

THE EMPIRE INTERVIEW

# IN FROM THE

SAM NEILL WAS STALKED BY DINOSAURS IN *JURASSIC PARK*, THE US NAVY IN *THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER* AND NOW, IN *HUNT FOR THE WILDERPEOPLE*, BY SOCIAL SERVICES. WE CAUGHT UP WITH CINEMA'S BEST-LOVED PREY

WORDS JAMES JENNINGS PORTRAITS DAMIAN BENNETT

# WILD



Sam Neill, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Sydney, Australia, on 28 July, 2016.

# FOR A MAN

who played the lead in Steven Spielberg's biggest film to date — the first one with the velociraptors — Sam Neill is a humble gent, never far from a self-deprecating quip. “One or two people smile at me now when I go through an airport, rather than muttering, ‘Wanker,’ as I pass, which is a change,” he says wryly. The laconic 68-year-old has enjoyed a recent spike in popularity in his homeland after playing a curmudgeon with a heart of gold in Taika Waititi's *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*, which became New Zealand's biggest-ever homegrown hit. The tiny, independent film — hardly anyone knew Waititi was making it until a trailer surfaced to accompany its Sundance premiere — is now hoping for similar success globally.

*Wilderpeople* follows an unlikely pair of outsiders — Neill's gruff mountain man Uncle Hec and juvenile delinquent Ricky Baker (Julian Dennison) — who go on the lam in the New Zealand bush, pursued by the authorities in an unlikely manhunt. Being an outsider is something Neill knows well: his career has leapfrogged from New Zealand (1977's *Sleeping Dogs*) to Australia (1979's *My Brilliant Career*) to Hollywood and the UK. Before that, Neill was a half-British kid born in Northern Ireland and transplanted back to NZ aged seven. It's a move he credits with kick-starting his career. “Although my father was a New Zealander, no-one gives a flying fuck about that in a playground in 1950s New Zealand,” he recounts dryly. “I've always thought that's what started me acting in a way, just as a means of survival. I was in effect acting, getting rid of my accent, assuming another accent altogether, just pretending to be someone else.”

Happily, “pretending to be someone else” has led to diverse, high-profile roles in such films as *Jurassic Park*, *The Piano*, *Dead Calm*, *The Hunt For Red October* and lauded television programmes including *The Tudors* and *Peaky Blinders*. If you sometimes get the impression that the charming, reserved Neill would be just as happy producing Pinot Noir anonymously at his Two Paddocks vineyard as he is standing in front of a camera lens, he still proved willing to sit down with *Empire* and discuss his career highs, lows and *Event Horizon*...

## **Hunt For The Wilderpeople is such an endearing, offbeat film. How was it pitched to you?**

I got this email from the producers that said, “Have a read, see if you're interested.” I knew I'd be interested because I know everything Taika's done — although after reading the script I wasn't entirely convinced anyone would get it from overseas, because it's so acutely of our place [New Zealand]. But everyone seems to love it.

## **Is what you read pretty much what wound up on screen?**

Quite a bit changed; Taika thinks on his feet. For instance, the “Ricky Baker” [birthday] song we had to do on the spot, because we couldn't do *Happy Birthday* for copyright reasons.



**Left:** Neill as Uncle Hec with fellow adventurer Ricky (Julian Dennison) in *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*.

**Below:** Cuddling up to a dino in 1993's monster hit *Jurassic Park*.

**Bottom:** A little tense in *Dead Calm* (1989).

**It's a hilarious scene, but you keep quite a poker face.** I never had any trouble with that. Taika says I've got a deep well of grumpiness I can draw upon, that sustains me. [But] Taika's sermon in the film [the director cameos as a clergyman], that was problematic, to keep a straight face in that.

## **How was the rest of the shoot?**

It was a lot of laughter. I was a little apprehensive when I met Julian Dennison, because if I didn't like the kid, that'd be a challenge. But I liked him immediately; he's very funny. We shot it in about four weeks. We were going like the clappers, but I like the energy you get from that. Too much waiting can really get you down on a long shoot, which is mostly sitting around bullshit to other actors, whinging about lunch. We just had to get on with it, get it in the can and fuck off.

