

IN A TELEVISION INTERVIEW ONCE, ALEC Baldwin was asked what the most beautiful sound in the world is. He answered without pause, "My wife." When asked what is the worst, he thought a minute and said, "The sound of my own voice in my head sometimes."

Right now the the latter sound is filling the otherwise blessedly warm confines of a transport van shuttling the actor from the set of his new motion picture, *Bookworm*, to the holding area of campers and trailers a quarter of a

INTERVIEW: TOM O'NEILL

The star of 'Ghosts of Mississippi' on parent-hood, politics and why he'll never win an Oscar

mile away. With the majestic Canadian Rockies soaring in the background (the crew swears that the Alberta location is so picturesque, audiences aren't going to believe it's real), Baldwin is ranting and raving about a native pastime: bowhunting. Seems the 38-year-old Long Island native happened upon a hunting show on television this morning while pounding away on his treadmill and was, in his own powerfully comported words, made nearly "sick to my stomach." What the actor hasn't taken into account is the fact that two other passengers in the van are locals who, by statistical probability, are likely to be hunters themselves (or, at the very least, the sons, brothers or friends of hunters). While the actor is entitled to his opinions, of course—no matter how didactic or sonorously presented—there is something in the deafening silence that greets them that makes him seem

PHOTOGRAPH: NIGEL PARRY

even more detached from the surroundings than if he were indeed shooting this movie on a cheesy Hollywood back lot. When he exits the van at his trailer, an enormous Cuban cigar popped in his mouth like a big rubber stopper ("Some guys smoke good Dominicans; other guys smoke great Jamaicans. I only smoke the best: Havanas!"), the entire vehicle decompresses as if punctured by some hunter's giant arrow.

One thing you've got to say for the guy: He's got presence.

And since first making that presence known 17 years ago in the sudsy world of daytime soaps, the steely-eyed, husky-voiced older brother of actors William, Danny and Stephen has managed to remain in the public eye, even becoming part of the pop-culture lexicon in the process. (As anyone who has seen *Clueless* knows, cute boys are called "Baldwins.")

"Yeah, I heard about that," sniffs Baldwin with nary a trace of the self-deprecating wit that has made him such a sought-after guest on *Letterman* and a favorite host at *Saturday Night Live*.

The actor has reason to be wary of the press, with whom he has had a rocky relationship. In 1988, when he appeared in no fewer than five of the year's showiest films—*Beetlejuice*, *Married to the Mob*, *She's*

Having a Baby, *Talk Radio* and *Working Girl*—it was a virtual lovefest. In less time than it takes most thespians to get their head shots, Baldwin had become the darling of the media and was being positioned by the industry to inherit the leading-man status of his aging heroes Pacino, De Niro and Hoffman.

Something, of course, had to go wrong.

Baldwin's first starring role in a major motion picture came with 1990's adaptation of Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October*, in which Baldwin played CIA analyst Jack Ryan. Although the film was clearly a hit (\$120 million), when it came time for the sequels (*Patriot Games* and *Clear and Present Danger*) the actor balked. He didn't like the scripts, he claimed, and wanted to do a revival of *A Streetcar Named*

Desire on Broadway, anyway. (According to a source who worked on the films, the play's producers agreed to delay the show to accommodate the films, but Baldwin refused, in part because he wouldn't have been eligible for that year's

Alec Baldwin

"I BELIEVE" that the people who run the Republican Party are really rotten, nasty, horrible

Tony Award.) The film role went, of course, to Harrison Ford, who, it should be noted, would later do *The Fugitive*, another project that Baldwin had been developing for several years. Though Baldwin received kudos — and that coveted Tony nomination — for his work in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his actions had insiders whispering that he'd developed a nasty case of attitude. By the time he'd completed *The Marrying Man*, the whispers had turned into shouts. As if the reports about his bad behavior on the set

cal organization composed of actors. In fact, even the actor's run-in with a paparazzo last year resulted in an avalanche of positive press — and the good wishes of celebrities everywhere — when a jury agreed that the photographer's pursuit of Baldwin's newborn had crossed the line of acceptable behavior; the jury acquitted the actor of misdemeanor battery charges.

Now, with the release of Rob Reiner's civil-rights drama *Ghosts of Mississippi*, the career rehabilitation of Alec Baldwin is off to a roar.

want to repeat his previous Reiner-directed saga, *A Few Good Men*): "The kinds of roles I've seen him playing are always very edgy and dark, and I saw a whole other side to him — warm, sweet and intelligent — that wasn't being explored in films. I hope this allows people to see him in another light."

