





Interview: TOM O'NEILL

# Liam

# NEESON

LIAM NEESON, A LOOMING FIGURE DRESSED ENTIRELY IN WHITE (SHIRT, PANTS, SNEAKERS), LUMBERS INTO THE foyer of his tony apartment building on Manhattan's Upper West Side, 10 minutes late. Now, to the uninitiated, 10 minutes in movie-star time—that is, when they're on the receiving end (say for a limo to the set or a table at the Ivy)—is a lifetime, 600 seconds of utter agony. However, when they're on the administering end—and especially if it's the media waiting—it's barely a breath, a nanosecond that doesn't even register on the Cartier tank watch some grateful producer bestowed upon them.

Neeson, however, has never shown a predilection for Hollywood's fame game. He apologizes profusely on his way through the lobby, pauses in the elevator to pat a baby on the head ("Hey, little fella!") and heads upstairs to his office, where he makes his visitor a fresh pot of coffee (a nuisance, since the actor is drinking tea). It's during such moments that the 44-year-old Irishman appears, like the country that bore him, gracious and down-to-earth. Yet, also like his homeland, he can be fractured and stormy.

Sitting beneath a poster for *Schindler's List* (his portrayal of the title character earned him an Academy Award nomination) and just an arm's length from the boxing gloves that he wore as a boy in Ballymena, Ireland (he won the Ulster championships three years running), Neeson fidgets and looks distracted. On a number of occasions he refuses to answer questions, most notably those concerning the politics of the movie he has just sat down to promote.

*Michael Collins*, director Neil Jordan's passionate look at the revolutionary founder of the Irish Republican Army, has generated controversy since the moment it began filming. Politicians and scribes on both sides of the centuries-old dispute are claiming, without having seen the film, that it could fan the flames of tension in Northern Ireland, an especially delicate issue since the breakdown of the peace talks last spring.

Rather than discuss "the Troubles," as the Catholic and Protestant unrest has historically been referred to in his homeland, Neeson chooses to stress emphatically that the film deals with the IRA of an older, less terroristic time when the targets of the notorious guerrillas were not, as is often the case today, innocent civilians.

The actor's reticence also has a more personal source. Says his pal the writer and director Terry George (*In the Name of the Father* and the upcoming *Some Mother's Son*), who served three years in prison for his own politically motivated crimes: "Here's the thing: [Neeson's] is a Catholic family living in a very Protestant neighborhood, and they've managed to survive. His parents are kind people; they're not into violence at all; but any word that Liam says gets picked up in Northern Ireland." Gravely, he adds, "What he says has repercussions for his family, so he is cautious."

Perhaps the stress of having to promote a film under these

**AS OSCAR BUZZES  
AROUND HIS  
PORTRAYAL OF I.R.A.  
FOUNDER MICHAEL  
COLLINS, THE  
IRISH ACTOR TALKS  
ABOUT FATHERS  
AND SONS, LOVERS  
AND FRIENDS,  
AND HIS LARGER-  
THAN-LIFE ROLES**

conditions contributed to Neeson's recent health scare. In early September, the actor was rushed from *Michael Collins'* premiere at the Venice Film Festival (where he won the best-actor award and the movie was named best picture) to the hospital for emergency surgery to relieve a blocked intestine.

It seems appropriate, then, that the 6-foot-4-inch actor has found his greatest success playing characters who bear the weight of the world on their broad shoulders. From the deaf-mute falsely accused of murder in *Suspect*, to the country doctor struggling to protect a wild child from exploitation in *Nell*, to the Scottish warrior Rob Roy, who must avenge the rape of his wife, Neeson has made a career of suffering for others. This perhaps Irish-Catholic tendency was nowhere more fully realized than in his portrayal of Oskar Schindler, the entrepreneur who desperately tries to save his Jewish factory workers from the gas chamber in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*.

Neeson's capacity to absorb the pain of others can no doubt be traced back to his own upbringing. While he has described his youth as peaceful, his family was poorer than its Protestant neighbors, and religious differences aside, he must have understood oppression.

