

# the conversation

## 'I was young for a long time — more years than most'

The secret to being an age-defying acting talent? No trans-fats, no drink and avoid Hollywood at all costs, says Oscar-winner Sissy Spacek. **Helena de Bertodano** meets the reclusive star at her Virginia country club

**T**here is something so unmistakable about the face of Sissy Spacek that it seems a little superfluous when she sticks out her hand and says, in that distinctive Texan twang: "Hihih. Ahh. Sissy." But this is quite essential Spacek — despite being an Oscar-winning actress forever associated with her memorable portrayal of the eponymous protagonist in *Carrie*, she tries very hard to prove that she is, as she points out repeatedly, "very ordinary."

"Bless your heart for driving all this way in the torrential rain," she exclaims, as she sinks into a floral sofa in the private members' lounge of Keswick Hall, a hotel a few miles from her farm in deeply rural Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's about as far away in the United States as any actor can get both geographically and culturally from Hollywood. Spacek retreated here with her husband, the art director Jack Fisk, nearly three decades ago. "A lot of people would find it lonely, but for me it is heaven. I can walk around the farm in my pyjamas and nobody has a long enough lens to see me."

Not that her relative seclusion has stopped her from acting. Her most recent film is *The Help*, the film adaptation of the bestselling novel about racial tensions in 1960s Mississippi, which has grossed nearly \$200 million in the US and is about to be released in the UK. Coinciding with Obama's presidency and a national conversation on race, *The Help* has been described as one of the most important pieces of fiction since *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The film has proved just as popular as the book. The success is due not just to its portrayal of the inequalities of race but the frustrated middle-class white women of the Sixties, a topic that has become wildly popular with programmes such as *Mad Men*.

Spacek plays Miss Walters, the elderly mother of the horribly racist Miss Hilly. The author, Kathryn Stockett, describes Miss Walters as "bat-shit crazy." Spacek says she was a challenge to play. "She has Alzheimer's, but she also has incredible clarity so it was a hard act to balance."

At first, Spacek says, Stockett thought that she was not right for the part. "I appeared in my shorts and Chaos [Fisk flops] and shades, looking really cool, and the writer took one look at me and said, 'You're not old enough to play Miss Walters.' I went 'Ha-ha-ha, just you wait.' I'd like to say it took hours to prepare me, but you'd be surprised: they just twisted my hair up and put those glasses on me. All it took was five friggin' minutes!"

It is not a big role and Spacek initially hesitated. "I wondered if I had enough time to build a whole character. Tate [the director Tate Taylor] said, 'You could improvise, and I said, 'Oh, yeah, I've heard that before.' But he was true to his word. I would apolo-

gise to the actors in the foreground and say, 'I'm about to upstage you terribly in the back of your very important scene...'"

Now 61, Spacek still resembles the young girl who burst on to the screen in *Badlands* in 1973, accompanying Martin Sheen on a cross-country killing spree. In 1976 she earned her first Academy Award nomination as Carrie, the persecuted teenager with telekinetic powers who takes revenge on her tormentors. Then in 1980 she won an Oscar for her performance as the country singer Loretta Lynn in *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Spacek was by then nearly 30, the movie opened with her playing Loretta aged 14.

The tilted nose and long fringe have always made her look younger than she is. "That's the beauty of bangs," she says, swishing them out of her eyes. "Have you noticed my characters always have bangs?"

She does not feel in a position to lament the paucity of good roles for older women. "I was young for a long time — more years than most — so I feel I've gotten more than my share. And I have no interest in playing ingénues or forty-somethings. I'm interested in how Miss Walters was really feeling. I know what it means to walk into a room and to forget what I came in for. I want to look my age so I can play my age."

She adds: "Getting older is so much better than I expected. My advice is, 'Don't eat trans fats. Exercise, get sleep and don't drink too much.' But it is weird how age slips up on you. I'm usually the oldest one on a movie set."

Her 23-year-old daughter, Madison, is accompanying her this morning and has been working out in the gym while we talk. Now she comes in. She has a nose ring and psychedelic pink nail varnish and contributes occasional helpful comments such as: "It makes me nauseous watching my mother's movies." "Really?" says Spacek, looking a bit taken aback. "Yes," says Madison. "I just a lot of friends in sixth grade when everyone started watching *Carrie*. No one wanted to come over any more."

"That's awful," says Spacek, then turns back to me. "That's the wonderful thing about having children: they couldn't care less if you're famous. Everyone else scurries round doing everything you want and then your children come along and kick you to the kerb."

"I did like watching you in *The Help* though," interjects Madison, chucking. "I went to see it with my roommates and we just cried with laughter."

