

Soul SURVIVOR

In the upcoming film *Cloud Atlas*, Susan Sarandon plays – among other roles – a wise, powerful, highly respected leader. It's a part that comes easily to her BY MATT MUELLER

Somewhat distracted, Susan Sarandon enters a Beverly Hills hotel room trailed by an assistant carrying a carafe of bright green tea that, at first sight, doesn't look appealing. "It's actually Scotch," Sarandon jokes, fiddling with her BlackBerry as the assistant pours her a glass, takes her jacket and leaves the room. "Sorry," she says, "I'm just trying to see if my son's meeting me for lunch." What did we do before we had phones, I ask? "We made plans!" says Sarandon, snapping to attention and glaring at me in mock annoyance. "We read maps, and we kept to our word!"

She might have to put up with flaky adult offspring (she has three: a daughter, Eva, with Italian filmmaker Franco Amurri; and two sons, Jack and Miles, with Tim Robbins), but she has the appearance of someone very much in control of her world. Her considerable talent and shrewd choices have served her well in a career forged on bringing fierce and fearless intelligence to roles like *Bull Durham's* predacious baseball groupie, the hard-bitten waitress embarking on a feminist odyssey in *Thelma & Louise* and the compassionate nun fighting to save Sean Penn's death-row inmate in *Dead Man Walking* – the last of which landed Sarandon an Oscar for Best Actress.

In *Cloud Atlas*, an adaptation of David Mitchell's acclaimed bestseller, Sarandon joins Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, Hugh Grant and Jim Broadbent in inhabiting multiple roles – many involving layers of prosthetics, tattoos and theatrical costuming. The film comprises six interlocking stories that range from a 19th-century South Seas voyage to 22nd-century Seoul. The 2004 novel had long been deemed unfilmable until Andy and Lana Wachowski, the sibling duo behind the *Matrix* trilogy, joined forces with German director Tom Tykwer. Sarandon was thrilled when the Wachowskis, with whom she'd worked on 2008's *Speed Racer*, approached her.

"They gave me the book [while we were working] on *Speed Racer* because they loved it so much," she says. "I read it and loved it too, but I didn't for a moment entertain that anyone could make it into a movie. But when they called me, I said yes without reading the script or knowing what parts I was playing. I just knew that it was going to be extraordinary."

Like many of her co-stars, Sarandon switched genders for a blink-and-you'll-miss-it appearance as an Indian man, but her main role in *Cloud Atlas* is as the Abbess, a tattooed spiritual leader in post-apocalyptic Hawaii.



"It's a fabulous filmmaking experiment – an epic, adult film about epic, adult ideas," she says. "On set, there was a spirit of play. You had no time to hold on to your ego when you saw Tom Hanks doing little parts, big parts, changing roles. It added to the brave festivities of this circus."

Has it made Sarandon think more about how and why people come into her own life? Does she ever, for instance, experience the kind of déjà vu that courses through *Cloud Atlas*? "Well, my life is nothing but people coming in that I don't expect, and serendipitous connections that end up taking me somewhere," she muses. "I mean, now I'm a ping-pong entrepreneur [she co-owns two clubs]. How could that ever happen, right?"

Sarandon is honest, energetic, funny and not about to start worrying whether her outspoken support for various causes has cost her in terms of her career. There have been times when her political views have been unpopular: she and Robbins infuriated the Hollywood establishment when they used their platform as Oscar presenters in 1993 to criticise the US government's quarantine of HIV-positive Haitian refugees; more recently, she branded Pope Benedict XVI a Nazi, drawing opprobrium from several quarters. But she insists Hollywood is a more forgiving place than it appears. ►



FROM TOP As a spiritual leader in *Cloud Atlas*; in her Oscar-winning role with Sean Penn in *Dead Man Walking*; with Geena Davis in *Thelma & Louise*

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“When people ask if my political views have ruined my chances for parts, I always say that, for good or bad, Hollywood is not political,” she says. “What they might hold against you is getting fat and getting old. But if your movie makes money, it doesn’t matter what you say or what you get up to. If you crash

and burn, you go into rehab, you get out – you’re fine.”

Her perseverance in an unforgiving industry for older women is noteworthy, and she continues to be heavily in demand. When I point out that she’s appeared in almost 20 films since 2009 (the year her 22-year relationship with Robbins ended), she laughs, batting the observation away. “Yeah, but I’m just diversifying my portfolio,” she says. “In case a few of them fail, I have the other ones as back-up. They’re just little parts and, altogether, probably made up one of Meryl Streep’s movies.”

Many actresses lament the lack of roles after 40, but Sarandon says she and Streep are not the only women defying that trend. “There’s Sigourney [Weaver], Jessica Lange... it is different now. And it’s good to be a survivor, as long as you’re still having fun. It isn’t good to stay in any business if it’s not fun any more. I’ve crashed and burned a

number of times, so I’ve learned things along the way.”

Does she consider herself a role model and inspiration to other women? “My daughter wouldn’t say that,” she laughs. “But it’s interesting you should ask me that, because I have to give a speech in a couple of days at a ‘Women In Hollywood’ event [*Elle* magazine’s 2012 Women In Hollywood awards]. Anyway, they made this award and I’m thinking, What am I going to say? I’ll use you as my rehearsal.” And she does, waxing lyrical about male dominance in the film industry and what can improve the situation, but also warning that women shouldn’t fall into the trap of believing power for its own sake is the goal. It’s not a bad speech, considering the fact that she’s improvising.

And with her acceptance speech now presumably, serendipitously, in better shape than it was before she entered the room, Sarandon gathers up her BlackBerry and green tea and heads off for lunch with her son. “It’s not necessarily the best thing to have it so easy,” she concludes. “The bottom line is, you have to strive to live an authentic life, and that means finding joy in whatever you’re doing, and celebrating the smallest victories.” ■

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian

Cloud Atlas opens on 22nd February in the UK



Stills from *Cloud Atlas*, *Dead Man Walking* and *Thelma & Louise* Rex Features