A tough lad, Neeson took up boxing for the local club, where he revealed for the first time the intensity and drive that would later surface in his work as an actor. "He had a chin on him like granite," recalls Mickey Tohill, a former national champion of Ireland who boxed Neeson as a teen. "You could hit him all night long and he'd keep coming back at ya."

After dropping out of teachers college and losing interest in an architecture apprenticeship, Neeson turned to driving a forklift and to carpentry to make a living. He also began auditioning for regional stage productions and, a few years later, was accepted into Belfast's acclaimed Lyric Players Theatre and then Dublin's famed Abbey Theatre. Director John Boorman spotted him onstage at the Abbey and cast him as a knight in the 1981 medieval adventure *Excalibur*.

On the set of that film, Neeson met and fell in love with acclaimed British actress Helen Mirren, then 35, seven years his senior. He moved into her London flat and the two became a fixture on the local theater scene. Neeson, however, grew frustrated at being overshadowed by Mirren's well-earned status and, four years later, with her blessing, took off for Hollywood. A string of support-



**DRESSED FOR SUCCESS: NEESON WITH HIS WIFE, NATASHA RICHARDSON, AT THE PREMIERE OF 'ROB ROY' IN NEW YORK, SPRING 1995**

ing roles in films as forgettable as *Krull*, *The Bounty* and *The Mission* followed before his breakthrough turn in 1987's *Suspect*.

Around the same time, to his great dismay, Neeson became as well-known for his high-profile romantic attachments as for his acting talents. Besides *Satisfaction* co-star Julia Roberts (who plays his fiancée in *Michael Collins*), Neeson became involved with Brooke Shields, Sinéad O'Connor and Barbra Streisand, among others. Two and a half years ago he married Natasha Richardson, a member of the Redgrave acting dynasty. They now have two sons, Micheál, 16 months, and Daniel Jack, born days after this interview.

"Every woman on the set of *Suspect* was madly in love with Liam," says Cher, who starred in the film. "Every single one of them." She hastens to add that the only reason she didn't fall for him was because she was attached at the time. So what's her expert opinion on his appeal? "He's Irish and charming," she says. "To women, that's just deadly."

Behind the charming brogue and good looks are more mysterious qualities—less visible but more intriguing. As Terry George puts it, "There's a gentle-giant thing about Liam that masks something very complicated."

"He doesn't quite trust success and fame," adds Neeson's *Michael Collins* co-star Aidan Quinn. "He is genuinely one of the sweetest and warmest human beings I've ever met, but like most Irish people, he's uncomfortable with compliments. Maybe it's because they come his way so much."

Jordan (*The Crying Game*, *Interview With the Vampire*), the screenwriter as well as director of *Michael Collins*, first asked Neeson to

play the part 12 years ago when he wrote the original script. So he was startled when he got a call from the actor right before shooting started last summer with an offer to back out.

"He got cold feet," says Jordan, still sounding befuddled. "He rang up and said, 'Look, you're only doing this because you asked me 12 years ago, and maybe I'm not right

for it anymore.' I had to say to him, 'No, Liam, you are. You are!'" Judging from the Oscar buzz that has already begun, Jordan was right.

But here in the office Neeson shares with his wife, he seems less concerned with awards and accolades than he does with just getting through the first of two interviews for this piece. Peering intently at his

visitor through wire-rimmed spectacles, Neeson takes a deep breath and not so much asks as announces, "Could we keep the personal stuff to a minimum?"

*We'll start with the movie, but you've said you don't want to discuss its political ramifications, and boy oh boy, they're out there.*

Well, I tread such a delicate path. Past interviews I've done have had nothing to do with what's happening in Ireland and then someone will fire a question from left field. Like during *Schindler's List* they asked what I thought about Gerry Adams [the controversial president of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA] and then it appeared [incorrectly] in the *Belfast Telegraph* that I support Gerry Adams and the IRA, in full headlines! You know, I have family living in a very, very heavy Protestant area.