When asked about Baldwin's on-set demeanor, Woods (a friend since they made *The Getaway* together in 1994) laughs. "We have these reputations for being difficult because, I guess, we're sort of intense guys," he says. "But if people really knew how boring we are, it'd be embarrassing. I mean, they say 'Cut' and we'd go play Scrabble in his trailer."

But Anthony Hopkins, Baldwin's *Bookworm* co-star, still sees a little bit of the fire and ice. "I like people who've got a streak of darkness and badness in them," says Hopkins, who was once known for being a rabble-rouser. "I like troubled people because I belong to the same ilk. And Alec's up there. In your face. He's a fighter, and that fascinates me."

In *Bookworm*, Baldwin and Hopkins play survivors of a plane crash who are stranded in the Alaskan wilderness. During a five-day visit to the set in November, the freezing temperatures and continual snow do little to diminish what appears to be a state of constant good humor ("As long as I'm not standing around with my d--- in my hand, I'm happy" is Baldwin's response to the bad weather). But ask the wrong question and his steely reserve surfaces. "Why do you want to know?" he'll snap, with a narrowing of the eyes and clenching of the teeth that recall his many villainous screen personae.

But with the prospect of Baldwin's wife and daughter rejoining him on the set after a 10-day absence, the actor is in mostly good spirits. Although, there is one dark cloud on the immediate horizon.

You really seem to enjoy those cigars. How do they go over with the missis?

[Leaning back, balancing a stogie between his teeth] Can't smoke in front of Kim. Nooo smoking in front of Kim. She hates it. Hates it. I get all my smoking in before Kim comes. *When you read the script for 'Bookworm,' did you say, "Oh, this is great! I really want to play another bad guy and work in a freezing climate with ice up my jeans!"?*

Tony [Hopkins] and I always joke with Harold Perrineau [the third male lead, a New York City native] about that. We say, "This script sure reads different when you're snuggled in your bed in Brooklyn, eh, Harold?"



BROTHERLY LOVE: BALDWIN BOYS WILLIAM, STEPHEN AND ALEC IN NEW YORK IN 1989

weren't enough, the released film was a frothy flop. The media that once had loved him now had very serious second thoughts.

Of course, the situation wasn't helped by more bad movies (*The Shadow*, *The Juror*, *Heaven's Prisoners*) and Baldwin's inability to hold his tongue. At a 1992 appearance at a New York City Hall hearing about the working conditions of carriage horses, he challenged a driver to a fistfight and uttered a homophobic slur, just two days before he was to speak at the city's annual AIDS march.

But things seem to be turning around for Baldwin since he wed *Marrying Man* co-star Kim Basinger in 1993, became a father (their daughter, Ireland, was born in October 1995) and was made the very polite president of the Creative Coalition, a nonpartisan politi-

ing start. As Bobby DeLaughter, the real-life Southern prosecutor who put racist Byron De La Beckwith (played by James Woods) behind bars for the murder, 30 years earlier, of civil-rights leader Medgar Evers, Baldwin has finally found the role that will restore him to the A list and, perhaps more important, make him proud of his work again.

"[Baldwin] talked quite frankly with me about some of his recent roles," says author and journalist Willie Morris, who brought the Evers case to the attention of the film's producers. "He said he was not totally pleased with them. He said that [*Ghosts of Mississippi*] was the most gratifying experience he's ever had as an actor."

Adds Reiner, who cast Baldwin after Tom Cruise turned down the part (saying he didn't

human beings and they want to hurt [Clinton]. The forces of darkness are going to try to give it to him bad."

But I've always been happy to play a certain role regardless of how it reflects on me. I didn't always have to play the hero or the good guy. I just read the script and say, "Do I want to be in this movie?" And I didn't think about it. I will say that after doing this one, I won't play this kind of part again. I'm really fed up and tired of it.

So why'd you sign up?

Two reasons: David Mamet [who wrote the screenplay] and Tony [Hopkins]. I think Tony's probably the greatest English-speaking actor alive today who still works. I mean, how much longer am I going to do this for a living? I don't know. So I asked myself what chance would I get again to do a movie with Anthony Hopkins.

Another of your heroes is Marlon Brando. Did he go to see you when you did 'A Streetcar Named Desire'?

[Wistfully] No. We had our antennae out, but he didn't come. I would love to meet him. Just the other day, Kim and I got offered *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for TV. We wanted Brando to play Big Daddy, but he wouldn't do it.

I have a feeling you'd do the dictionary with Brando if he said yes.

We could celebrate our birthday together. We have the same birthday: April 3. It's also Eddie Murphy, Doris Day and Wayne Newton! When's yours?

March 20.

