

TV Close-Up: Sam Neill

by Eirik_Knutzen

Although born in the Emerald Isle, Sam Neill found himself a tad homesick after nearly seven months of shooting 10 one-hour episodes of "The Tudors" in and around Dublin. He loved the project, salivated over his role, met with friends all over Great Britain and had several visits by his wife and children; however, his heart and mind always remained focused on his country home in New Zealand.

Neill - a serious traveler who seldom films two movies in a row in the same country - felt the incredible urge to live and breathe with his wife, Noriko Watanabe, and daughter, Elena, in the pastoral beauty of his Two Paddocks vineyard in Central Otago, deep in New Zealand's South Island. He had been dreaming of such blessedly mindless tasks as mowing the grass between his vines.

When he returned to paradise, Fire - Neill's Staffordshire bull terrier employed for rabbit control in the vineyard - chased a bunny into the engine compartment of his late-model Mini-Cooper S. The canine then proceeded to dismantle the car's grill and bumper; a few smaller parts may have been digested.

SAM NEILL - Sam Neill portrays Cardinal Thomas Wolsey in the 10-hour dramatic series 'The Tudors.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Francois Rousseau.

The rabbit got away, but Fire still sleeps on the best sofa in the house while the Mini-Cooper remains in the shop and suspicious automobile insurance company agents try to piece the case together.

On the more positive side, Neill discovered that he had just been awarded the D.C.N.Z.M. at the 2007 New Year's Honours. Once the 59-year-old picked up the large Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit medal at the Government House in Wellington for his contribution to filmmaking - which fits very nicely with his fine collection of distinguished showbiz service awards, including the Order of the British Empire in 1993 for his contribution to acting - his life returned to normal.

Suddenly, the soft-spoken performer had a few weeks to think about his life and times, particularly his recent activities in Ireland shooting "The Tudors," a 10-hour limited series revolving around the intemperate lives of young King Henry VIII (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (Neill). Wolsey was the son of a butcher and a prostitute who became Lord Chancellor in 1515 while heading the Catholic Church of England

during its split from Rome.

By the time both men became fat, disgusting beasts consumed with greed and power, Wolsey fell from the graces of Ann Boleyn (Natalie Dormer) and the king, after dragging his feet regarding a papal annulment of Henry's marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon (Maria Doyle Kennedy). Stripped of his power and earthly possessions overnight, Wolsey died under hazy circumstances in 1530 on the road to London, where apparently he was falsely accused of rape.

It was also a matter of taking on a huge personal challenge on camera, according to Neill, a man who counts "A Cry in the Dark," "The Hunt for Red October," "The Piano," "Jurassic Park" and "Jurassic Park III" among his big-screen successes.

"It was a happy time for me, working with a great ensemble cast led by Jonny Rhys-Meyers, who is intelligent and charismatic. But it's a bit daunting to work with really fantastic British and Irish actors."

Neill was introduced to American television audiences in the brilliant series "Reilly, Ace of Spies," soon followed by the miniseries "Kane and Abel." He killed time while away from his family for half a year by visiting old friends in London and traveling the length of Ireland by car - including his birthplace in Omagh, Northern Ireland.

"It was quite by accident," said the actor-director-writer-producer.

Neill's mother was English, but his father was a third-generation New Zealander serving as an officer with a British-Irish regiment when he happened to be born. A fourth-generation Kiwi, he grew up in New Zealand and studied English literature at the University of Canterbury.

He met his wife - an upper-tier makeup artist who last earned an Academy Award nomination for "Memoirs of a Geisha" - on the set of "Dead Calm," working opposite Nicole Kidman. When both are working at opposite ends of the universe, their three children (his, hers and theirs) are likely to pursue their career or education simultaneously on three continents.

"Something unusual has happened during the past year," sighed Neill, "as Noriko has been home for the past few months we're parenting our 16-year-old Elena through school. I've spent as much time as humanly possible with her while overseeing our pinot noir from vine to bottle and after a slow start due to an early frost, it looks like a vintage year for the Two Paddocks label.

"However, I recently promoted my French film, 'Angel,' at the Berlin Film Festival and I'm about to start an as-yet-untitled film with Guy Pearce in Australia. I love acting, but there are few things as rewarding as opening a good bottle of your own wine."

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