*So you're protecting your family?*

Yeah. I've learned to my cost that journalists will print things totally out of context or not true at all. [*Incredulously*] This one wrote, "Surely, Mr. Neeson and his family must live in fear of their lives now from Protestant reprisals." I wrote to the lord mayor of my town [the Protestant leader] that this was a load of bulls--- and I'd never given an interview to this guy. I'm very proud of my roots—Protestant and Catholic—and he printed *that* in all the local papers, which I was thrilled about. *Wait—you're Catholic. Are there Protestant roots in your family?*

No, I mean community. I have very, very dear friends who go off and march every 12th of July [the most patriotic holiday on the Protestant calendar] with their sashes, and that's cool. And *that* doesn't get reported. It's always

# ON FATHERHOOD:

**"I suspected I would love it, and I do. Meryl Streep is a buddy of ours, and she told me when my son was born, 'You realize now you're a hostage till the day you die.' She said it with a twinkle in her eye, but that's true."**

that the Catholics and Protestants are at loggerheads, but that's just not true.

*It's been reported that the film's ending has changed a number of times.*

No, that's totally false. [Sighs] There's been pinpricks of retaliation in the press, in England and Ireland, since the film has been shot. People just don't want this story to be told. These detractors have been writing stuff and they haven't read the script. They certainly did not see the film.

*What would the media have to gain by knocking the film?*

I don't know—you tell me. Again, this points to certain sections of British society seeing this guy as just a terrorist who's in total cahoots with the IRA of today, which is not true. This [story] was 70 years ago, but in people's minds it was, like, last Tuesday. Detractors want to see this as some IRA film, but it's not. Or they want to relate it to what's happening [in Northern Ireland] at the minute. [Strongly] I generally believe—I know—Michael Collins would be turning in his grave at what atrocities have been committed in the name of Ireland since the 1940s. *On a lighter note: In the movie, your character proposes marriage to the character played by Julia Roberts. Considering your history, was that a difficult scene to play?*

[Sighs] It was never remotely an issue. I mean, I guess Julia and I know each other to a certain extent, [but] we just had consummate ease in acting with each other. There was no past history or anything like that. And that scene in particular, it was so simply done, that's the beauty of it.

*But it's natural to wonder—*

[Interrupting] No, it's not. That's all water under the bridge, and it is to Julia, too. It's 10 lifetimes ago. It was never an issue before Julia was cast in the movie, and it wasn't an issue during the shoot.

*OK, on to fatherhood. Does being a dad change your perspective on the world?*

Yes, it does, and it certainly takes you out of yourself. It gets you away from your own selfishness, which us actors can tend to lean to if we're not too careful. I suspected I would always love it, and I do. Meryl Streep is a

buddy of ours, and she told me when [Micheál] was born, "You realize now you're a hostage till the day you die." She said it with a twinkle in her eye, but that's true as well.

*Is Micheál walking yet?*

[Proudly] On the 6th of August 1996, he took six steps. So that was a great diary entry. And then of course you're saying, "Does he walk like me, or does he walk like my wife?"

*Who does he look like?*

It's weird because I remember one little incident in Dublin, almost a year ago. He was only a few weeks old, and he was sitting in this chair and he turned to the window, and for a split second I saw my father. My dad's deceased now, but it really was jaw dropping. For that split second I saw my dad, which gave me a great comfort because I knew he was in there and I could actually see it.

*Natasha comes from a very established theater family in England, and you come from a farming family in Northern Ireland. What is it like to meld two such different backgrounds?*

You know, everybody talks about this kind of royalty status and we just laugh about it. When we hear this [in haughty tones], "Coming from this theatrical dynasty..." we think of silver tea services and croquet lawns and have a laugh.

*But it is a dynasty—her mother is considered one of the greatest living actresses in the world.*

Her mother is awesome, she really is. [Grins] And she's a great fly fisherman.

*You go fishing with Vanessa Redgrave?*

Yeah, and with incredible success, too. She'll find spots in the river and I'da gone, "Nah, no way." Within minutes she's pulling in trout—pulling them in!

