

Why Can't America Kick the Drug War Habit?

Mother Jones

PEOPLE, POLITICS AND OTHER PASSIONS

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Susan
Sarandon
Above
The Neck

**Ehrenreich
To Bush:
Read My Letter**

**Lynda Barry's
Got a New
Neighborhood**



Sarandon, Seriously

A WEARY WOMAN IN SUNGLASSES ENTERS A GREENWICH Village restaurant in the semideserted dusk. Behind the shades are Susan Sarandon's signature hooded eyes, luminous and vivid, but the rest of her seems to be in defeat, taking the day off—her face drawn, her mood impatient. She has been back on U.S. soil only a matter of hours, having just returned from filmmaking in England, so she is perhaps jet-lagged? "I'm life-lagged," she says. She orders chamomile tea, then begs the waitress to find her a cigarette—"any brand," she says. "I'm a whore."

Sarandon is a mass of contradictions: chamomile tea and Kent 100s. Catholic schooling and unwed motherhood. *Atlantic City* and *The Other Side of Midnight*. A reputation as a dependable spokesperson for socially conscious causes and a reputation as a pain in the ass. She is a 42-year-old actress savoring some of her best roles in the Age of the Brat Pack, an Oscar-nominated actress who still has to audition for parts. She has played a succession of oddballs, victims, and lowlifes with a fierce intensity that commands attention, then

She's still auditioning for parts. Maybe that's because she's a political player just about everywhere but Hollywood.

By Aimee Lee Ball





Photographs by Marcia Lieberman

Sarandon insists, "I'm definitely not hard to work with, unless I'm working with stupid people."



seems to fade from sight in ignorable vanilla parts—we do not, it seems, want to see Sarandon as the beleaguered housewife of *Compromising Positions* or *Sweet Hearts Dance*. She is passionately involved in Washington politics but utterly inept at the Hollywood kind, which may explain why she seems forever “on the brink” of major, big-league stardom. It is curious, though, that she is enough of a “movie star”—or a metaphor for one—that she’s even been a screen presence when she’s not in the film. Two years ago the movie *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* portrayed a skid row bum, cleaned up and Armanied enough to pass for star material at a chichi L.A. restaurant. “Didn’t I see you at the Cannes Film Festival?” a toadying MGM executive asked him. “You were with Susan Sarandon.”

Actually, Sarandon does precious little of the sort of Hollywood huckstering that the public seldom sees but that often determines who gets to do what and for how much. “I don’t hang out in L.A.,” she says. “I’m not very obvious within the film community. It’s a beautiful place, and I think it’s really funny, but there’s something unnatural about it. It’s too much about the business.” It would be much smarter, she concedes, to abandon her New York home and move to the land of “doing lunch,” but she can’t do it, even as an expedient means to an end. “I would like to have more power,” she admits, “and I would like to have more consistently interesting parts, but I don’t have the time or inclination to do certain things that are necessary for that. There are a certain number of projects that go immediately to the top, to the people that are hot, hot, hottest this season, and then the rest of the stuff trickles on down to the rest of the names that are around. It’s totally cyclical. Sometimes it’s frustrating, but I have a good life. My career is a means to my life.”

Perhaps even more importantly, her professional visibility provides a podium for a changing roster of political subjects that stir her passions, from Nicaragua to nuclear waste, from voter registration to ERA, from Meals on Wheels to flood relief. During one recent week she was involved with women’s sports, endangered wildlife, and the Center for Constitutional Rights, which had informed her that she’d been “indexed” by the FBI—arguably a repercussion of all the other activities. When she last appeared on *The Today Show*, to plug a movie, she wore a button for ACT UP, which she describes as “a fairly militant group,” encouraging civil disobedience on behalf of AIDS research. Her reputation as a firebrand may figure as well into the trouble she’s had getting roles, the trouble on the sets of several recent films. In January she opened in *The January Man*, a piece of pure entertainment with no pretensions to social conscience, but her heart belongs to this spring’s *Dry White Season*, an unflinching look at apartheid, providing a rare opportunity to mesh her two worlds:

acting and politics. Samuel Goldwyn's advice about movie-making notwithstanding ("You wanna send a message? Call Western Union"), Sarandon applauds the ambition of a political movie and welcomes the opportunity to participate in it. "Actors are in a privileged position, being able to create something that affects people and challenges their perspectives," she says. "Actors are still the keepers of the dreams."

