

JC Chandor is up and about in a Soho hotel room, demonstrating what he describes as his “one superpower”: an uncanny, sixth-sense-style ability to avert disaster right before it strikes. A modest example would be snatching his daughter’s baby-food jar in midair before it shatters on the floor. A more striking one — which he is excitedly re-enacting, his dense mane of grey-streaked black hair bouncing in time to the movements — would be the heroic act he performed immediately after our initial meeting at the Cannes film festival, after a gust of wind caught the large beach umbrella that had been shading us. Without even looking, Chandor thrust out his hand and caught the spiky projectile as he carried on his interview with an AP reporter, sparing the people opposite from potential injury. AP splashed the story as “JC Chandor Saves a Publicist’s Life, Debuts *All Is Lost*”. His father sent him an email saying: “Be careful crossing the street. Things are going far too well for you.”

Why things are going so well for Chandor is that his impressive debut, *Margin Call*, a talky, sharply written dissection of Wall Street meltdown with a large ensemble cast, has been followed by a striking volte-face that reveals him to be a virtuoso director as well as a crafty wordsmith. A virtually wordless *tour de force* about a lone man battling a sinking yacht in the middle of the Indian Ocean, *All Is Lost* is as gripping as it is increasingly distressing.

for them,” Chandor explains. “Whenever I see his mother, I can tell she feels that. She always asks about the other two people in that car, who also survived, never about our other friends from that time.”

Chandor spent much of his twenties living as if he was on borrowed time, coming out of university with a sense of self-confidence “verging on the ridiculous” and thriving as a hotshot commercials and music-video director, until the collapse of those industries returned him to earth with a thump. He spent the next several years enduring dark nights of the soul, wondering whether his directorial aspirations were hopeless, until he got *Margin Call* made.

The obvious next step could have been “*Margin Call with guns*” — the kind of scripts he was offered in its wake. Instead he went full pelt in the opposite direction with *All Is Lost*, which began life on his commute back and forth to New York to edit *Margin Call*. In flight, he wrote the letter Redford reads out in the opening moments: a regret-filled missive to a never-seen family that returns near the end of the film as a redemptive, assenting message in a bottle — a letter into which Chandor poured his own feelings about unfulfilled lives.

Any water-based shoot brings logistical nightmares, and *All Is Lost* was no exception. On screen, it’s a 50/50 split between real ocean and tank work, but most of the shooting took place in James Cameron’s *Titanic* tanks in Mexico, the controlled environment Chandor needed

capitalism, the container ships, which remorselessly pass him by. Yet the production was enabled by Disney, which 18 months earlier had spent \$4m renovating the pumps in Baja’s four tanks in preparation for the David Fincher-directed adaptation of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which the studio subsequently scrapped. If it hadn’t, we might not be watching Chandor’s \$10m film.

“That allowed us to feel like we were a \$50m movie,” he says. “We had four tanks going at any one time, and three boats in various stages of distress, so that within the day we could move around.” Of the four tanks, the main one was used for endless ocean. A second — where Cameron constructed the *Titanic*’s submersible dining hall and grand staircase — ended up too expensive to use, and a third served its purpose for the film’s violent storms, which required the aid of green-screen CGI work. Last but not least was the “clarity tank”, for any scene where Redford was in, or under, water. There are a fair few of those.

With a succession of queasy sequences depicting *Our Man* being bashed about by angry storm waves in his boat and inflatable life raft, it’s impossible not to wonder how much of the heavy lifting Redford — who was 76 when the film was made — was really able to perform. Chandor insists that “it’s nearly all him”. The actor refused a double or stuntperson unless absolutely necessary: “He’s got an ego on him.” For one amazing

## Directing the old man and the sea

The two films represent the two sides of Chandor: the brainy chatterbox and the somewhat haunted outsider who has had his own flirtation with death and describes himself as a high-IQ dyslexic who learnt to cope with his academic shortcomings by developing an intellect that functions in an acutely visual, photographic way. His mind is a whirling carousel of images, and he could project the entire narratives for both films in his head before applying pen to paper. His approach to *All Is Lost* was stark and piercing: no internal monologue, no flashbacks, no techno-connectivity or CGI tiger. Just “*Our Man*”, as he is credited, in extremis: the old man and the sea. It’s superb film-making, ripe for consumption both as an existential meditation on mortality and as a septuagenarian action film, with an emblematic performance from Robert Redford.