*Have you ever worked with her?*

No, but [pauses] I can tell this story. She was incredibly gracious a couple of weeks ago. She called up and said she wanted to speak to me. I'm going to play Oscar Wilde next year, and she's been offered the part of Lady Wilde in this other film. I guess she was asking my permission, in a way, and I felt this real sense of loyalty. It didn't faze me if she did it or not, I just was very, very touched by that.

*How will you play Wilde? Fey?*

For starters, he was 6-foot-3, Irish and in-

credibly strong. He was a real physical guy, and there are anecdotes of him just throwing students out of his room, manhandling people down the stairs at Oxford. I think he's famous for when he put it on, when he was propagating his theory of beauty.

*Wilde was renowned for his own beauty, no?* By today's standards, it's hard to say. You look at some of these rock musicians that kids hang above their bed and you think, f--- me, Oscar Wilde was gorgeous compared with them.

*It seems like the film world is opening up about putting gay heroes onscreen.*

That's good. Whether they're about gays or lesbians, they're just human-interest stories. They're just drama. And someone like Wilde—to do what he did in those days and to be this extraordinary genius of the English stage—is a real hero for anybody, anytime.

*Are there any love scenes?*

Like, thrashing-about-the-bed scenes? No. *What, little kissing scenes?*

Yeah, yeah, they'll have to show some sort of intimacy.

*But don't you think that can be more distracting—when gay characters aren't allowed physical contact?*

I know what you mean, like in *Philadelphia*, for example.

*Exactly. Antonio Banderas and Tom Hanks hardly kissed.*

They danced a little bit, but the actors looked embarrassed doing it. But for a big studio film to go out there in the heartland of America, it was bloody good. It's a big step. I had to keep reminding myself of that when I saw it. Yes, I know, you're right, but yet at the same time you can show incredible passion by two hands being held under a table or an affectionate touch. That can convey so much more eroticism.

*Switching gears, what do you miss most about Ireland now that you live in New York?*

I miss the spirit. It's hard to define what a nation's spirit is, [but] when I'm there I just fall into a rhythm. Here, I feel I'm like that [snaps fingers quickly], and over in Ireland it's like that [steadies hand], and when I get him [nods toward photo of son], we're both like that. It just feels right. The older I get, the

more right it feels. But I never get homesick, because I love New York, I love America. *You're so recognizable now. What's it like for your mom to have a movie-star son?*

I think she's very, very wary of it, and she's very protective of me because she's seen what damage the press can do. She's had to learn, in not a nice way, about stuff in the papers — this is going back a few years. I would get frantic calls. She'd say, "Oh, they're writing that you're this, you're that." And I'd say, "Mommy, don't look at that s---! That's somebody trying to make a buck." You know, you're seen in a restaurant sitting with a woman and therefore you're going to have babies next week. *[Irritated]* That kind of thing was always in the press, and it always had a knife to it, a little barb that you're some male slut. And it used to just piss me off something awful. I got over it because I realized if you allow them to affect you, then they've won, in a way. But I hated it because it used to annoy my mother. *Well, this puts me in a quandary because I wanted to ask you about your image as a kind of wandering Irish Lothario and your list of famous exes.* *[Firmly]* I'm a happily married man, and that was five lifetimes ago.

*OK then, what made you finally decide to get married? Why Natasha?*

*[Pause]* I've always been attracted to beauty and talent. Who knows what those forces are that work on you. When I was doing *Anna Christie* with her on Broadway, there was an incredible sense of rightness in doing this piece of work with this magnificent woman. Our relationship developed after the play — it wasn't an instant thing. Then it all coincided with doing *Schindler's List*, looking through a window at the mortality of life and having this incredible relationship developing at the same time. Those things sealed it for me that this was worth preserving and holding on to and developing. If that makes sense.

*It does. It's like the elements conspired to make it happen.*

Yeah, and you don't go against it because if you do, you're gonna f--- yourself up. It wasn't a plan of, "Whoop! *[Claps hands]* I'm 40! Got to meet somebody!" It has nothing to do with that.