WHEN SUSAN ABIGAIL TOMALIN WAS GROWING UP IN Metuchen, New Jersey, she firmly believed that her dolls came alive at midnight, and she would rotate the better dresses among them so that no doll would be unfairly slighted, bearing up with a Loehmann's wardrobe while a luckier doll wore Saks. "Somewhere early on," she says, "I got a sense of trying to make things equitable."

An admirable sentiment, perhaps, but neither toy-box socialism nor anything else in Sarandon's upbringing prepared her for moral outrage and activism. The eldest of nine children, she was introduced to show business through her father's work as a big-band singer, then as a producer and director in the Uncle Miltie days of television, but she describes her home life as a cocoon, suburban and nonpolitical. "It wasn't a house where we knew anything was going on outside," she says. "I've always been jealous of families that sit down and actually argue about things going on outside of themselves." Her parochial education was insular and simplistic—"I had never seen black people. I was raised to believe that Jewish people should be completely apologetic. I had my own brand of isolation and ignorance to overcome."

The wider world beckoned in the form of a college campus called Washington, D.C., in the radically chic '60s. "I attended Catholic University," says Sarandon, "and it was certainly the way to become a lapsed Catholic. Somewhere in the institutionalizing, it has gone terribly off. But I suppose if you're Catholic and you can believe in transubstantiation, it does pave the way for believing just about anything. I was very preoccupied with being strong enough to sustain the onslaught of the communists when they came to torture us."

One of Sarandon's quirky little pursuits in college was an elective in military strategy, studying a sort of gentleman's warfare that was obsolete before it hit the printed page, and wrestling with such thorny but impractical didactics as: If we accidentally unleash the bomb in your direction, you can take out three of our cities, OK? Sarandon was struck by the myopia of the propositions—"No one mentioned that the electrical field would be ruined, and all communication would be bollixed"—so the course of studies was brief, unfortunately too brief to teach her much about the sort of strategizing that could have proved useful in Hollywood warfare down the road.

It is doubtful that the U.S. military was robbed of an officer candidate, but it was about this time that Sarandon was diverted into acting. At the age of 17 she met a graduate student named Chris Sarandon and, under his aegis, began studying drama, reading poetry and the classics. His interests were an epiphany to a sheltered Catholic school girl—"What can I say? He knew about black and white movies"—and she not only took on his profession, she took on his name. A bride at 20, the new Mrs. Sarandon tagged along with her husband to an audition for the movie *Joe*, about a middle-class businessman who murders the drug-peddling boyfriend of his

daughter. Chris Sarandon got a bit part. Susan Sarandon got the pivotal role of the daughter ("a pretty teenager," the *New York Times* review called her), and a star, or an auspicious beginner, was born.

It is ironic that the actor who made the unusual Greek name of Sarandon familiar (albeit often mispronounced—the accent is on the "ran") was Susan, not Chris. They remain friends, and whenever Chris is asked about Susan's success, he toes the party line about wishing her well. She loyally maintains that his talents have yet to be discovered, speculating that his performance as a flamboyant homosexual hoping for sex-change surgery in *Dog Day Afternoon* so stunned Hollywood that it didn't know what to do with him. She also loyally kept the Sarandon name during her own early years in the film business, when she was urged to disassociate herself from the idea of a husband ("You were considered more 'available' if you weren't married"), and even after their divorce. "I thought he was responsible for my blossoming or even maturing, though I can hardly use that word about myself at the time," she says. "I felt much more attached to the person I became during my marriage than to the person I'd been before. The name came from a dear friend who happened to be my husband."

