

Douglas Thompson

An Interview with Jack Nicholson

When Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep first worked together a decade ago on 'Heartburn' their director Mike Nichols was adamant that the two stars would not meet until their first moment before the cameras.

On film it resulted, according to the legendary Nicholson, in a sequence 'electric with excitement'. Streep agrees but today reveals that Nicholson had, as she puts it, broken the ice before their supposed first encounter:

'I was sitting in my trailer getting my hair curled and looking like hell and I get this knock on the door and he said:" Hi, this is Jack Nicholson. Can I use your toilet?" '

Nicholson remains hugely amused by the story broadcasting a grin that roars with mischief. She adores Nicholson and has made four movies with him, but nevertheless had to break the director's rule, had to rebel. The man with the satirical approach to macho has written his own script for decades.

Today, at nearly 60, he is the indispensable actor of modern American cinema. He is also one of the richest stars in Hollywood . 'He's the mayor of the town,' says his friend and sometime co-star Harvey Keitel.

It's his talent that got him elected but most certainly his charm which has kept him in office. Arguably the world's most powerful actor he became a star with one film, 'Easy Rider' in 1969, and with 'Five Easy Pieces' a year later a leader of the 1970s New Wave movies. ' Chinatown ' in 1974 made him a millionaire and anointed him a superstar. He's played the part perfectly ever since.

He talks about retiring but he and everyone else knows that is just a little way of getting attention. He likes attention. Which he will be getting by delivering moviegoers a double helping of his talent over the next two weeks. Or rather, a hat trick of Nicholson.

In 'Mars Attacks!' (Feb 28) he is the doltish U.S. President and a wonderful Las Vegas sleaze, a grinning goose bump of a real estate hustler. He's surrounded by a marvellous gathering of players including Glenn Close, Annette Bening, Danny DeVito, Sarah Jessica Parker, Pierce Brosnan, Rod Steiger, Tom Jones and Paul Winfield who says Nicholson inspired constant laugh attacks during filming: 'He literally had us on the floor laughing -- he was having such a great time making fun of himself in the role'.

British screenwriter Jonathan Gems who director Tim Burton met while he was guiding Nicholson's Joker in 'Batman' explained the key to getting the outrageous homage to 1950s sci-fi movies made:

'When Jack signed on everything settled into place. He is that important to a movie. If he's on board so are the studio and all the rest that goes with it'. Indeed, Glenn Close and Annette Bening both said they took the film to work with Nicholson. Brosnan boasted: 'I have one six page scene with the man'.

Tim Burton's 'Mars Attacks!' --the thinking person's 'Independence Day' -- involves the cackling Martians landing and announcing they have come in peace. And then they whip out their weapons and blast anyone and everything. It's a problem for bumbling President James Dale.

'I wanted Jack for that role but after he read the script I just kinda waved my arms and said:" Which part do you want to play?" He said: "How about all of them?"

There's no better actor to go up against the Martians than Jack -- I enjoy seeing somebody who is really strong and who just goes for it. Jack is willing to do anything no matter how crazy it seems. He's the greatest and to have him in two roles is amazing'.

Also, impressive is Nicholson's longterm friendship with director Bob Rafelson. 'Blood and Wine' which opens next week (March 7) is their fifth film together and the completion of a trilogy about dysfunctional families. In 'Five Easy Pieces' Nicholson was the son, in 'The King of the Marvin Gardens' the brother and in the last the father. With Rafelson he also made the less well received 'Man Trouble' with Ellen Barkin and the remake of 'The Postman Always Rings Twice' co-starring Jessica Lange.

Now, Nicholson is a Miami wine merchant who when his business gets into trouble steals a diamond necklace aided by his lover Jennifer Lopez and safecracker Michael Caine. Naturally, with Nicholson and Rafelson nothing is simple except the robbery. The complication is Nicholson's former wife Judy Davis and stepson Stephen Dorff. Diamonds, as it turns, out are no one's best friend.

Although he complains about the lack of strong material Nicholson can be lured in front of a camera by film-makers like Burton and Rafelson -- as he could by his surrogate 'father' the late John Huston -- and despite all the years and all the movies jump in with enthusiasm.

He didn't need to be asked twice to reprise his role of astronaut Garrett Breedlove and join Shirley MacLaine in 'Evening Star' -- it will be seen later this year -- the follow on to his Oscar winning 'Terms of Endearment'. His favourite basketball team, the Los Angeles Lakers, were playing at the same Texas town during his week of filming.

