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LET'S KEEP GOING
WHY HOLLYWOOD CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF
SUSAN SARANDON



Still in great demand after four decades in Hollywood, the Oscar-winning actress Susan Sarandon shows no sign of slowing down. She talks to **Helena de Bertodano** about her controversial human-rights activism, her split from Tim Robbins and her new-found love of table tennis

Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe

Desperately sought-after Susan

On Susan Sarandon's wrist is an unusual tattoo. At first glance it looks like a jagged bracelet, but if you look closer you can see the letters ANDAND. 'It stands for A New Dawn A New Day,' says Sarandon, twisting her wrist round to show me. 'It's supposed to remind me that if there are disappointments or mistakes, the next day I can just start again. One of my strongest attributes is being able to change direction when I'm given the gift of something I didn't anticipate.'

Sarandon has recently suffered her fair share of disappointments. Last Christmas she and the actor Tim Robbins, one of Hollywood's most enduring couples, announced their separation after 23 years together. Then on a trip to Haiti a few weeks later (she was visiting a hospital with Artists for Peace and Justice) she damaged her foot so badly that she had to have a bone replaced in her toe and has been limping around on crutches ever since.



Even her on-screen characters cannot escape misfortune. Her latest film, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, is the sequel to the Academy Award-winning 1987 film *Wall Street*. It sees Michael Douglas reprise his role as the ruthless Gordon Gekko, just released from jail. Sarandon plays Sylvia Moore, the hapless mother-in-law to Gekko's estranged daughter, Winnie. Sarandon's character experiences financial ruin when her real-estate business crashes. 'I represent Everyman because I'm bottom of the heap financially. Sylvia could have drawn some strength from my tattoo.'

We meet at Spin, a New York table-tennis club, Sarandon's latest venture and a testament to her ability to change direction.

'If you'd told me a year ago I would own a Ping-Pong club I would have laughed until I fell on the ground. It just kind of happened – the people who asked me were so enthusiastic about the idea that it was infectious. I think it is a riot that everybody takes the game so seriously.'

Our conversation is frequently interrupted as bright orange balls ricochet off the corner table we are sitting at, sometimes hitting Sarandon directly in the face.

Unperturbed, she picks them up and plays with them as she talks. The club – a vast, colourful underground bar with more than a dozen Ping-Pong tables – has swiftly become one of the coolest spots in New York. Sarandon is planning a documentary about the people who frequent the club: 'We have everyone from kids who are trying to make the Olympics to undercover narcotics cops in here.'

Dressed in a flowing white kaftan shirt with white cropped trousers, Sarandon does not seem her age (63) but denies Botox or cosmetic surgery. 'I'm afraid of Botox,' she says in her distinctive gravelly voice. 'As an actress you have to use your face. But I do think a woman has a right to do whatever she wants with her body.'

Sarandon is an unpredictable and entertaining interviewee with an unusual take on almost everything. Consider her explanation of the difference between acting on a film set or in a theatre: 'It's like the difference between masturbation and making love. When you're in movies you are almost by yourself, whereas on stage you have a relationship with the audience.'

Or her openness about using recreational drugs. 'I was lucky to come of age at a time when there were consciousness-opening drugs as opposed to the meaner chemical drugs.' Later

she mentions that she is on a health kick, not even drinking coffee. So drugs are out of the question then, I say. 'I wouldn't go that far,' says Sarandon, laughing. 'And I do like tequila.'

Today she settles for an iced green tea, which she sips from the bottle. She wears no make-up and her hair is tied back. She sports an eccentric collection of jewellery: a safety pin in one ear, a stud in the other, a thumb ring and three necklaces including a pendant made from broken glass. 'It is a piece of bottle that I found in the street in New York and to me it looked like a heart,' she says.

Sarandon was born in New York and grew up just outside the city. The eldest of nine children, she was often left in charge of

her younger siblings. 'I was very shy so being the eldest grounded me in a way that I wouldn't have been otherwise.' I ask her if she had a happy childhood. 'Ummm,' she says and pauses. 'You don't know any different. Compared with some tragic childhoods...'

Nor does she have particularly fond memories of the Catholic convent where she was educated. 'I wasn't a rebel at all but I asked too many questions. When I was in third grade the nuns told me that only people

who married in the Catholic church were really married. So I asked how Joseph and Mary could be married if Jesus didn't make up the church until

later. They told me I had an overabundance of original sin and to go and stand in the hallway.' She chuckles. 'They were a fairly joyless bunch.'

Later she studied drama at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, where she met Chris Sarandon, her first (and only) husband, marrying at 20. 'He was the first person I ever had sex with and my best friend. I married so young but I took it very seriously; I never had that kind of free-love 1960s. I was slow to lose my virginity. In fact, throughout my life I've been with so few people; I'm one of those serial monogamists.'