A film student examining Sarandon's career might wonder at her unconventional choices. She made one genuine cult classic, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in which she was seduced by an extraterrestrial transvestite. She got critical raves playing an ambitious prostitute trying to escape the fabled Storyville section of New Orleans in *Pretty Baby*, and received an Oscar nomination for her role as a clam-shucker in *Atlantic City*, memorable when she bathes with lemons to get the fishy smell off her skin. (Both films were made by her then-lover Louis Malle, who went on to marry Candice Bergen, creating some of the cattiest Hollywood gossip since the rivalry of Hedda and Louella.) She also made some undeniable fluff, some unqualified trash, like *King of the Gypsies* (filmmakers always seemed to see her as Brooke Shields's mother) and *The Other Side of Midnight*. She insists that she selected from the palette available to her, and it is a conceit in the film community that nobody sets out to make a bad movie, but certainly sometimes they set out to make schlock (*The Other Side of Midnight?* Who's kidding whom?)—cloaked in the excuse that they must survive, that this is an era when only a fistful of "bankable" stars can get a classy movie made, that Meryl Streep's rejects quite literally allow everyone else to work.

Sarandon says it's never been clear to her whether an obsessive outspokenness on a variety of touchy subjects has affected the parts she's offered. "I don't know if people consider me a pain in the ass," she says. "I'm certainly not handing out leaflets on the set. But I think you develop a reputation based on your personality, not your politics." To that end, during the making of one film, a journalist wrote that she seemed distant and difficult, but Sarandon says that everyone from the director to the hairdresser wrote letters saying it wasn't true. Among studio personnel and the press corps, she is known for being intense, for being smart and dedicated but sometimes haughty, even humorless, for being quite capable of a temper tantrum when an airplane connection is missed. "I'm definitely not hard to work with," she says in her defense, "unless I'm working with stupid people."

There were several reasons why (Continued on page 50)

SARANDON

(Continued from page 33) she seemed to drop out of sight a few years back: a dearth of good parts coming her way, a growing sense of estrangement from an industry that was making movies for the likes of Molly Ringwald, and, although she refers to it obliquely, a growing sense of malaise that had all the makings of a mid-life crisis. At any rate, Sarandon took a leave of absence from filmmaking, and one of the options she exercised during the hiatus was motherhood. "When you start out in the business, you can do a lot of things as learning experiences," she says. "Then when you know what you're doing, you're all dressed up with nowhere to go. That's really when my daughter came into my life, and she filled that void." Having a baby with Italian director Franco Amurri without the benefit of marriage was the sort of thing that got Ingrid Bergman ostracized. It's rather more trendy today—in fact Sarandon and her current companion, *Bull Durham* costar Tim Robbins, are expecting her second child in May—but not to her Catholic parents. "The baby was probably pretty shocking," she says. "But I think they more or less assume I'm going to do whatever I want anyway—and I hope I can remember this lesson—so they haven't really tried to caution me. When I told my father I was pregnant, he said he thought it was something I'd probably always wanted and he was happy for me, and that's the only thing he's ever said. I really don't know what they feel about it. And obviously they're not comfortable discussing it, so I don't bring it up." Eva Maria Olivia Amurri is now four, and she spends several months a year in Italy with her father, although he and Sarandon are no longer a couple. Eva is already bilingual, says her mother—"but she'll speak Italian only to children and animals that, I guess, she thinks don't speak English."