"Oh, 'Grow up!'" says Spacek, laughing

too. She says that the main reason she moved to the countryside was to give her daughters a normal childhood. (She also has an older daughter, Schuyler, who is an actress and singer.) "I think I realised long ago that I didn't want to try to stay king of the mountain. I wanted to have a long career and to live a normal life and raise children. That's probably a lot to ask of the movie industry. If you're not careful, it can really chew you up and spit you out. I've always respected English actors who seem to keep everything in perspective."

Born on Christmas Day, 1949, Spacek was the daughter of an agricultural agent and had two older brothers, one of whom, Robbie, died of leukaemia at 18. "The fact that happened to me so early in life, I realised a lot of things that life is short and all we have is this moment."

After being elected Homecoming Queen — "It was a very small school, I didn't realise what a dork I really was" — Spacek moved to New York to live with her cousin, the actor Rip Torn, and tried to make her name as a singer, at first singing in Greenwich coffee houses. Later, she released a song titled "John, You've Gone Too Far This Time", a reference to John Lennon appearing naked with Yoko Ono on an album cover. "It wasn't my song," she says today. "I was just looking for anything to pay my bills. This was pre-singer-songwriter days. Someone said, 'We've got a song, we need a girl.' So I took it."

The song was a flop and Spacek turned her attention to acting, working as an extra at Andy Warhol's Factory and appearing in a non-credited role in his 1970 film *Trash*. I ask her what it was like being part of the Warhol set. She shrugs: "It was like casting pearls before swine. I didn't know who anybody was. I was never on the inside."

But the experience made her resolve to become an actress. "I was completely determined. You have to be because you get rejected and rejected and I just thought 'Well, some day, I'm going to meet somebody really smart who's going to realise how talented I am.' It's survival of the fittest. Some of my friends who went to acting school were really beautiful and talented, probably far superior to me, certainly in looks, but maybe I just wanted it more."

Looks have never really been her thing. "When I went back to Texas, it was all thick hair and glamour and I was like the plain Jane. Even my dad once said, 'Why don't you wear a little lipstick?' I'm proof there's hope for anyone. One reviewer described me in *Carrie* as an 'unborn crocodile foe-

tus', which I thought was brilliant." Today she is dressed in a black shirt, black short skirt and tights with a denim jacket tied around her waist and brown leather boots and, as usual, is wearing no make-up. "I always think if you just wear navy blue or black, then nobody notices and you can wear it over and over again."

Terrence Malick was the director who realised Spacek's talent, casting her in *Badlands*. "I had been trying so hard to get rid of my southernness because people in New York were saying, 'Get rid of that accent or get back on that plane.' But Terry liked the accent. That's what he needed. That was pure luck."

*Badlands* changed everything for her, both professionally and personally: not only did she make a name for herself but she also met her husband on set. "Probably all human beings are a product of our choices and everything that happens to us, good and bad. I was really fortunate, because I came up in the Seventies and I think my look was conducive for that time."

She says that she has never regretted taking on *Carrie*, the role which gave her cult status and which people still most associate her with. "I was actually watching some clips from *Carrie* last night on YouTube: that scene where the kitchen utensils are flying into Carrie's mother [Carrie used her telekinetic powers to kill her mother]. I was like 'Wow, that was really weird and wonderful. The technical aspect of film-making fascinates me. I'm so grateful I did *Carrie*. What's wonderful is that it has connected me to generations of teenagers."

Spacek says that she did not find it hard to relate to Carrie. "Don't all teenagers have that 'Woe is me' kind of thing? I think the whole scenario is part of life. I can find all the characters I play somewhere inside myself. You're just digging them out and bringing them to the surface."

While raising her children she took on fewer films but was back on top of her game in Todd Field's *In The Bedroom* in 2000, earning her sixth Best Actress nomination. It was a harrowing portrayal of a mother pushed to the edge by grief. Spacek finds it hard to describe what happens to her when she is in character. "Sometimes I find myself transported. The director will say, 'Do the same thing again. And I'll go, 'What did I do? I don't remember anything. I was having an out-of-body experience.'"

Since *The Help* was released, Spacek says that offers have been rolling in. In the meantime, she is happy to continue playing her most successful role yet, that of the Virginian farmwife. "People are always coming up to me and saying, 'Did anybody ever tell you that you look exactly like the actress Sissy Spacek?' It just doesn't seem to occur to anyone that I am me."

*The Help* is released on Wednesday



**'A critic said I looked like "an unborn crocodile foetus". I loved that'**



**KEY ROLES** Sissy Spacek as Miss Walters in *The Help*, right; as Carrie, above; inset, with her husband Jack Fisk and daughters Madison, left, and Schuyler



DALE ROBERTS