He's won two Oscars and been nominated for seven others. He made more than \$50 million dollars as The Joker in 'Batman' because, he says, he is an astute businessman. His investments -- including oils by names like Picasso, Matisse and Soutine -- have put estimates of his personal fortune at more than \$300 million dollars. He's beloved. And he's most certainly bankable.

He's also an inveterate womaniser and full of surprises. A member of the over-50 paternity fraternity -- along with friends Warren Beatty, Al Pacino and Dennis Hopper -- he is the father of two youngsters by former waitress Rebecca Broussard who is the same age as his first born daughter.

He has earned his Jack the Lad reputation with the sexy legend that he's built. In other stars it might have shaky foundations but somehow, amazingly, he has been able to float above criticism and America's politically correct lobby.

His talent, his rarefied celebrity, has guarded him from being branded sleazy. Any doubts about scandal involving unseemly and dangerous liaisons he has effortlessly avoided with his irresistible charm.

His image is of Jolly Jack the Pirate, the Hollywood buccaneer always ready to run up the Skull and Crossbones at pomposity. He supports it with: 'I believe in living life to the hilt. I'm not afraid of my own imagination -- or anybody else's. I lead by following, you know? What I know, I know. What I don't, I don't.

'Love is at the heart of life. Love a woman, love a child, love a country -- it fills your life.' His has been overflowing from the beginning when he was born on April 22, 1937, in Neptune, New Jersey, the illegitimate child of 17-year-old June Nicholson. He grew up thinking she was his older sister and that her mother Ethel May -- his grandmother -- was his mother.

It was only after their deaths that he learned the truth from a magazine article: 'It was in 1975 soon after June died. I was making "The Fortune" for Mike Nichols and someone called me on the 'phone and told me. Ultimately I got official verification from June's sister Lorraine . I was stunned.'

The discovery made him a staunch opponent of abortion: 'I don't have the right to any other view. My only emotion is gratitude, literally, for my life. If June and Ethel May had been of less character I would never have gotten to live. These women gave me the gift of life. As an illegitimate child born during the Depression to a broken lower-middle-class family you're an automatic abortion with most people today. They were strong women; they all had a great deal of style and they were a lot of fun.'

Nicholson credits his 'sisters' June and Lorraine and 'mother' Ethel May with creating the man he is: 'The neighbourhood idolised them. I'm very fortunate to have had that very unusual environment to grow up in.'

'Because of them my basic model for women is an independent woman. I prefer the company of women and I have deep respect for them. I always tell me there are three rules: they hate us, we hate them; they're stronger, they're smarter; and, most important, they don't play fair.'

'They trained me great, those ladies. It mapped out the way I would live my life. It's what I'm all about. In whatever I do I like to feel I've got a little gamble going. It's why I'm a sports fanatic. You gotta remember my line of work. Sports is the only place I can go and not know how it's going to end.'

His life has been as unconventional as his upbringing. Hollywood studio boss Mark Canton calls him 'the hippest man in America' and Nicholson with his trademark black Ray-bans, designer gear and the Killer Smile --the nippy, sparkling teeth flashingly alive -- publicly plays to the image.

The easy rider turned grandfather believes he's not as seductive as he was was -- but just by a degree. 'I've been involved with women who have trampled all over me on the way to some goal that I could have handed to them. And I know that what they're after is not gonna produce why they're after it. You can't run your whole life just checking things off.'

But he's always checked out the women: 'It's all a matter of glands. Men's glands programme them to get up after sex and go right on to the next one.'

'At my age the body is older but the brain stays fresh if the curiosity is still there. I still want to know what's around the corner. Sex is my favourite subject and the sexual part of acting is the key. But sex isn't love. They shouldn't be confused.'

He never appears that way but Nicholson seems to have been driven to prove himself again and again. In the pre-'Easy Rider' days of B and biker movies -- he had a decade long association with low-budget moviemaker Roger Corman -- he married the admired actress Sandra Knight. It lasted from 1961 to 1966. Their daughter Jennifer is now 32 and herself a mother.

At school he had a knack for playing pool, the horses and basketball but his hopes for a hoop career faded when he realised he was never going to be any taller than 5ft 9ins. He took to the stage at college and then went West in 1954 where he got a job as an office boy in MGM's cartoon department. It fitted the class clown from Manasquan High School, New Jersey. He gave himself a decade to become a screen star:

'It was a large projected pretension to think I could be a movie star. I didn't really know what the hell I was doing then.'

'Mostly at MGM I watched movie stars. I loved watching the women. I remember spending time lying on the grass, looking underneath a wagon, trying to see Lana Turner's legs.'

