

HIS BRILLIANT CAREER HIS BRILLIANT CAREER HIS BRILLIANT CAREER HIS BRILLIANT CAREER

The media is saturated on a daily basis with celebrity ‘news’. Whether it’s birth, death, divorce, marriage, rehab, drink-driving, or simply a knickerless night out, if it involves a celebrity, we get to hear about it. Yet there are still those in the flicks who seem to slip through the net, enjoying success without the fuss and flash of the 24-hour paparazzi chase.

Sam Neill is among the ranks of the latter. He’s been on our screens for nigh on 30 years, yet shied away from all but the necessary limelight. Therefore, it’s a privilege to have the opportunity to interview Mr. Neill, to gain some insight into the life and thoughts of an otherwise fairly private man.

Like Russell Crowe and the boys from Crowded House, Sam is one of those great successes Australians like to claim as their own but who actually hails from across ‘the ditch’. However, while Sam calls New Zealand home, he was actually born in Ireland.

He spent his first seven years in the Northern Ireland town of Omagh where his parents had a house on the coast called the Watch House. As Sam explains, it’s a site of great historic significance.

“It was a customs and excise place in the 18th century where they’d watch for smugglers and they’d launch a boat if they saw any suspicious sights. It was also the beach where the SS Great Britain ran aground on its maiden voyage.”

These early years of Sam’s life preceded the political troubles in Northern Ireland so it’s a period he remembers with fondness. But he’s also extremely grateful that he got to grow up in New Zealand and recalls family holidays as a highlight of his childhood.

“I think one of the greatest things my parents ever did in a roundabout way for me was that they took us all to New Zealand. Although it was something of a shock initially, it was a wonderful place to grow up.”

“My parents were fantastic people and very funny. I’ve always regarded my brother, who was quite a bit older than me, as something of a mentor and he was a very funny guy, too.

ACTING MAY HAVE GIVEN SAM NEILL A BOUNTIFUL CAREER BUT IT IS WINEMAKING THAT IS CURRENTLY GIVING HIM HIS HAPPIEST HARVEST.

Words **Jackie Macdonald** Photography **Steven Baccon**

Grooming **Natasha Severino** Styling **Howard Steeves**





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“We’d head off camping in the holidays, although it was often calamitous because my father was very accident prone and by no means a practical man. But we’d go to these astounding places, great alpine lakes up in the Alps and camp for two weeks and maybe see three other people for the whole time. It was so beautiful and empty and unspoilt. My father used to say, ‘I don’t know why people don’t grow grapes up here, this is perfect’ ”.

Therein, the seed of an idea was planted. But more on that later.

After school, Sam went on to study English Literature at the University of Canterbury then worked as a documentary film-maker for quite a few years. His first significant film role was in 1977’s *Sleeping Dogs* but it was 1979’s *My Brilliant Career* that garnered international recognition and led to further roles. Since then, Sam has gone from success to success, with almost 100 films under his belt including *Dead Calm*, *The Piano*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Sirens*.

Acting is a profession that Sam feels fortunate to be a part of as it has shaped his life and allowed him to avoid the threat of more menial jobs.

“Without acting my life would be entirely different, I mean unthinkably different. I can’t imagine. I’m temperamentally unsuited and intellectually entirely ill-equipped to work in an office.”

So while many actors tell you theirs is an incredibly demanding job requiring huge amounts of mental energy, Sam’s not so sure. The hard part, according to him, is the rejection.

“The business of acting can seem like very hard work but actually compared to most things it’s probably a slacker’s paradise if anything. (But) if you’re a singer or a painter or any number of things, while there will be moments of euphoric success there will be many more times where you feel the full force of rejection and cruel criticism.

“I say this blithely, I’m not feeling sorry for myself at all. I always tell people when they ask how I got into acting and what they should expect that if you’re happy to contemplate a lifetime of humiliations then by all means give it a shot.”

Despite these difficult moments, Sam’s passion for acting has never waned, in fact, it is as strong as it ever was – last year saw him work on five separate films.

“Each of them involved entirely different characters and it was fantastically fun. I mean I was knackered at the end of the year, but the opportunity and privilege of being able to do that was just fantastic.”

Sam finds himself in awe of “pretty much every actor (he’s) ever come across” and in terms of directing, in true gentlemanly fashion he refuses to name names for fear of leaving anyone out.

So it’s the business of acting, the opportunity to travel the world, to work with and be inspired by some of the best that has drawn him in and kept him there. And Sam’s been able to enjoy all this without being constantly hounded by photographers and tabloid journalists. This for him has been a very conscious choice and one that he sees as available to all who decide on acting as a life.

“If you’re going to be ‘mega’, shall we say, you have to be aware that there’s two jobs. One of them is your ‘acting’ job and the other one is the ‘being a star’ job. And they’re two separate, if connected, endeavours. I’ve never put any time into the second one and indeed done all I can to get out of it.”

This is not to say that Sam holds those who choose to be stars in disdain, quite the opposite in fact.

“If you become incredibly famous, you entirely sacrifice your privacy and that’s a big bloody ask. Friends of mine who make \$20-25 million a movie, I always think they’re kind of underpaid because I wouldn’t have their life for quids, not even 25 million quids. Having paparazzi follow you around and all that crap – unendurable.”

Sam prefers to invest a lot of his spare time, energy and money into one of his greatest passions – wine.

When his father retired from the army he returned to the family firm, Neill and Co., which was an import and export business. One of the key parts of this business was importing wine and spirits from France, so wine has been part of Sam’s life since childhood.

