

INVESTIGATION OF THE UNAUTHORIZED USE OF
UNITED STATES PASSPORTS—PART 4

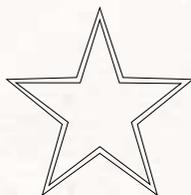
SAM MENDES
IS ACCUSED OF
COMMITTING
UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES
WITH REVOLUTIONARY ROAD

AND ALL HIS PREVIOUS MOVIES.
TOTAL FILM GRILLS THE BRIT DIRECTOR ON

14 NOVEMBER 2008

and asks him to defend his persistent biting of the hand that feeds.

(HEREIN LIES THE RECORD OF THAT HISTORIC DAY)

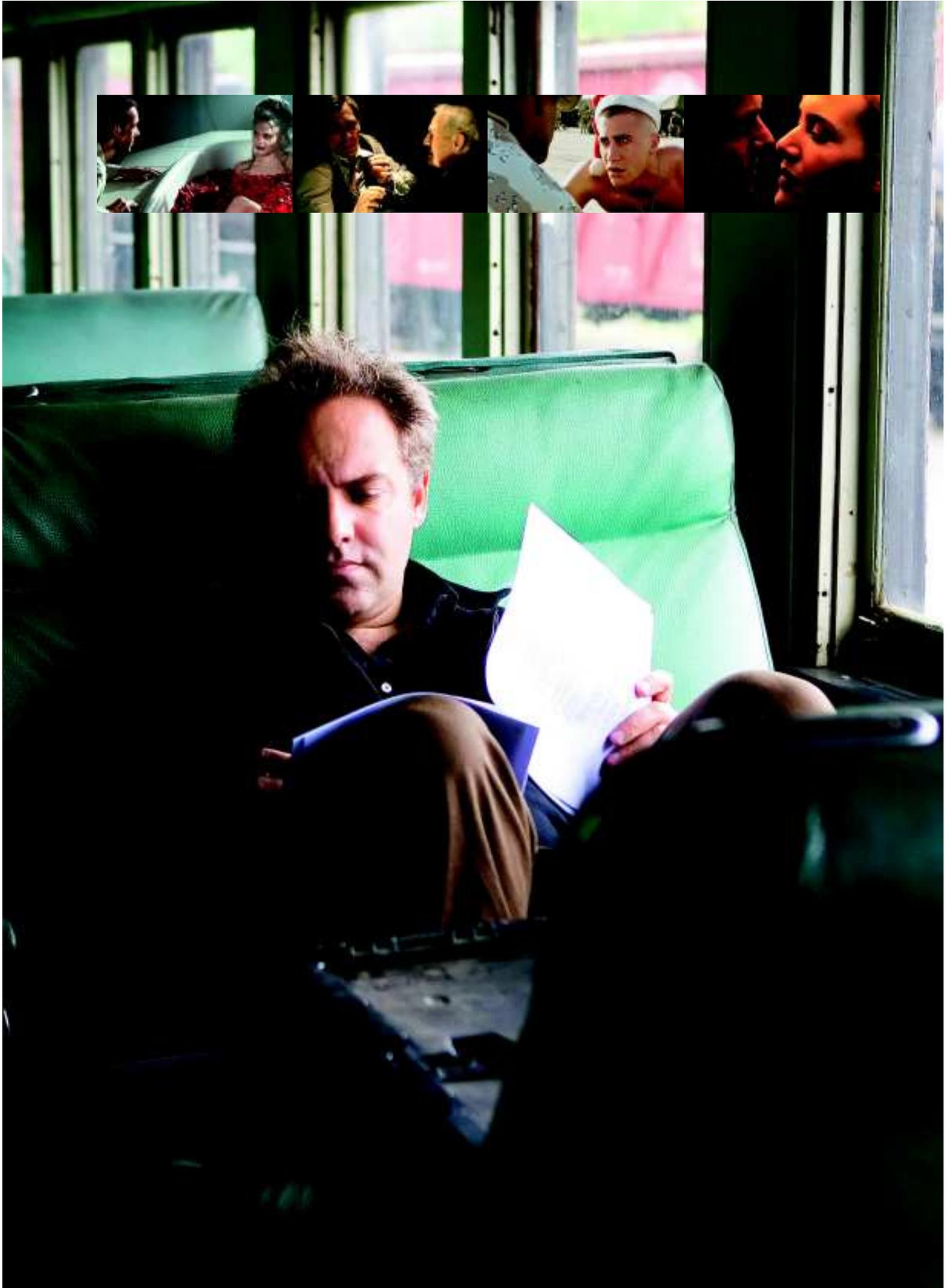


WORDS MATT MUELLER

Only four movies into his already Oscar-graced career, and Sam Mendes' interest in the dark side of the American dream looks like it is becoming an obsession. From the soul-crushing conformity of *American Beauty* to the murky vengeance of *Road To Perdition* and the military horror of *Jarhead*, he's stuck to a bleak path. And you ain't seen nothing yet: *Revolutionary Road* is easily his most unflinching film to date — a despairing descent into conjugal armageddon for its protagonists Frank and April Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio and the real-life Mrs Mendes, Kate Winslet). "It would be wrong to say that it's relentlessly gloomy because I don't think it is," barks Mendes down the line from Brooklyn as he's being ferried home to what seems the

diametric opposite of *Road's* crumbling couple — his blissful set-up with Winslet and brood. "But it's not a barrel of laughs. Although there weren't a lot of laughs in *Titanic* either!"