[Excitedly] You're an Aries, too!

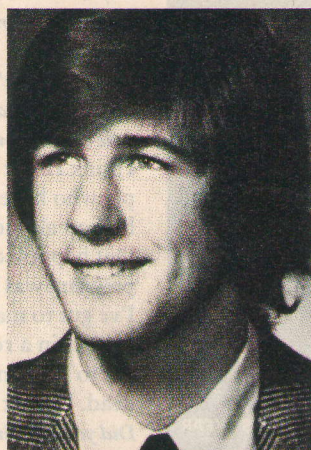
No, I'm a Pisces. Speaking of signs: What do you predict the next four years are going to be like for President Clinton?

I believe that the people who run the Republican Party in this country are really rotten, nasty, horrible human beings and they want to hurt him. They want to bash him; they're pissed. The forces of darkness are going to try to give it to him bad.

The Shadow speaks! Who are these evil men? Newt Gingrich, who calls [Clinton] a lying scumbag every chance he gets, and Al D'Amato, the paragon of senatorial virtue.

I saw your mom kissing D'Amato last week on television at a rally for breast-cancer research.

[Wincing] He kissed her! Please. Be very careful when you say that. D'Amato raced up to my mother. My mother was horri-



BALDWIN IN HIGH SCHOOL

fied. She was hiding in a corner. The fact that he was using this [rally] was really kind of shameful. Which are you more passionate about: politics or acting? I don't know.

Well, why not get it over with already and run for something?

No money in it.

You've got enough money. Just put it in the bank, invest it, then the wife can continue working.

That's an idea. I never thought of that.

Or she could be the first lady.

Would she like that?

No. She'd be a good one, though. I think Kim is good whenever she's involved in public life, [but] she's very private, very reclusive. People don't know her, really. She doesn't do a lot of self-promotion. But when she does...[drifts off, looking like a lovesick puppy].

People are charmed?

Yeah, they fall madly in love with her. She's very, very adorable.

I understand she called yesterday, very upset because there was a picture of you and the baby in a tabloid.

Yeah, well, that we had somebody on the set with a camera like that was very upsetting. Uninvited people taking photographs of my child has been an issue before [laughs].

Do you think your case caused a re-examining of the way tabloids pursue celebrities? Look at George Clooney's boycott of 'Entertainment Tonight.'

Well, Clooney's is a separate thing because he had a written agreement with Frank Kelly [president of Paramount TV, which owns *ET* and *Hard Copy*] that they would get off his back. And they violated that agreement. That's wholly different.

'ET' is coming to the set of 'Bookworm.' Did Clooney call and ask you to join the boycott?

Yeah, I talked to George on the phone a couple days ago. I don't do very much publicity to begin with, [but] one of the things I had pre-agreed to do on this movie was *ET*, because they've always been very nice to me. So I said, "George, I'd be happy to talk with you about how I could be of some help to you, after I fulfill this already arranged situation. But I can't back out of it now." He was cool about it. He's a wonderful guy.

In an interview recently, you said that one of the reasons you felt you'd had trouble landing choice roles is because of your outspokenness — or more precisely, your political activism. And you named five stars: Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford, Sylvester Stallone and...?

[Warily] I don't remember. [Pause] Mel Gibson.

Right. And you lashed out at these five guys for not taking stands, for being safe and apolitical. I think you're mistaken when you suggest that I lashed out at them. But what I did say in that article, I'd be happy to restate now: The biggest people in the business tend to be apolitical publicly. These people may give untold millions of dollars to political causes privately, but you just don't see them stepping out. I'm not suggesting that they don't — I don't know what they do. It's none of my business. But I do know that there are people who are much more public, much more front and center for political causes, and it does — I take it back, it can — backfire on you. I'm not saying it has on me, but it can.

Well, my reading of your statement was that you felt your outspokenness had backfired on you; otherwise, why would you have made the statement? And you seem angry at these guys for shirking what you consider their civic responsibility. No, I'm saying that I find it interesting that they have that in common, that the only way you can make contact with them, as an audience, is to buy a ticket and go see them in a movie; otherwise, they're [invisible]. You don't see very much of them, which I admire, actually. If I had it to do over again, maybe I would have done that [laughs].