I was never that wild, although I was a bit of a hippie chick. I think I probably still am a hippie chick.'

When her husband, Chris, went to an audition for the film *Joe*, a psychological crime drama, Susan accompanied him. He failed to land a part but she was cast as a teen junkie – her first major role. I watch the film before I meet her and despite the



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FROM TOP SARANDON IN 'WALL STREET: MONEY NEVER SLEEPS'; IN 'THELMA AND LOUISE' (1991); WITH TIM ROBBINS IN 'BULL DURHAM' (1988)

wooden script, she already comes across an assured actress. 'Oh, God,' she says, visibly cringing when I say I have seen the film. 'That movie was so bad. Actually I hate watching myself in almost everything.'

Since then she has made nearly 80 films, winning a best-actress Oscar for *Dead Man Walking* (1995), in which she played a nun who befriends a murderer, as well as best-actress nominations for *Atlantic City* (1980), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) and *The Client* (1994). She often plays tough, sexy women. 'Certainly if there is an older woman/younger guy theme they seem to come to me. I think it's great that people see me as being multifaceted and still desirable and smart and funny. What more could you ask?'

Sarandon says that films and plays with grim themes are the most entertaining to work on. 'The more depressing it is the more fun I am to work with, because I can't bear the idea of not having a good time, so *Lorenzo's Oil* [a devastating film in which she plays the mother of a desperately ill child] was a laugh riot. I think you need to have a respite and anything that is really extreme becomes funny.'



Almost as well known for her activism as her acting, Sarandon's outspoken support for liberal causes has frequently landed her in trouble. She cut her teeth on the Vietnam protests and civil-rights marches while a student. Since then she has sparked controversy with views on everything from Aids to guns to human rights. 'I've never had anyone come up and say to me, "You suck as an actor," but I've had people say, "You commie c—," which is shocking when you're nursing a baby in the middle of the afternoon.'

When she spoke out about the plight of Haitian refugees at the 1993 Academy Awards, the backlash was vicious. The Academy said it would not ask her to present an award again and she was given the cold-shoulder by most of Hollywood.

Not that it put her off. In 1999 she was arrested and spent seven hours in a cell for demonstrating against the police shooting of an unarmed black immigrant. And her vociferous opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq earned her ridicule and death threats. 'It got pretty ugly in the lead-up to the [second] Gulf war,' she concedes. 'But I can't remain silent.'

I ask if she gets equally riled in her personal life. 'Usually I'm so understanding and I listen and I listen. But at a certain point I snap, and when I step over the line I'm horrible and

unforgiving. I find I can no longer have confrontations that go on and on until four in the morning.'

Although Sarandon believes much of her life is dictated by chance, she will also chase a role if she feels it is right for her. Determined to play the part of Annie, an unorthodox baseball groupie in *Bull Durham* (1988), she paid her own travel expenses to go for the audition. 'They told me they wanted someone else and wouldn't even pay for my plane. I felt so humiliated, but I felt it was such a great part that I had to do everything I could to get it. The only reason I got it was because the people they really wanted wouldn't even read for it.'

The film was a huge hit. And it also changed the direction of her personal life: her on-screen lover was played by Tim Robbins, 12 years her junior, who became her partner. They never considered marriage. 'I've always liked the idea of choosing to be with somebody,' says Sarandon, who has two sons, Jack and Miles, with Robbins, as well as an older daughter,

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Eva, 25, from a previous relationship with the director Franco Amurri. 'I thought that if you didn't get married you wouldn't take each



ABOVE SARANDON WITH TIM ROBBINS IN 1996
LEFT WITH HER DAUGHTER, EVA AMURRI, IN AUGUST

other for granted as easily. I don't know if after twentysomething years that was still true.'

Their split last year shocked everyone. 'People were coming up to me in the street and saying "I cried and cried when I heard." Well, I was sadder! I didn't think it would ever happen, either.'

She implies that her relationship with Robbins ran its course. 'You bring people into your life at certain times. Maybe you have a relationship to have children and you realise that it's fulfilled after that point.'

Rumour has it that Sarandon is involved with her Spin business partner, Jonathan Bricklin, 31, who is chatting to her when I arrive. 'You have to have a sense of humour,' she says about the reports. 'There are lots of people in my life at the moment.'

These days she does not take anything for granted. 'What I've realised in my old age is that your relationship with people or with your job has to be a growing organism,' she says. 'It's not something where you reach a certain point and then you start preserving it. You have to nurture it, you have to stay curious and hungry and foolish. Once you stop doing that you get satisfied and you get stuck.'

Sarandon looks at her watch and checks herself: 'I've talked enough to really get myself into trouble, haven't I?' You don't really care, do you, I say. She chuckles. 'Not in the least!'

'Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps' is out on Wednesday