The actor’s second wife — the German artist Sibylle Szaggars — was instrumental in bringing the two men together. She recommended the script to her husband, who first leapt to Chandor’s mind the year he brought *Margin Call* to Sundance. In the midst of Redford’s welcome speech to film-makers, the speakers near Chandor cut out, and it dawned on him that the only way to make Redford an everyman to audiences would be to hit the mute button — “To take away that buttery voice.”

For Chandor, *All Is Lost* is about a man who has lived in denial his whole life that one day he will die. It was only after he completed the film, however, that he accepted how intimately *Our Man*’s fateful saga tied into his own near-death experience at 19, when he was involved in a horrific car crash that took the life of the driver, one of his best friends. “When a 19-year-old boy dies, you almost feel like you’re living a bit of your life

**JC Chandor is a risk-taker — no more so than when casting Robert Redford, 76, as a lone yachtsman in *All Is Lost*. How did he persuade Mr Sundance to play cold and very wet, asks Matt Mueller**

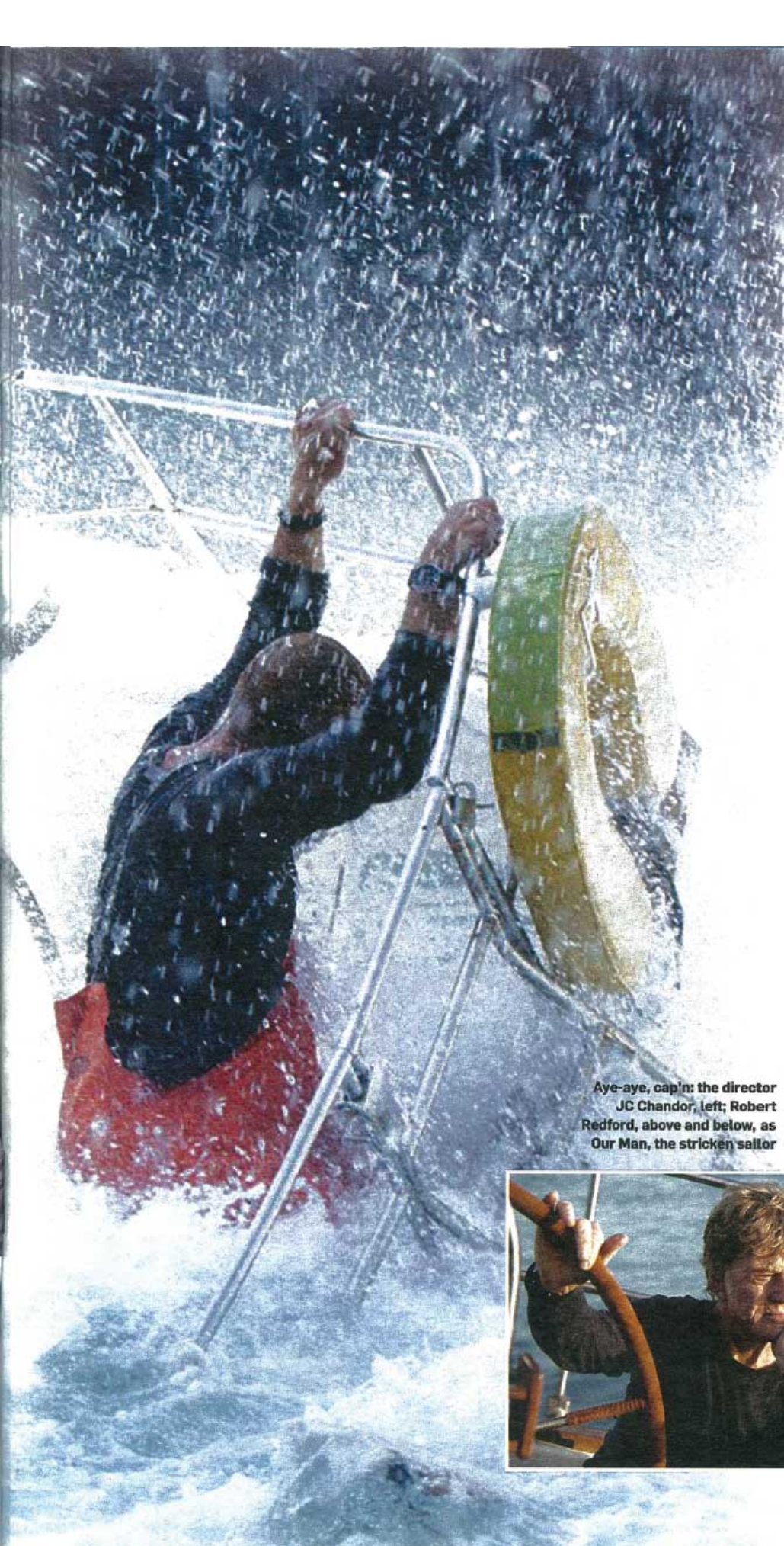


for the insane, elaborate, stunt-laden sequences that pepper his film. Because the tanks are attractively perched on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, Chandor, whose father is a banker in tune with the financial world, reckons Baja Film Studios will eventually be turned into condos “or something just as sad”.

His mild lament is echoed in *All Is Lost*, where the cause of Redford’s plight is a cargo container filled with cheap trainers, adrift in the ocean, while his most likely saviours are those faceless monoliths of modern-day

scene, in which the yacht flips during a violent tempest, an interior model of the cabin was constructed entirely out of foam, with Chandor employing the same joystick-operated rig Robert Zemeckis used to spin the passenger jet in *Flight*. Even knowing that Redford is essentially ricocheting around inside a designer bouncy castle doesn’t make it any less stomach-churning to watch. “There’s only one shot where that’s a stuntperson,” Chandor insists. “Otherwise, that is Mr Redford getting the shit kicked out of him.”





**Aye-aye, cap'n: the director JC Chandor, left; Robert Redford, above and below, as *Our Man*, the stricken sailor**

It has to be the most physical role ever undertaken by a 76-year-old actor. Chandor was relentless in his vision, but also respectful. He needed to be: whatever safety measures were in place, there was ample opportunity for Redford to get injured, which would have cooked Chandor's goose and the film's. He jokes that *Lost in La Mancha*, the 2002 documentary relating the grim unravelling of Terry Gilliam's dream project, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, always lurked in the back of his mind. "His wife sent him to me," he notes, "but she also would have taken him from me."