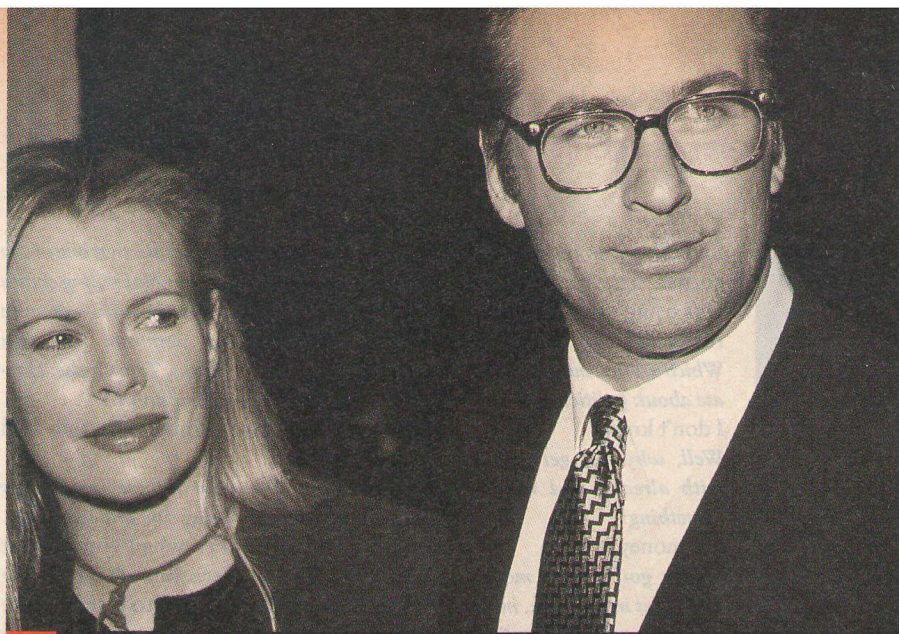
Do you feel that you've been punished in any way for being outspoken, for taking stands?

No, I don't think I've been punished, but on the other hand, I wouldn't be surprised if there are people who, if they had to choose between going to see a movie of mine and going to see a movie of somebody else's who was less opinionated than I was, won't see my movies because they think I'm a commie. I was actually referring to your being punished by the industry, not the public.

[Sharply] Now, when you say "by the industry," you mean what?

I mean, are there studios who don't hire you because they think you might be difficult or they simply disagree with your politics?

No, I think the studios hire you if your movies make money. It's that simple. They really don't give a s--- what your politics are. Rupert Murdoch [the ultraconservative owner of



BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE: BALDWIN AND BASINGER AT THE L.A. PREMIERE OF 'THE JUROR' LAST YEAR

Twentieth Century Fox] is about as antithetical to me politically as you possibly can be, yet he's paying me a lot of money to come up here and make a movie for him.

All right, another question about politics —

[Tersely] Just let me just ask you a question: Why do you ask me those questions about politics? Why does anybody who comes into this kind of a forum with me feel that it's necessary to open up that door?

Because it's very much a part of your public persona. I'm trying to figure out where it comes from. Where does it come from? I went to college. I mean, [politics is] what I wanted to do. What I'm doing now is not at all what I wanted to do.

You lost a student-body election at George Washington University and then decided to try to be an actor, right?

I lost that election, and then I'd gone to [New York University] to visit friends and a woman said to me, "I think you really have the personality to be an actor." I'd been taking an acting class at G.W. just as a thing to fill my credits. I'd always thought about it because it was something I wanted to do, but I thought it was something you never studied in college. When I went to [visit] NYU, I remember saying to myself, God, law school — because where I was headed was law school — I can't do that. That'll always be there. If I want to come back and do that someday, I can, but I think I really want to try this. [Long pause] You know, I can see why I was so uptight as a person, because I was so locked in. I was white-knuckling this image of what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go. I was just going to shoot myself like a missile into politics.

Who were you trying to please, then?

[Pause] Probably my father.

I know your father wanted you to fulfill some of

the dreams he never realized — becoming a lawyer or a politician. In order to feed his growing family, he dropped out of law school to become a teacher. He died in 1983. Did he ever get to see you be a success?

Not really, no. That's one of my biggest sadnesses. Because my father was somebody who I really respected and really liked. He was a good guy. And he was very tough.

Was he harder on you than on the others because you were the eldest son?

He was pretty tough with everybody, but I was his first son, so I got a little bit of a pass on that one. He worked Danny over pretty good [laughs]. Gave him a hard time. Danny was pretty wild — Danny and Stephen. Billy and I are more alike temperamentally. [But] you just didn't bother trying to pull any s--- on [my father]. He was a tough-looking guy, too. You knew he would just kill you.

Is it hard not having him around for advice?

