**T TOOK ALL OF 90 SECONDS FOLLOWING THE WORLD PREMIERE OF PAOLO SORRENTINO'S *This Must Be the Place* in Cannes last year for the film to be dismissed by critics as a disjointed comedy that takes a right-hand turn into Holocaust territory. The arc traveled by its main character, Cheyenne, from blasted, New York Dolls-style glam rocker—seemingly barely compos mentis and retired with his wife (Frances McDormand) in an Irish castle—to unlikely Nazi hunter is unorthodox, comic, fantastic. There is a through line, however, clear to anyone who knows the adult children of Holocaust survivors. Some have done just great. Some have wilted under the weight of parental fatalism. Others, like Cheyenne, played by Sean Penn, have gone to extremes to get their parents to care about their lives more than the dead. Most, if not all, have dealt with the obsessive lens through which their parents viewed the world. All must plot the way forward or surrender.

*This Must Be the Place's* unusual entry point makes it a target for all custodians of the Holocaust legacy, which must always tell the same story the same way. No doubt, Sorrentino disarms the viewer by touring a soul on ice, and finding how far and how comically off course the second half of the 20th century veered. I caught up with Penn in January at Sundance, where *This Must Be the Place* had its U.S. premiere, to talk about the movie's real topic: making one's way forward in the postwar era.

Your character's journey is as the child of a Holocaust survivor. Cheyenne must not just repair his own internal emotional obsession, he has to go to the root and repair his father's. What books or films about the Holocaust, or personal knowledge of people who went through it, have had an impact on you?

It's something that is not that far away—15 years before I was born. My family was not directly affected by it except some who fled. It was a devastating piece of human history. It's not the first time I've seen horrifying images from the Holocaust. I've been to the Holocaust Museum, and I spent time with my father in Germany, going through areas he bombed in support of liberation. I experience it still watching Paolo's movie. The imagery of this vicious inhumanity. What a vicious spell overtook these people.

You are no stranger to troubled-young-men roles—*Taps* [81], *Bad Boys* [83], *At Close Range* [86], *Dead Man Walking* [95]. What are your thoughts about the American male character?

In film and off screen, men in America believe their own lie, the lie of machismo, the lie of expectation. Men don't know their place. A lot of the philosophical discussions date it back to the hunter-gatherer phenomenon. Whether or not we own that archive in our DNA, we have let it confuse us because we are born into a society that's already created a replacement for it—the idea of American macho. It has led to the disparity between the male American heart and the way we act. From birth there is a kind of chaotic experience in society for a boy. Even in *Indian Runner* [91], the white noise of living on hustled land lives with us. The image of John Wayne relieves us of our guilt and makes us the hero.

The sad part of that is when it comes to true-life heroism or our aspirations to contribute, to be kind, or to enjoy the basics of life, it affords us an out from all these things. It affords us a personality on loan. It creates the pack. It diminishes originality and creates hostility. And it's that

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recklessness that I find kind of touching, because as much as they are the actions of the perpetrator, they haunt him.

**So many characters you have played tread on the crack in their personality created by their upbringing. Has your perception of child rearing changed over time as you have parented?** Sure, in many ways. I was in a lucky club the way I was parented. The demon doors I went through were largely self-created. That's why my interest is so focused more outside the home. Bruce Springsteen once said: "We have come a long way and we're going back." We are a money-driven society, and money breeds a lot of cowardice. It's the unusual person who is able to break through that—and this goes back to *This Must Be the Place*. Paolo is one of the few artists who really genuinely defies it.

**Three of your most integrated characters are a gay man in *Milk* [08], a damaged man in *I Am Sam* [01], and Cheyenne, who's a drugged-out glam rocker. For all your alpha male persona, your best roles are wounded men on a journey to put the parts back together, one that stems from paternal rejection.**

Yes. I don't know if we want to break up our desire to be recognized by the father. It is something very healthy. The more we dismiss it and rebel, the more we tell fathers they're not responsible. We are born of our fathers and mothers. That's just going to be with us.

**Both Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and *This Must Be the Place* are at their core about the son's journey to heal the rejection or obsession of the father. How do you connect this to your relationship with your father?**

I have a great connection to my father. I had what I'd like to give my kids. Even at my best—and I consider myself a good father—I have trespassed more on their development than my father did on mine but with an equal amount of expressed love. I remember once going to see a movie that was very highly praised at the time, and it was a subject I was interested in. I knew the director. I fucking loathed it, thought it was totally full of shit. And I went out to my parents' house, and I went off on this frigging movie. My father listened, and took a little second after I was finished spouting and said, "Everybody has their own truth, kid." He was very much that kind of guy.



Penn in *This Must Be the Place*

**"Each generation suffers from its own conditioning. I'd hate to see the theatergoing experience killed by people watching things on a wristwatch. I would check out at that point."**

**How do you feel about presenting your failures to your parents?**

[Laughs] I don't have to bring it to them—it's an Internet world. My father is gone now, and my mother is the last one surprised when I stumble and the least surprised when I get back up. She herself is an extraordinary get-back-up artist. She's had the most Shakespearean things to deal with in her life, and at 84 she is still a soldier.

**What did they want for you in your career choices and the life you would lead?**

To work in arts and film was a respected life. But both of them, having been actors, wanted to make sure—as I would with my children—that I knew this is not where ultimate happiness lies. They wanted to have happy children who could feed and shelter themselves.

**You are a mixture of Jews and Catholics. How have you understood your roots?**

My father was an atheist raised Jewish. My mother spurned the Church when I was young but later went back to it as a cafeteria Catholic—"I like this. I'll take a little of that..." She doesn't see it that way. We were raised to make a decision on our own, even whether to visit a church or a synagogue. I was the middle brother. Both my older and younger brothers chose some version of Christianity, which my father was comfortable with. I have always been perfectly comfortable with the mystery of it all.

Someone tells me there is a god, I think it's a punch line; someone tells me there isn't, I think it's a punch line. Life is a rolling thing to me. You do your best each time to do better at what you do. If you don't put yourself in prison or damage someone undeservedly or irreparably, you are already ahead of the game. You've got the common sense you've got. We're either right or wrong.

**Is art a better guidance system in addressing the doubts of the universe than religion?**

I am still a practitioner of filmmaking, but if there is a pulpit we have to know the times we live in and what is important to be addressed, to be healed and celebrated. And if we do our jobs well, if we give it everything we've got, then we have a chance that the medium will be valued enough to be held onto by future generations. That might be as simple as the next generation's decision to go to a theater and see a film on a big screen 10 years from now. If we fail at our job, they won't. Each generation suffers from its own conditioning. I'd hate to see the theatergoing experience killed by people watching things on a wristwatch. I would check out at that point. When I make a movie as a director and someone tells me they saw it on a DVD on their TV and they loved it, I don't care—it's just not what I made.

**How do you rate your experience as a director versus as an actor being directed by Terrence Malick, Clint, Gus Van Sant, Woody?**

If all I wanted to do was direct—which is all I want to do—I've had an incredible front-row seat to watch these directors in action. I've worked with others that were generous. Martin Scorsese allowed me to audit his set. When I direct, I choose a subject that relates to my life at that time. When I act, I have to hope I get offered something that will touch base with that. I've done it but I've been reluctant to develop projects for myself as an actor, because I don't like to work that self-consciously. I like to come in when the material is reasonably complete and at least start as an interpreter. If only for being able to choose, I am a much happier guy when I am directing.

**Why are you a target?**

I am a little too comfortable with exercising expression in something short of charming ways. □