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My life: Sam Neill

The actor and winemaker talks to Susan Jung about corks, cows and why action films are duller than they look



PHOTO: NORA TAM

TRACING ROOTS I was born in Northern Ireland (where his father, a New Zealander serving with the Irish Guards, was stationed). We worked out that my family has been in the wine business for 150 years, although I'm the first to grow wines. It could be longer, but my great-grandfather, who left Ireland (for New Zealand) in 1860 and was the son of a wine merchant, was unable to verify whether (his grandfather) was also a wine merchant. We've had at least four generations in wine - it was called Neill and Company, back in New Zealand.

THE ACCIDENTAL ACTOR I got into acting by accident. I wanted to act but there were no drama schools where I was, so I got into films, but behind the camera. Then people started to ask me to be in their films and I was silly enough to accept the low wages. I'm self-taught, never went to acting school. But I go to acting schools now and pass on what little I know to young people. I was doing a film with Meryl Streep - it was *A Cry in the Dark*. I asked her if there was a little signature she puts in every film, and she said, "Yes, I always fall over once." She asked me what mine was, and I said, "I always do a 360-degree turn somewhere." That's my signature.

None of my children are actors, although a couple of them could be - they're really good. They don't seem to think that what I'm doing is a real job. Recently, I've been extremely busy. I finished *Alcatraz* (last) February and did two other television programmes; one was called *Harry*, the other *Peaky Blinders*. And I've done two movies: *A Long Way Down* with Pierce Brosnan and Toni Collette, and *The Tomb*, with Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

BEHIND THE SCENES Making good films and good wines are both very difficult to do. Both are expensive. You need an excellent team and a lot of commitment, and a tremendous amount of profound knowledge. And if they're to be any good, they should be made with a lot of love. I think love is the most important thing of all. There's a lot that goes into both that the end user doesn't see. For instance, if you're doing an action film, you would think it would be pish-posh, but making an action film is the slowest, duller thing. You need hundreds and hundreds of people to do dull little jobs, and the whole thing (on screen) is over in 10 seconds. With a great bottle of wine, those vines have been nurtured and tended and cherished for years and years.

VINE BE THE GLORY When I was growing up, there was always wine in the house, but it wasn't until I was 29 that I actually had a glass that made me realise that wine is

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fascinating and splendid and multilayered, and something akin to poetry. It was in Switzerland, and I was staying with (actor) James Mason and his wife. James brought a bottle of burgundy to a restaurant. It was a bit of a revelation to me. When I went back to London, I started following burgundy - starting with white burgundy, then that morphed into an interest in reds, which, of course, are made of pinot noir.

I'd built my house with the idea that we would settle back in New Zealand, but it just happened to also be the right place for wines. There was a man named Rolfe Mills, of Rippon Vineyard - he died some years ago and his son runs the winery now. Rolfe was an old family friend of my father. He had started to produce some really interesting pinot noirs and it was drinking his wine that made me want to do this. In 1992, we started planting our first vines. At that stage, I think there were three little wineries in Central Otago, but now it's something like 200. I'm the only person at (Neill's vineyard) Two Paddocks who doesn't get paid. It sustains itself but it doesn't pay me.

We've been using screw caps since 1999, when about 25 per cent of our corks were duff - it was heartbreaking. Most of the wines in Australia are under screw cap and even the French are beginning to use it, because it's a better seal. When I'm pulling out a cork, it's usually accompanied by low-level swearing as the damn thing disintegrates and smells like wet cardboard. It's called the expletive ceremony. No more corks for me - screw the cork, as they say.

GONG LI, THE COW In addition to wine grapes, we grow other things at Two Paddocks, including lavender and saffron, and we have animals. We planted trees to get some of the native birds back. We don't like the grape-eating birds but we love the honey birds. We don't officially call ourselves organic although we use a lot of organic and biodynamic techniques. But we're not cultish about it.

Our pot-belly pigs are getting big. We've not eaten any of them; we'd like them to live long and happy lives. The lambs? My lips are sealed. Some of them have gone missing, let's say. You never name the food you're going to eat; "Fred was delicious" - you can't say that. The chickens are purely decorative - we have really nice, safe homes for them but they prefer to live in the trees, which are not as safe. Some of them have gone missing but they haven't gone into a pot. I'm fond of them, and we give all of them names. One is called Michael Caine. There are two chickens that are a bit weird - one thinks it's a pig. It doesn't like the other chickens, it hangs out with the pigs. And the other is best friends with a dog - it thinks it's a dog. We have a cow named Gong Li. My wife is a little anxious about that - she says, "You can't call a cow Gong Li." I say, "But I only call my cows after the most beautiful women in the world. It's the biggest compliment I could possibly make." There's also one called Shakira - that's Michael Caine's (the actor, not the chicken) wife. She's a big cow - but it doesn't sound right when you say it like that.

Sam Neill was in Hong Kong on a personal visit.

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Very interesting article Susan, Struck by the comment regarding James Mason...a marvellous actor, added gravitas to every part he played. Also there is quite a strong physical resemblance between Sam Neill and James Mason, other than their fondness for good wine, Burgundy and Pinot Noir. Both outstanding actors. Looking forward to seeing Sam in Peaky Blinders, shot on location in my home town of Liverpool. Thank you for sharing this article.