*And you had, uh, sown your wild oats?*

You've done all that s--- and it's now time to wave goodbye to the boy and welcome the man.

*You also have a reputation for abhorring the Hollywood scene. How come?*

It has to do with being on this earth a certain

number of years rather than, um, I mean, I'd hate to be... *[Struggles to think of the name]* Matthew McConaughey?

Yeah. I was trying to think of his name. He has a lot of promise. I have to be careful what I say here because I saw this movie *[A Time to Kill]* and it left a lot to be desired, but my heart went out to him. I thought, this boy needs guidance. And it's not [about] being snapped up by the biggest agents in town and demanding huge salaries for him. *I saw him ambushed by cameras on a tabloid TV show last night — he just looked miserable, like he might have been thinking, is this worth it?* As he should. You look at somebody like River Phoenix or Robert Downey Jr. — that's



IN THE SPRING OF 1977, NEESON WAS WORKING ON THE BELFAST STAGE WITH STELLA MCCUSKER IN 'BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY.'

know a point's going to come when I say, "Look, if you want me for the movie, I'll do it, but everything else, I'm not going to do anymore." And *I'm* not Tom Cruise.

*But the public just wants a glimpse of you, and that's what we're trying to do here.*

I know that. I actually see both sides. *[But]* take someone like Sharon Stone. Every magazine, every newspaper you pick up, her image is emblazoned on it. I don't know, it turns you off in some way. I find it, too, with trailers of movies. *[Disgusted]* If I'm bombarded with *Mission: Impossible* once more...I will not see that film now because it's invaded my privacy. *[Quickly]* I have to see it; my mother-in-law's in it. But I remember feeling so *anti* that film because I hear, "Oh, it's going to be released at 4,000, 5,000 screens!" *[Indignantly]* What about a family going to a shopping mall to see a movie and they can't see anything but *Mission: Impossible*? And then

if they *don't* see it, they're not a member of "the club." The kids aren't in "the club" because the other kids have seen it. Do you know what I mean? *[Pause]* I think, yes, I'm involved in it, and yes, I want my films to do well, but I think sometimes it's like they're trying to suck marrow out of people here. Anyway, that's a piece of my soul.

*Can we get back to something: the sex-symbol or stud-image thing. Are you still trying to put it behind you?*

*I have.* I mean, it's like it never existed for me. *But it did exist, and besides, people could say worse things about you.*

Oh, God, I know it. It's terribly flattering, of course it is. But maybe it's got to do with loving women, and I do, you know? I'm on record as saying I find them much more interesting than guys.

*I should've come here in drag. Maybe that would've worked for me.*

If you shaved first *[laughs]*. I don't know. It's flattering, but then I've read some more malicious stuff. Sometimes I'll be at a function chatting to some woman and I can sense maybe they're a wee bit reticent because they've read something [about me] or there's some of them who think I'm hitting on them. That's happened a couple of times, and that's made me feel uncomfortable.

*All you've got to do is flash your wedding ring at them and —* *[Both interviewer and interviewee drop their gaze to]* *[Continued on page 124]*

the extreme. It can take you rapidly on a spiral down to death. I hope and pray it doesn't happen to Robert Downey Jr. But it's funny you tapped into [McConaughey]. I'd just seen the movie the other night and I'd been hearing all that stuff about him, and actually the two of us were supposed to do a film a few months ago. It didn't work out for various reasons. But it was just...*[struggling]* I saw something of that guy's soul and I thought, I hope he's going to be OK, I really do.

*Would you ever write him a letter or something?*

*Did you meet him when you almost did the film?*

I didn't, but if I met him now, I'd love to pull him in for a pint.

*What would you tell him?*

I don't think I can say.

*You're kind of a tough interview. What's the deal?*

Of course, actors should do press. They get bums on seats, they get people in to see movies. It's part of the gig, but when I read about someone in a magazine, when there's a huge article, I get really embarrassed that I've read it because I know something about that person. I understand the public's wanting to find out more about people, but I

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*Neeson's ring finger and notice it's bare.]*

Well, I...hmm, I was going to say, "I do." I do anyway, but...