After Eva's birth, Sarandon began fighting for the welfare of women and children in the United States and in other countries, particularly those she sees as the victims of an ill-conceived and immoral confrontation in Nicaragua. Five years ago she narrated a taped program for schools called *Talking Nicaragua*, a reasoned explanation of the U.S. involvement with that country for the last one hundred years. She learned about an organization called the Committee of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs, whose members had all lost families since the revolution, and who wanted to send a message to the Reagan administration through the women of the United States: "Please stop killing our children." In response to that plea, a group

of U.S. women formed an organization called MADRE to enhance friendship with the women of Central America and the Caribbean. Sarandon joined a group from MADRE that delivered baby food and milk to the women of Nicaragua. She visited bombed-out day-care centers, saw children playing in abandoned tanks—and came home just in time for another congressional vote on contra aid.

"If people realized what was happening to their tax money, maybe they'd question and slow down the pouring of funds into this country the size of Iowa," she says. "Now we're also sending \$400 million a year to El Salvador and, according to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, there are 100,000 homeless children in this country. There's a link between killing children by neglect in this country and killing them with bombs in other countries, and *I'm paying for it*. People outside my doorstep don't have a place to live. It's not removed from me. It's something I have to explain to my daughter."

It is probably legitimate, certainly satisfying, to question the motives of celebrities who embrace or endorse emotionally laden causes, sometimes not-so-incidentally reaping the rewards of great personal PR. But Sarandon has also been involved in good works out of the public eye. At one point in her hiatus from acting, she says, "I was feeling particularly useless, sinking into too much self-obsession, and I thought: Oh, I'll go and read fairy tales to little children in beds somewhere." When she began to make inquiries about volunteer work, she discovered a program at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York that was a perfect calling for an out-of-work actor: Every Tuesday and Thursday, from morning to night, she would teach an improvisational theater technique called Theatre Games to schizophrenic patients—"some of whom didn't move, some of whom couldn't communicate, maybe had tried to commit suicide, maybe had gotten shock treatment," she says. "There was a warm-up first with music or painting or something physical. And then they'd take on another character, using dolls or postcards or nursery rhymes or whatever, playing something outside themselves. Sometimes it allowed them to open up in ways they couldn't before. Things happened in these sessions—they started to integrate more with other people."

Dealing with the emotionally unstable and the clinically deranged was, some pundits might observe, suitable preparation for re-entry into the world of movies. Two years ago Sarandon was set to star in the film adaptation of John Updike's novel *The Witches of Eastwick*, playing the role of the sculp-

tor. She hadn't signed a contract for the part, but that wasn't unusual—"it often happens that you don't get your contract until after you've finished. It just takes so long to iron things out." But four days before rehearsals were to start, she was informed that she'd been replaced by Cher and given a new role as a repressed cellist. There were accusations and recriminations and bad blood and threats that stopped just short of legal action. "It wasn't really a question of who was lying or what was the truth," she says. "It was just a question of who had the most time and money to withstand a lawsuit." She decided she didn't. She also decided she didn't want to risk not working while she challenged the last-minute decisions of the production team, and she insists there was no animosity toward Cher, who was riding a crest of popularity and probably could have asked for (and been granted) any role in the film she wanted—including Jack Nicholson's. Sarandon recovered her equanimity, donned a red wig, and went on with the show, creating a vivid picture as she celloed her way to passion, in a film that took questionable liberties with Updike's book. "I'm pleased with the fact that I made a certain adjustment in my head," she says, "seeing that the advantage of having a part that's not in the script is that you can do anything. I was determined to have a good time and be as creative as I could. The thing that was so amazing about *Witches* was that I didn't think I could be that naive this late in the game. I completely underestimated the league I was in—I just didn't get it. And it certainly did change something deep within me in terms of my paranoia about the business."