Ah yes, the *T*-word. They may be locking lips again, but those expecting to see Kate and Leo swooning in '50s suburbia had better douse themselves in icy water now. *Road* will shatter those *Titanic* dreams, as Winslet and DiCaprio share just a few moments of courtship before flaying each other like recruits to a school of marital torture. We jest, but only slightly — Richard Yates' 1961 novel takes a blowtorch to American post-war self-satisfaction. Packed with vicious rows, destructive parenting and crushing cynicism, it's now rightly hailed as an unsung classic. >>





On the road: Sam directs Kate on set of Revolutionary Road.

Mendes is an altogether sunnier fellow, a charming, affable filmmaker who just happens to be drawn to dark, nasty stories that reflect the repression and malice riddling America's institutional fairytale. "Yes, the setting is specifically American," agrees Mendes, "but the idea at the centre of *Revolutionary Road* is what happens if you wake up one day in your '30s and you realise you're not living the life you wanted – you had kids when you didn't want them, you're not sure you married the right person. How do you fulfil the dreams you had when you were young? That's a universal theme that could be set at any time, in any country."

Berkshire-born, Cambridge-educated and West End-groomed (as artistic director of the Donmar Warehouse), the 43-year-old Reading boy has forged an illustrious career that's both blessed and inexorable. Having eloped with Winslet in 2003 (after dating Rachel Weisz and Jane Horrocks), America is where the heart is for Mendes – New York being home for the past five years. But if Mendes is directing his celluloid energies towards American topics, he's adamant he's not avoiding the homeland on purpose.

"I keep thinking the next film is going to be in Europe but we live here during the school year and if making a movie in England means leaving my children, then I'm not going to do it," declares Mendes, who has a five-year-old son, Joe Alfie, with Winslet (he's stepfather to her daughter Mia). "You think, 'I can drop everything and go wherever I want.' But I can't. Well, I could but I don't want to."

That means saying no more than he'd like. He had to decline an offer to adapt *What Is The What*, the "unbelievable" novel by Dave Eggers (who also scripted Mendes' next, untitled film) about the Sudanese civil war, because "it would mean filming in Africa for six months."

As five films in 10 years indicate, Mendes selects his projects carefully. He was initially reluctant when Winslet broached *Road* because "it was set in American suburbia and I thought, 'I've already done that.' But when I read the book, I realised it was a love story and I'd never made a love story, even if it is a tragic one." Not seeing *Revolutionary Road* as any more quintessentially Yank than his debut

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American Beauty, Mendes streamlined Yates' tome by not dwelling on the community where the Wheelers live or on their friends and neighbours. It was a wise decision, as he lets his star duo carry the film with devastating performances.

Going into *Road* directing his wife and one of her best friends wasn't, claims the director, daunting. "Leo and Kate are great friends and I'd met him over the years and instinctively liked him. He's easy to be around, very genuine. I was so impressed and delighted that he was willing to play such a guilty, manipulative character. And I think he's amazing in it. He surprised me in wanting to do it, but he surprised me even more in how he did it."

As for Winslet, "The only rule we had was that she could talk about it at any time, day or night and that was something I had to live with," Mendes laughs. "I like to switch off and she doesn't so it was 24 hours a day around our house."

Unfortunately for Mendes, as brilliant as Winslet is in *Revolutionary Road*, she also has *The Reader* jostling for gongs this awards season. He's steering clear of the studio politics that determines which film gets the bigger push ("I make the movie and turn up for the Q&As"). Besides, he's too busy. During the day, he's been rehearsing two plays for his pal Kevin Spacey's Old Vic theatre this coming May. And in the evenings, he's editing his Eggers-scripted relationship comedy, still labouring under the moniker 'The Untitled Sam Mendes Project' months after it wrapped. "It's ridiculous!" he laughs. "I remember having the same struggle for *Road To Perdition*. I ended up moaning to Steven Spielberg, 'We can't call it *Road To Perdition*.' And he said, 'When I told people I was making a movie called *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, they thought I was insane... But if the movie's good, the title will be great.'"

Perdition was a fine but overlooked effort that wilted in *Beauty's* glare; *Jarhead*, in failing to drive a stake into the heart of America's first Gulf War, made Mendes a scapegoat for some. He may be following *Road* with a lighter tale, but then he intends to revisit the dark side with an adaptation of Garth Ennis' comic-book series *Preacher*, about a Texas cleric battling a religious cabal. Labelling it "the funniest and most blasphemous graphic novel I've ever read," Mendes is seeking a screenwriter to craft his vision. It's another hallmark of his career: once attached, he has carte blanche to cultivate any project and – if he secures a greenlight – shoot it as he sees fit.

And for that, he's still offering thanks to his debut. "*American Beauty* felt like a big weight where I thought, 'How do I follow that up?' But it would be churlish of me to think of it as anything other than a gift. It handed me both my film career and artistic control. I get final cut on my movies and I control the material that I do. That's a wonderful gift..."

***Revolutionary Road* opens on 30 January and is reviewed on page 42.**

NEXT UP...

An untitled relationship comedy starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and *The Office's* John Krasinski as an expecting couple who traverse America seeking the right town to lay down roots. Mendes calls it "the funniest film I've done. I wouldn't call it an out-and-out comedy – it's as much of a comedy as *American Beauty* – but having seen it with an audience, it is very funny. I want it to come out as far away from awards season as possible so I don't have to make any claims for it above the fact that you'll have a good time."

ALLSTAR, SPLASH NEWS