His father’s words on those family holidays stuck with him and Sam’s company, Two Paddocks, now has three separate vineyard sites in Central Otago on New Zealand’s South Island. The enterprise started in 1993 with the aim, as Sam describes on his website, of producing “a good Pinot Noir that would, at the very least, be enjoyed by my family and friends”. The first vintage in 1997 turned out to be better than expected and by ‘99 it was producing a Pinot the company considered to be “world class”.

It is the combination of the Central Otago terroir, Burgundian winemaking techniques and his talented viticulture and winemaking team that Sam credits for the success of Two Paddocks Pinot. Among their triumphs was the invitation to be part of the Stoniers International Pinot Noir Tasting at which Pinots from world leading producers of Grand Cru Burgundy, as well as outstanding

“I STOOD ON THE MONTRACHET VINEYARD, WHICH WAS A BIT LIKE THE FAITHFUL GOING TO MECCA”

examples from the USA, New Zealand and Australia are blind tasted by industry luminaries such as James Halliday and Brian Croser.

Sam felt incredibly privileged to be part of such an event and was extremely proud of the Two Paddocks performance.

“I thought, oh my god we’re in some illustrious company now, we’re talking about Burgundys that are about \$200 to \$300 a bottle, but we came out with flying colours.”

Despite being openly proud of his Two Paddocks brand, there’s nothing that riles Sam more than the idea that he might be using his celebrity status to sell the wine.

“I was deeply irritated to read an article here about Jack’s (Thompson) barbecue sauce, my wine and I can’t remember what else... but the wine doesn’t need me to attach to it... I could pop off tomorrow and I believe, barring some sort of man-made catastrophe, in a hundred years time people will still be wanting to find Two Paddocks and it won’t be anything to do with me.”

Beyond his own Pinot, Sam finds the wines of Burgundy particularly inspiring and was thrilled when he finally found an opportunity to visit the region after the 2007 Rugby World Cup, with Wallabies legend George Gregan and his wife Erica, who are great Burgundy fans as well.

“We had a wonderful trip. On the way we had a night at the Moët and Chandon Château, which put on a fantastic dinner for us and we stopped at Chablis on the way through. So that covered about three of my particular passions. And I stood on hallowed ground in Burgundy, on the Montrachet vineyard, which was a bit like the faithful going to Mecca or Lourdes.”

Gaining an insight into the real personality of someone as famous as Sam is rare. However, if you visit the “TP Blog” section of the Two Paddocks website you can share in the exploits of his family, friends, employees and even animals in regular entries from Sam.

From this blog I noticed that Sam played a game last Easter that involved the participants matching a wine to a woman they admire. When I ask for some of his personal picks, he insisted I give him some new suggestions.

Naomi Watts.

“Naomi Watts, that’s a good one. I think she’s definitely a top Château Chablis, very cool and crisp and elegant.”

Kathy Bates.

“Hmmm. Perhaps a Châteauneuf du pape from the best part of the vineyard. Best part of the hill. Full and rich and every performance satisfying.”

The Queen.

“Château d’Yquem. Good year.”

Helen Mirren.

“One of those very austere South Australian Rieslings, perhaps a Peter Lehmann, something like that. Again, a good one.”

Apart from wine, Sam is a great fan of photography, listing Cartier Bresson, Max Dupain and Brassai as those he admires. He also professes to a love of music from pop to rock, jazz and classical.

“I probably know every note of every symphony Sibelius wrote. Just as I do every note that Lennon/McCartney and Wilson wrote.”

But if you really want to get him going, bring up politics and religion. On the latter, his stance is blatant.

“I’m very uninterested in religion. I can’t see any point in getting heated or divisive about it. Something to be regretted is the rise of fundamentalism, whether it be in the east or west. I think fundamentalist Christianity is just as dangerous as fundamentalist anything else. Who’d have ever thought we’d see the rise of fundamentalist Anglicanism! And in Sydney of all places! The point of the Anglican church and I’m a confirmed member thereof, is that it’s not fundamentalist and it’s tolerant, that’s the deal. I think to hell with all fundamentalists wherever you come from.”

On politics, he’s keeping a keen eye on the American Presidential race and is hoping for a change of direction in Australia.

“One of the things I think is to be regretted about the last 10 years in Australia is the over enthusiasm for blindly going where America leads. I don’t see myself being in any way anti-American, but I think that this current administration in the States has blundered badly and god knows, it’s apparent now, but it was just as clear in 2002. I look forward to a certain amount of clear and independent thinking in terms of foreign policy.”

However, not all political figureheads are lambasted by the accomplished actor, he is one of many who admire New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clarke, particularly for her stance on Iraq.

“She said no, we’re not going to Iraq, we don’t think you’re right. And it’s not an unwillingness to serve, we’ve gone to Afghanistan as part of the United Nations but she thought Iraq was wrong. I think that took real courage because undoubtedly she was under enormous pressure from London, Washington and Canberra.”

Given the esteem in which he holds Clarke it seems apt to go back to the wine game and ask where she’d fit in the wine world.

“Well she’d have to be New Zealand and we’d have to say a very distinguished Cabernet Sauvignon from Waiheke Island.”

On that note, I come to the end of my time with Sam Neill. Once he’s gone, I’m left feeling somewhat envious. Here’s a man who’s managed to balance a cracking film career with a fulfilling personal life bursting with love, laughs and plenty of quality wine. ■

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