Sarandon learned, as other Hollywood players have, the truth in the warning of Rudyard Kipling: There is never a promise of God or man that goes north of ten thousand bucks. Some actresses have gone on to realize that the best person to work for is oneself—and those with enough clout (Sally Field, Goldie Hawn) have formed their own production companies. Yet, Sarandon says, "I'm not wealthy enough to form my own production company." To a Hollywood outsider, the idea that Susan Sarandon lacks for work may seem farfetched, but after two decades in the movies, she still has to scramble. "When I have found something in the news or a book that interests me, it's usually gone to Jane Fonda's people first. I was fortunate that *Bull Durham* came along because I'm a working gal and I need to make a living, but I really had to grovel to get that part. The studio wasn't particularly interested in me, and the director felt he had to have people read. Now, in the business, one of the power games is whether or not you read, and I hadn't been reading for many

years. But that was one of the few scripts I'd seen where I didn't know in the first few pages what was going to happen, and it was a woman I hadn't seen on-screen before. The only negative review I saw said that the character was a male fantasy figure. I thought she was a female fantasy figure. She was allowed to be everything and not be punished for it—very much like a guy. I felt so strongly about what it said on the subject of following your dream and finding some way to be a success within the framework of your own life. I thought it used one American myth to debunk another American myth about making money and what failure really is.

"So I flew myself from Italy to California. I really took a chance by going after it, because the minute you start reading for parts, you've cut your own bargaining position. But I thought: If I'm going to humiliate myself, I might as well do it all the way. Luckily it worked out. *Bull Durham* made me feel really good about myself. It restored my faith in team playing and passion and poetry. If it turns out to do other things, I'll be even happier. But I keep plugging away and choosing from what's given to me. I know that sometimes I'm in quality things, I know that I'm a professional, that I try my hardest and learn while I'm trying. But one thing I will teach my daughter is that there is no

justice. You can't expect to have everything come your way, even if you do everything right. That's not the way the world works."

Not every time, anyway. If she hit a home run with *Bull Durham*, Sarandon struck out with *Sweet Hearts Dance*. There were no warning signs at the beginning. Rarely, she says, is she approached with a script and an assurance that the part is hers. "More often," she says, "what happens to me is that the director will approach me and say, 'I'd like to do the next rewrite of this with you in mind. Do you like it?' Or a studio will get something with a man in it—they almost always want to set the man first, not the woman." That's pretty much what happened when she was asked to play Don Johnson's long-suffering wife, nearly anesthetized by a now-bloodless marriage to a perennially sophomoric man. The character had strength and the scenario had possibilities—until Sarandon arrived on the Vermont set to find that 40 pages of the script had been rewritten, turning the portrait of the marriage into a male buddy film. She did not react kindly—it was reported that she stormed off the set. "I don't think I ever walked off the set," she hedges. "I might not have gone on. We certainly had screaming fights. But it's not that easy to back down from something legally. I found that out with *Witches*." It was also reported

that Sarandon and Johnson had an off-hours romance. Preposterous, says Sarandon. The *real* romance on the set was between her three-year-old daughter and Johnson's five-year-old son.

Even actors with unquestionable principles sometimes do films for the hell of it, for the chance to work with friends, for the bread. Sarandon's current release should perhaps be seen in this light—as she tells her daughter, "This is what Momma does for money." In the new release, *The January Man*, she got to work with what she calls "a real smorgasbord of acting styles and sensibilities," including those of Kevin Kline, whom she dated for about 20 minutes. And she got to play what she calls "a superfluous bitch, looking like a premenstrual Betty Furness." It's a part in which she is called upon to flounce, fling her mink, and exit—and it was a real vacation. "I wasn't operating under the burden of sincerity. I wasn't laboring under the mantle of unfolding the plot. Being totally irresponsible is so liberating."

SARANDON IS TRAIPSING AROUND NEW YORK, trying to find a school for her daughter, but the world keeps interceding. She has to go to Washington on behalf of the AIDS quilt project and she has to present an award to Susan Butcher, the only three-time consecutive winner of the Iditarod Trial

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dogsled race, and she has to go to a meeting at the Center for Constitutional Rights to discuss a class action suit against the FBI for its number 199 investigation (suspected international terrorism) and the indexing in FBI files of certain liberal organizations and individuals. Suspected International Terrorist Susan Sarandon is in those files, and since the former head of the CIA has just been elected president of the United States, she is not pleased.