## **You toured New Zealand doing provincial Q&A screenings. It's rare that actors are so willing to champion a film like that...**

It's one of those rare films in your career where you think, “I really want this to do well.” We took the film to Nelson and one of my oldest friends, John — who I'd been friends with since I was 13

— came along with his family. They loved the film, and then John went home — he was in remission from cancer — and that was his last time out of the house. He died about five weeks after that. I don't think the film killed him, but I was very happy that I got to show it to them before he died. It's like, at school, you do the woodwork project, you make the coffee table, you take it home [and] show it to the people you love. This was my coffee table project.

## **Halfway through its run it was said one in nine New Zealanders had seen the movie...**

Which begs the question: what's wrong with the other eight? I noticed that we've dropped from 100 per cent on Rotten Tomatoes to 99 per cent. Of course it's the only review you ever remember, too.

## **Did you learn bushcraft skills while filming?**

Taika seems to think I'm some kind of Pinot Noir-swilling lounge lizard, but in fact growing up in New Zealand I spent a lot of time in the bush, and still do; I go fishing every year. I'm okay out there. And a beard is nice because you can keep a secret food supply in it that can keep you going for at least another two days before they come to find you.

**Previous page:** Sam wears P. Johnson Tailor button-down shirt. Suit, jacket and trouser, crocheted tie and pocket scarf www.pjt.com



## **Taika had a beard in the film, too. Were you guys having a competition?**

I have to say my beard was the most vigorous on set, but there were a lot around. Having been to the *Thor: Ragnarok* set [Waititi is directing], I can tell you Taika is bearding again. It's a pretty beardy film. I was up on the set last week [and] I'll be doing a little cameo next month, just for fun. My part is small, more a case of, “Did you spot [Sam Neill] among the beards?”

## **Has Taika instructed you to go to the gym to get your biceps up to Chris Hemsworth levels?**

I'm already there. I've got muscles on my muscles, I'm ready to go. Hemsworth can go surfing for a day and I'll be his stunt double.

## **Did you see Jurassic World? What did you think of it?**

I thought it was done very, very well, and the actors were excellent. There was some re-treading of gags, like putting the kids in a bubble car and beating the shit out of the car. One can hardly argue with success though. It was fucking massive.

## **People still love seeing humans being eaten by dinosaurs.**

Yeah, and if you're a character in one of those things, you better not be smoking, or on your mobile phone. No weaknesses or you're meat. Living meat, as opposed to dead meat.

## **What was it like being directed by Spielberg?**

Steven's all over everything. My guess would be that for 90 per cent of [*Jurassic Park*] he was the camera operator. So he's got one eye down the tube, and one eye on you. There's absolutely nothing he's not involved in. It's sort of staggering how much energy he has, because he started shooting *Schindler's List* about two weeks after we wrapped.

## **Speaking of legends, you worked opposite Meryl Streep twice, on Plenty and A Cry In The Dark. How was that?**

By the time we did the second I was very comfortable with her. She scared the shit out of me in the first one. I was too young, and too bedazzled by her. I was daunted. And I think on day one we had a sex scene. I wonder how many actors have done sex scenes with Meryl Streep. Probably just a handful.

## **There's a career achievement to chalk up.**

I went to see her give a charity talk a few years ago. There were questions from the audience. Some were quite profound, but there's always a dumb question, and the dumb question was, “Who was the best kisser you ever worked with?” She answered straight away, “Sam Neill.” I thought that was the greatest endorsement, but she'd seen me in the audience.