Later, he did more than look but says: 'I prefer the company of women, yes. The rest is all hearsay.' Whatever, he has been linked with a long list of ladies including Diane Keaton, Michelle Phillips, Margaret Trudeau, Cher, Susan Sarandon and Streep who he worked with in 'Ironweed' and 'Heartburn' in which he played an adulterer.

'There's something autobiographical in a man who might do something as heinous as buy a woman a bracelet while his wife is pregnant. This might be grounds for execution in most people's minds but we wouldn't have many men left if the executions were carried out.

'The rogue male is a character the audience just won't buy. You can have a mass murderer get away scot free but not some guy who is fooling around.'

He certainly has. His seventeen year romance with Anjelica Huston-- her great film-making father John who died in 1987 was the father he never knew, 'just the best guy' -- ended in universal upset in 1989. It happened after it was revealed Rebecca Broussard, 32, was pregnant with their first child Lorraine who is now six. (Their son Raymond was born fourteen months later). It was a devastating time even for the man who in his teens was nicknamed The Great Seducer.

'Anjelica did not know I was unfaithful to her during our time together. She had a legitimate grievance. No one else has or will ever have one as far as I'm concerned. I don't have 17 years to work out the same kind of bullshit. I'm not in the business of telling people what I like in this area because it destroys the intimacy. I'm not compulsively polygamous.'

He indicates that he believes his relationship with Huston deserved to be monogamous although it clearly wasn't. Little Lorraine proved that. He confronted Huston with the news: 'I told her about first --and in person. I desperately admire her and always will. Everybody I love I rarely fall out of love with.'

There was an added complication -- his daughter Jennifer: 'Rebecca was a friend of Jennifer's and the whole thing was a little shocking to her.

'But it's not new that teenaged girls and girls in their early 20s know not to trust their girlfriends around their fathers...'

And then to make a tricky situation even more titillating the starlet Karen Mayo-Chandler, 34, entered the scene. It appeared that while Nicholson was filming 'Batman' in London and Anjelica Huston was at home waiting and Rebecca Broussard was pregnant he was running around in fluorescent socks and spanking a naked Miss Mayo-Chandler with a table tennis bat.

She said he was a 'non-stop sex machine' who also had a penchant for peanut butter (to keep his strength up) and Polaroids.

'I don't go around sleeping with everybody,' says Nicholson truthfully adding: 'I've never said in public that I did. It's not the way I do things.'

It was a mess for Anjelica Huston. It was not just the affairs but Broussard being pregnant. She had wanted a child with Nicholson. A friend said: 'Anjelica said ciao to Jack after learning about the baby.'

And, much to his surprise, Kentucky-bred Broussard who played the secretary to his Jake Gittes -- the dandy of a detective Nicholson created in Roman Polanski's 'Chinatown' -- in 'The Two Jakes' said the same thing after their second child was born. They had lived in separate home which he explained with:

'I'm very moody and shouldn't be around anyone when I think the world is too awful to tolerate. I'm too eccentric and restless to live day-in, day out with someone. I need a place where no one gets to.

'My home is my office not my harem. I have to be on the 'phone, read scripts and have all those Hollywood lunches so I don't wind up working on the same movies Bruce Willis makes. There is no abundance of quality projects so you have to be on the ball.

'Maybe middle-age makes you understand that you can live more honestly because the grim reaper is catching up with you.

So are some of his antics. In the best-selling 'You'll Never Make Love In This Town Again' published earlier this year in America he gets his own chapter in the book written by two good-time girls who detail his supposed sexual exploits in the shower.

And last year model Janice Dickinson revealed that she is writing a tell-all book with author Bill Stadiem who wrote 'Madam 90210' about Beverly Hills madam Alex Adams. Dickinson who dated Sylvester Stallone -- at one time he was going to marry her believing he had fathered her child -- says that Nicholson was her 'most amazing lover'.

She was quoted in an American magazine: 'We'd have drinks and Jack would chase me around the house naked. We'd make love on the terrace, on the lawn, in the pool, even in the backseat of his parked car. He loved to find new places to do it. Jack got off on playing love games with me and two other women at the same time.

'He had a fascination with go-go dancing. He'd have a bunch of women dancing in his living room for his personal delight. 'He likes to play at home.'

Property is important to Jack Nicholson. He enjoys being king of the castle. His Hollywood Hills home sits above an empty ravine and there's a chain-link fence around the twisting driveway which he shares with Marlon Brando.

There are two houses in the complex, a row of carports with basketball hoops and a sundeck with a swimming pool and Jacuzzi. It was in the whirlpool that Roman Polanski -- while Nicholson was away -- supplied a love drug to a 13-year-old and had sex with her leading to his conviction and flight to France .