"It's frightening to me that we've swung so far right," she says. "I went to the airport the other day. I wanted to get my kid a coloring book for the plane, and all they had were Rambo coloring books, with things like: 'Circle the tank that's different.' What is going on?" There are repercussions to voicing such strong opinions, even for the most popular public figures (the name "Hanoi Jane" might ring a bell), and Sarandon realizes that there is a correlation between her politics and her livelihood. "Once you've gone on record, it does eliminate certain things from your life," she says without regret. "I don't think I'd ever be asked to work with Sylvester Stallone."

Considering the number of issues she speaks out against, it's not unreasonable to wonder whether Sarandon jeopardizes her position as a serious spokesperson. On the other hand, who's going to turn down a celebrity willing to show up for yet another creamed chicken luncheon? Needy organizations with horns to toot are all too happy to trot out glamorous-yet-thoughtful Susan Sarandon as the all-purpose liberal actor. Kathy Engel, executive director of MADRE, says that "people have to check their effectiveness. Susan is effective because she embraces a little risk in an intelligent way. She follows her gut."

But Sarandon herself acknowledges you can follow your gut too far. "I have to decide what to focus on so it doesn't become a joke to see my name everywhere," she says. "But I resent it very strongly when people say, 'Oh, this year she's into Central America, but before that it was the homeless,' as if it's some kind of hobby I take up to fill my spare moments. These are all issues that have grown out of a personal fear. Fear definitely motivates my life. It's not a choice about being political. It's just a matter of feeling impotent and waiting for the next horrible thing to happen, or else deciding to make my voice known." She makes no apology for using her visibility to draw attention to pet issues—this is, after all, a time when Rob Lowe creates more clamor at the Democratic National Convention than Michael Dukakis. "It is unfortunate that television has so much power right now and that people are inclined to look for celebrities," she

says, but "if my privacy is going to be invaded and I'm going to be treated as a commodity, I might as well take advantage of it."

SARANDON MAY BE ABOUT TO FACE THE acid test of risking a political stance in Hollywood, albeit a Hollywood that is becoming increasingly intellectual, occasionally adventuresome (and, from time to time, foolish: are we to buy Judd Nelson as ambassador to the Soviet Union?). For her most recent effort, Sarandon chose a smallish role for a smallish salary in a film about apartheid directed by a young black woman named Euzhan Palcy. This is not the stuff of which box-office smashes are made. It's true that decrying apartheid is fairly safe, even by the industry standards that made many actors afraid to play Liberace for fear of being labeled homosexual. But *Dry White Season* was a chance to put her ideals where her career is, playing an Afrikaner journalist who loves her country and is trying to find some reasonable way to live there within the law while retaining her principles. "The theme is just as applicable in this country as in South Africa," she says. "People keep their eyes closed to things that might mean they would have to change their lives and inconvenience themselves or lose something if they admitted the injustices existed." It remains to be seen just how much public outcry the movie can foster. She's hoping for a lot, particularly among young people who are disillusioned and apathetic. "If nothing else," she says, "I would pray that my daughter will understand that everybody in the world is connected, and you can't ever protect yourself from what's happening around you. It just does not work that way."

Of course, Sarandon's fiery championing of just causes is hard to transport to the screen with any regularity, but that doesn't particularly disturb her. When it is suggested that her ideal script might be the story of a feminist biathlete who leaves her native Soweto, by way of Managua and San Salvador, to do AIDS research in Washington and help a nuclear disarmament rally disrupt the trial of Oliver North, the actress demurs. Sarandon knows too well that polemical movies are notorious failures. "The best movies help people feel like the protagonist in real life," she says. If *Dry White Season* goes well, all the better for The Cause. If not, after the baby is born, there will surely be other roles that will help Susan Sarandon pay the rent—and plenty of creamed chicken luncheons where she can help save the world.

Aimee Lee Ball is a free-lance writer living in New York. This is her first piece for Mother Jones.