## **You should leave out that part of the story.**

No, I couldn't possibly. You can't tell these things without at least a smidgeon of self-deprecation. ■

**The Hunt For Red October shoot seems like it would have been arduous.**

Tight, tight sets. It surprised me because whenever I've worked, particularly in Australia or New Zealand, there's always heaps of women in the cast and crew. That's the only film I've ever done where there were no women. That was strange. [But it was] a really good boys' film made for boys, by boys. [Director] John McTiernan and I liked each other a lot, Sean [Connery] and I got on very well. What interested me was how meticulous he is. Every little line, you'd walk past his trailer and hear him [affects Connery doing a Russian accent], "Three degrees, Mr. Borodin." He's saying that over and over, until he's got it the way he wants it.

**So a tough shoot, but a good role?**

A very good role. And I'll tell you what, this would never happen anymore, but the US Navy were very helpful and cooperative, and asked the cast if anyone wanted to go out on a nuclear sub for the weekend. I said, "Shit, yeah!" We went underwater for 48 hours on the USS Dallas. Unbelievable.

**Sticking with water-work, what are your memories of *Dead Calm*?**

It was a thoroughly engrossing film, and I loved being on the water. George Miller shot a lot of the second unit stuff. The DVD extras would be great because a lot of [cut] scenes were George directing me. There was a sub-plot when a shark invades the sinking boat and it's man versus shark. It was fantastic, but when they put it together they thought it just was a bit much. [Laughs] We had mechanical sharks and guys with fins on their backs. It'd be great to see, but they haven't done a DVD with extras. *Empire* should start a campaign.

**Did you know your co-star Billy Zane is *Empire's* agony uncle?**

Billy Zane writes advice? Are you fucking kidding me? I love Billy, but I wouldn't take any advice he had to give on anything. That is fucking fabulous. I've ended up in some strange places with Billy, and both of us could've done with advice from somebody sensible, which wasn't to be had.

**You've done a bit of TV work recently, such as *Peaky Blinders*. Do you think the quality of TV has turned a corner in recent years?**

The '70s were the great days of Hollywood movies because they were doing big films, medium films, and small films. That quality middle area, between arthouse and the blockbuster, television has taken up that space, and that's where actors want to be. When *Peaky Blinders* turned up I thought, "What good fortune is this?" How often do you get to play a part of such complexity and hideousness?

**Your character there was a religious man, albeit a deeply compromised one, but you played the antichrist himself in *Omen III: The Final Conflict*. Jim Caviezel once told me he thought he was always destined to play Christ. I failed to ask him if I was preordained to play the antichrist.** [Laughs] I haven't seen that film since 1981. Taika,



on the other hand, has seen it multiple times and knows all my lines. He'd mutter my lines in my ear, "You have won... nothing." Just to torment me as I was about to do a scene. He knows *Event Horizon* too. I couldn't tell you a line.

***Event Horizon* is a bit of a cult classic. What are your memories of that?**

Having fun with my friends Fish [Laurence Fishburne] and Sean Pertwee — still good friends. And getting horrible claustrophobia in a spacesuit once. I had to rip the thing off my head. Agonising hours in make-up to turn into a sort of bloodied beast with no genitals. I'd be in make-up at 2am, and I'd get out of there at 10pm. The only thing that got me through was VHS tapes of *Father Ted*. It's funny, though; some things survive and some are never heard from again. There's a sort of dark afterlife on YouTube.

**Especially in your line of work.**

[Laughs] Yes a lingering afterlife, like uranium. That's what my roles are — used uranium, glowing in an unpleasant way underground somewhere, radioactive for another 10,000 years. But in essence, I would describe my modest career as outrageous good fortune. I've been very lucky. ●

HUNT FOR THE WILDERPEOPLE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 SEPTEMBER AND IS REVIEWED ON PAGE 47

**Top:** *Event Horizon's* (1997) "bloodied beast with no genitals".

**Above:** As Chief Inspector Campbell in Season 1 of *Peaky Blinders* (2013).

This page: Sam wears Trenery tee www.trenery.com.au. Tommy Hilfinger navy jacket www.globaltommy.com. Grooming: Ziggy Golden. Stylist: Elana Hocking @ Reload Agency