It was built in the 1950s for an IBM executive. It is not instantly spectacular but the view is with the lights of suburbia fading up and onwards to the mountains and out to the Pacific you can see the jets like little glowing birds waiting to land at Los Angeles airport.

While every supposedly 'sane' person wants to leave Los Angeles he does not: 'I'm mad about LA. I can't look out my back window without the same degree of ocular naivete that I had when I moved here -- I know what's out there, that mountain and that one and another that might be twelve miles away. People comically impugn the LA sensibility but it's based on breadth. We have an open view of things that come out of the topography.'

He's mellower now, happy with his surroundings and belongings. A sign above his doorbell reads: 'If You Arrive Before 10 a.m. Please Ring The Next Address Over.' That's Brando's home.

His living room is a mix of sporting equipment and expensive art. Near an archway is a Picasso. There's a Botero in the bathroom, a Salvador Dali ashtray on a coffee table, a Matisse next to a Cecil Beaton photograph of boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. There's a photograph of Nicholson clowning with Muhammad Ali. One wall is blanketed by a stereo system, big screen, video recorders and a library of cassettes. There's the Oscar he received twenty years ago for 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' and the other from 1983's 'Terms of Endearment'.

Homes and past endearments find him in a complex and nasty squabble with former lover Susan Anspach. They worked together on 'Five Easy Pieces' and had a son Caleb who is now 26. Nicholson has privately acknowledged Caleb and paid for his Georgetown University schooling. Publicly he says his only son is baby Raymond by Rebecca Broussard.

He said so in a magazine article and that provoked Anspach to write to the magazine explaining their mistake. That in turn apparently angered Nicholson who started legal proceedings over the Santa Monica house he had helped Anspach buy in 1979. She says he promised she and Caleb could keep the home for life. Now, he wants the money he lent her back.

Nicholson, for the first time, has been presented as mean. Here is the phenomenally rich star quibbling over what by his standards is an inexpensive home.

He owns two homes in Aspen, Colorado, where he spends three months of the year pursuing his love of ski-ing and the beautiful people. The Santa Monica home can mean little to him but he is pursuing the ugly dispute because, it appears, Anspach has upset him by over-ruling his wishes. The absurd vendetta goes on in the California courts this Spring and Anspach says she is not going to give up for 'what I believe is right.'

Neither, of course, is Nicholson. He can be a difficult man. When the late John Belushi asked for per diem expenses during the dubbing of 'Goin' South' -- one of the three movies Nicholson has directed -- he gave him \$100 worth of dimes and nickels and had him chauffeured in a Subaru.

But Nicholson's hate of the moment is the movies -- well, Hollywood movies of the 1990s: 'It's the worst period ever for trying to do interesting work and they are wasting an awful lot of talent making movies where every eight minutes you either fuck somebody or blow them up. So when someone like Sean Penn comes along it's of great value.'

He's talking about 1996's 'The Crossing Guard' which Penn directed. In the raw, troubling movie Nicholson played a jeweller who has turned into a strip club devotee and compulsive drinker six years after his daughter was killed by a drunk driver. In the mix is his former wife played by Anjelica Huston. Penn talked the former lovers into appearing together although Nicholson says:

'It only gave me one moment's pause. She's a professional and so am I.'

'In all my experience -- and I goes back rather a long way -- I've never known a time when there was so much crap around. I'm lucky that I don't have to do it. I don't have to accept \$15 million to appear in a movie where I have to say one line looking over my shoulder between a car crash and an explosion.'

'I don't need the money and I don't need the aggravation.'

'I just wish every film I like wasn't either foreign or made in America which such terrible difficulty.'

Does he consider not working in the present climate?

'All the time. But I would never say: "I'm retired." I believe if I decided not to work in six months everybody would just forget whether you are working or not.'

He is balding, prone to an overlapping stomach and will be 60 in April. He says that doesn't bother him:

'Fifty put me to my knees for a year. I couldn't do anything except think I was dying. But once that was over there was something mystical about the number and how it affected me psychologically. I'm very content the way things have gone. I'm equally discontent with the way things look but I don't

grieve over the fact I can't play basketball anymore. Because I'm becoming a better golfer every day. To me, it's Zen archery.

'So, about turning 60 -- I don;t like waking up sore and tired every day whether I did anything ornot although I do like that it's gone by 12.30 or 1pm. But who am I to say to somebody:" Hey, 60's nothing!'

'It's a different 60. The only thing wrong with turning 60 is there's no guarantee you'll be alive until you're 160.

'You know what I'm saying?'

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