*What are they going to say if they don't see the wedding ring?*

But I always wear it. I'm not wearing it today because, you know [gravely], I hurt my finger, and it's actually upstate [at his country house]. That's where...but, ah, it's not an issue with me, it's not. You know? The press...I never was that person; that was totally conjured by the press.

*Well, it's in all your press clips —*

It's like everybody wants to regurgitate it, and that's f---ing 10 lifetimes ago. And what was it? I was a single guy— dating beautiful, intelligent women. What's wrong with that? I should be so lucky, and I'm still friends with some of those women. Big deal, you know? In a way, it's an insult to me and to the women because it's creating a "You're a guy and you're single, so therefore you know you must be a stud." That's such an insult to women, in a weird way.

*OK, let's switch over to a far less complicated subject: religion. Are you a practicing Catholic?*

Yes, I am. I'm not strict practicing, but yeah, I'm practicing.

*Will you raise the children Catholic?*

[Pause] Well, my son's baptized....Yes, I dare say I will. I'll certainly raise him with a knowledge of God and hopefully a sense of the religious, but I don't think in a strict way. Hopefully he'll go to school with Muslims and Protestants and what-have-you, and that will give him a little bit of knowledge of the spectrum of people's faith. That's important, rather than [slaps hands together], "This is a faith you're going to believe!" Because that's how I was brought up, and I think that can be wrong.

*What you said about your son's looking like your dad was touching. What did you share with your father that you want to have with your children?*

Oh, just an empathy. My father and I would never have long discourses. Well, about boxing, maybe. We never had a touchy-huggy relationship even though my dad was very physical. He'd always be touching people's shoulders, and I do the same, and I know my son Micheál does the same thing. And it's good to keep that up, to keep a sense of, when you meet them, hugging them and just always telling them that you love them.

*Did your father do that with you?*

No, no — we would have fallen over backward with embarrassment. [Softly] Both of us would.

*Let's get back to 'Michael Collins.' Here's a film that some people believe could actually change the course of Irish history. While you've stated that it isn't about the modern IRA, you're steering clear of certain related questions that people are going to be interested in: Do you support Gerry Adams? Do you want a united Ireland? How do you plan on dealing with that?*

I won't answer those questions because that is totally my own politics and [the answers] are very, very personal and still being fashioned. I'll talk till the cows come home about how I was attracted to playing the part, how I was attracted to telling something of that story of our history. But before the film, I read everything there was about Collins, and I'm still studying as if I was swatting [cramming] for an exam. Because I do not want to be caught by some f---wad who wants to try to corner me into making some statement about the present situation, which I will not do.

*Maybe if the peace process were working and the situation were less tense, you could.*

No. Nope, I wouldn't.

*Would you ever consider moving your family out of the North, since you are so worried about repercussions and reprisals?*

I won't answer that.

*I'm just curious about your strategy, because if you have to promote this film —*

And I am going to. Again, it's like for *Schindler's List*. I did every conceivable press for that movie because I believed in it, and somewhere along the line of talking to moron journalists and brilliant journalists, there was an area of discussion that was always real and truthful. It was really good discourse, and hopefully that will happen with this film. I'm sure it will, and I'm experienced enough to know when questions are coming from left field that are just to get me into a corner — trying to get me to say something that they can print and say, "This is an exclusive: This guy supports this or that." I'm pretty sensitive to who these people are before they open their mouth.

*Have you felt that here? You can be honest.*

No, I haven't, but at the same time, I'm worried because of the reasons we've talked about and because the magazine you work for sells in Ireland and in England. Nobody wants to be misquoted in this age of computers, where information is at people's fingertips. [Pause] Truth and integrity are virtues and principles that we must hold on to at all costs. Because you know, it's all we have. ■

Tom O'Neill, a New York-based contributing editor, interviewed Woody Harrelson for the July issue of 'US.'