

Film Close-Up: Jack Nicholson

by Joey_Berlin

In contrast to the sad vanity of the anti-aging crowd in Hollywood, Jack Nicholson is conspicuously more comfortable with his changing physicality.

Though his body may be growing more imperfect as he approaches his 71st birthday, Nicholson is enjoying life as much as always. The same could be said of his character in "The Bucket List," a dramatic comedy pairing Nicholson with another old pro, Morgan Freeman, as a couple of spunky but terminally ill old codgers. Instead of wasting away in hospital beds, they start crossing items off a list of things they would like to do before they die. Their adventures in the film, directed by Rob Reiner, include going on safari in Africa, climbing in the Himalayas and parachuting from an airplane.

JACK NICHOLSON - Three-time Oscar winner Jack Nicholson has gone from a '60s-era icon of rebellious youth to a cranky but cool septuagenarian. In 'The Bucket List,' he and Morgan Freeman are a couple of spunky but terminally ill old codgers. CNS Photo. What is remarkable about Nicholson, whose 12 Oscar nominations since "Easy Rider" have resulted in three wins, is that his career has arced gracefully over the decades all the way from a '60s-era icon of rebellious youth to a cranky but cool septuagenarian.

Q: When you were filming "The Bucket List," did you think any more than usual about your own mortality?

A: This is a film about living. One of the things about it that I liked is, everybody considers their mortality all the time whether they know about it or not. That fear of the unknown. The movie stays with you and I think it's because these are interior, private conversations that we have with ourselves and we haven't really seen them on film before. Nobody's that different.

So I went by the assumption that these are things that people have thought about, regardless of how consciously they've thought about them. And if you touch that chord, you know, this is what you get. My first acting teacher, Jeff Corey, said, "Your job is to provide a stimulating point of departure. This is what you do in a theatrical experience." And I thought, this'll be a doozy.

Q: How much movie magic was involved in some of the adventures you and Morgan Freeman had in the film, particularly the skydiving scene. How did you do it?

A: Well, we dove like son of a guns. Fantastic! Fearlessly leapt out into the void, didn't care and so forth. This is part of my new lying approach. But why I say that, and I've said this before, is when I was first doing interviews I met Diana Vreeland, who was the editor of Vogue magazine, and gave the normal, you know, complaints people have about interviews. And she said, "Well Jack, you must not tell them the truth." I said, "What?" She said, "Well, my guess is you're going to be doing a lot of interviews. If you tell them the truth, very quickly you'll become bored with your own life."

Q: Rob Reiner said the difference between working with you on "A Few Good Men" and this film was your 15 years of life experience in between. What does that 15 years of experience do for you, and your approach to the role?

A: Well it's an impossible question. I would approach the role the same way. Once again, Jeff Corey said, 85 percent of whoever you play is identical to the character. It's the 15 percent that you have to find, isolate and act, so to speak. So I would approach the role from that point of view, since I've held it since I was in my 20s.

Q: How difficult is it to keep isolating that 15 percent, and try to act differently for each role?

A: We make a lot of movies. You want them to be different. But you also have to accept the reality. You know, I've been saying for a long time, anybody can be good once. Twice if they've got some talent. But once you have to un-Morgan the part, or un-Jack the part, that's when you're in the pro game, when you can suspend who the audience thinks you are and reinvolve them in a new story. This is really our job at this point in our body of work, so to speak.

Q: Your body of work is so large by now, why do you keep taking on more roles?

A: You know, a lot of people are asking Morgan and I now about the bucket list and so forth, but our good fortune is that acting educates you about life. You're not going to take a test, but if you're of medium interest and intelligence about what you do, you learn about every total thing in life from acting. No matter what part it is, you go on learning. And that's the elixir, for me, of the job.

Q: You took Morgan to a Lakers game, which is one of your passions. One of his passions is sailing. Did he take you on his boat?

A: No he didn't. That's another thing about Morgan. He said, "When I go out there, I sail alone just to test myself."

Q: After "The Bucket List," what are you doing next?

A: Don't know. That's what I do, based on my means and position. And I've done this intermittently. When I'm done sometimes I just stop. I don't read scripts, I don't talk scripts, I don't do banquets, I don't do anything. I stop. Nobody else does that.

Q: Will you ever direct again?

A: Only if somebody asks me.

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