It's very hard. Years ago, I saw myself unconsciously making father figures out of people I knew. There was a guy who was my agent for years — he became my closest friend. Finding male friendship with people who could counsel me was a preoccupation of mine unconsciously for a long, long time. *You must have been scared when you found out your mother had cancer a few years ago.*

Yes, because we would all joke to each other that my mother was going to live to 100: "She'll be around forever." It was just something that intellectually I never could conceive. I never could conceive of my mother dying. *Never.* I didn't conceive my father was going to die, either; but he did, and...it was like somebody shot me. I just couldn't believe it. He was 55 years old. I just think of all the things I would do for him if he were here today. I wouldn't hesitate to give him anything he wanted to make him comfort-

able...[trails off]. When my mom got sick, I thought, oh, man. I wasn't ready, but in a way, I secretly knew that she wouldn't [die]. My mother's very tough.

And she's fine now, right?

Yeah.

Now that you're a dad, are you more diligent about taking care of yourself so you're around to take care of your daughter?

I think I must be very much like a lot of people who have a kid and then put their seat belt on all the time. One of the first things that happened to me when I knew Kim was pregnant was I thought, oh, I've got to work! I've got to make money! I've got to do five movies in a row. I may die tomorrow! I've got to leave my wife a lot of money if I drop dead. I've got to leave my kid money.

Did you tell Kim this?

Yes! One day I just started thinking about work and obsessing about work, and she said, what is it? And I made the discovery right there in that moment. I said, "Well, God, we have a kid now! I have to work! I've got to make money!" You have this kind of momentary panic.

Her reaction was?

I don't think she bothered trying to tell me anything. She just said, "OK, you go do what you want to do."

Is that how your relationship is?

[Grins] Yeah, she endures my behavior.

Share something with me about your life together.

You know, when I met my wife, I was living in New York and she was living in L.A. She lived by herself; she was divorced. It was just her and 11 dogs that she had. She had a big dog and 10 little dogs. When I first came to visit her, I was kind of taken aback. I said, "It's just you and the 11 dogs in this little house in the valley?" And she was like, "Yeah, that's it." She lived this very simple life.

Was it scary being faced with that brood on your first date?

The dogs were very territorial. I definitely got this vibe from the dogs like, "The boyfriends come and go, Alec. We're here forever."

Have you consolidated your households?

[Nods] When she got pregnant last year, we [thought], well, now, how are we going to live the rest of our lives? So we bought this house back in New York. It's really a dream for me. I'm just dying to settle in somewhere so we'll be able to live in just one place. Hopefully, I'll die there.

How many bedrooms?

Seven.

You going to have six kids like your folks?

No, but I do think we'll have another one, hopefully. Adopt one or more. I'll be honest with you: My wife and I had kids later in life, and I just don't see [Continued on page 115]

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it as possible for us to have as many kids as we might want, now. I'm happy with the way it worked out, but I certainly would've liked to have had six or eight or 10 kids; I wouldn't care.

Let me ask you about something that actors are often superstitious about: winning an Oscar. Well? Wouldn't it be nice?

I'll make a prediction: I'll never win an Oscar [laughs]. I just don't think I'm the kind of person who would win an Oscar.

Why not? Do you think there are evil forces that don't reward talent alone?

No. I don't think there's anybody *more* talented than Tom Hanks. I think he definitely deserves all the recognition he gets. Just think of the people who've won the Oscar in the last few years: Tony [Hopkins], Daniel Day-Lewis, Jeremy Irons...

You don't think you're in the same category as those guys?

No, it's tough. I mean, a movie like Rob's, a *Ghosts of Mississippi*, maybe *that's* the kind of movie that people want to celebrate. Maybe *that's* the kind of movie people want to reward. I've done a lot of movies that I don't think they'd want to. I mean, I don't have any shortage of people who tell me that they like what I do. I'm very grateful for that. But I think that, in order to win an Oscar, you have to do a certain kind of movie; and I've yet to. [Pause] Well, Rob's is the first, maybe. Lately, anyway.

That said, everybody has a secret acceptance speech. Who would you thank?

The people who made me love acting. And my dad. My father was somebody who infected me with acting. We would watch old movies together forever. We'd open up *The New York Times* to the funny little capsule reviews and read those and watch everything — every conceivable movie that was on. Just the two of us. Over and over again. [Pause] I remember the day my father drove me from Washington, D.C., to New York when I transferred to NYU. It was a really quiet car ride. I think my dad was wondering, you know, what are you doing? He just kept looking at me, and I turned to him finally and said, "What do you think it takes to be a good actor?" And he said, "I think you have to be smart." [Quietly] And I'll never forget it: He just looked at me and said, "And I think you're smart, so I think you'll do fine."

Contributing editor Tom O'Neill interviewed Liam Neeson for the November 1996 issue of 'US.'