For his part, Redford felt isolated on the shoot, surrounded by a crowd of thirty- and forty-somethings, and didn't always want to be there. "But where was I going to go?" he said earlier this year. "I was stuck." Although he wore a micro wetsuit to keep warm, he was soaked every day of the 40-day shoot. It was a miserable experience and an emotionally taxing one, not least for Chandor, who needed to give Redford daily pep talks to keep him motivated, and had to admonish his star one day when he did something he wasn't supposed to, jumping from the yacht onto the rubber dinghy and freaking his director out. "It was like, 'You f\*\*\*er,'" Chandor says with a grim laugh. "That shot's not very good, because it wasn't supposed to happen, but we kept it in."

Margin Call was a relatively euphoric experience — a brisk 17-day shoot, but one in which the daily success of churning through pages of tricky dialogue meant much backslapping with actors including Kevin Spacey, Stanley Tucci and Paul Bettany. All *Is Lost* couldn't have been more different. "It felt like one day grinding into the next," Chandor says. "It was monotonous, which was great for the movie, because it's what this guy is going through. But to just see the same guy every day... I know this sounds ridiculous, because it's Robert Redford. But after three days, who gives a crap? And the same for him, seeing *me* every day. It's pretty exciting when you're flipping a boat upside down, but most of the days weren't like that. And the depression that set in — Redford used that word recently, and he's not a person who's ever dealt with that."

For both men, the ecstatic response to the film should make the pain worth it. Chandor remarks that, as he watched the film unspooling at its Cannes debut, he couldn't help reflecting how far his life had come in two years — "From barely being able to afford diapers for my daughter" to having a film that looks certain to vie for Oscars, not least for Redford's splendid performance.

"He would never admit it, but it's been special for him to get the reviews he has," Chandor says. "And he deserves it because of what he does in the third act. The first two acts are Redford being Redford. But what he does in the third act is not something he had ever done before, which is expose himself fully as an actor." □

*All Is Lost opens on Thursday*

