

In conversation with

John Cusack

“In Hollywood, you can do a romantic comedy and get paid to tell lies about love, or you can do an action movie and get paid to tell lies about violence.”

For an A-list star, John Cusack has managed to remain amazingly enigmatic. It might be down to his constantly zigzagging filmography — one moment he's playing matinée idol in a glossy studio rom-com (*America's Sweethearts*), the next he's in a small indie film, sporting a lank ponytail (*Being John Malkovich*) or acting with one arm bent behind his back (*Max*). Or it might have something to do with his long-maintained refusal to discuss his private life with the press, unusual in a showbiz world where even the biggest stars crave headline ink.

His rejection of celebrity culture stems back to a childhood spent in Evanston, Illinois, far from the chattering bistros of Hollywood. Raised by liberal Irish-American parents Dick and Nancy, he and his siblings, Joan, Ann, Bill and Susie, were encouraged to think for themselves and explore the arts. All five of them became actors, with John's big break coming in 1984, in the form of *Class*. Presumably the 16-year-old Cusack's classmates were green with envy when they found he was spending school days on a movie set with sex bomb Jacqueline Bisset.

Then came a string of '80s teen comedies of variable quality (*The Sure Thing*, *Tapeheads*, *Say Anything...*) before Cusack made the transition to adult roles with his turn in noir throwback *The Grifters* (1990). Since then he hasn't looked back, working with directors as



On choosing to do *Con Air*

"It's not one of those testosterone-ridden movies where not only do you kill somebody, you have to take an orgasmic pleasure in doing it."



On Hollywood and politics

"One of the myths that the right wing spreads is that Hollywood's trying to turn everyone into lesbians and Communists."



On Being John Malkovich

"I read the script and said to my agent, 'This is the greatest thing in history. If anybody does this but me, I'm leaving the agency.'"

diverse as Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood and Spike Jonze, as well as some of his heroes from '70s cinema like Gene Hackman and Al Pacino. Then there are his regular collaborators — childhood friend Jeremy Piven (they've made 11 films together), sister Joan (nine films) and Tim Robbins (six).

There have been ups and downs, classics and films he says "shouldn't have seen the light of day". But through it all, Cusack has remained one of cinema's most likeable stars — a rare actor who's equally popular with both genders. Yet beneath that easy charm and sly wit is a ferocious intellect. Like Robbins, Cusack is a liberal activist, railing publicly against the iniquities of the Bush government. One of his forthcoming movies, *Grace Is Gone*, sees Cusack

playing a father whose wife dies in the current Iraq war. He was driven to make it by disgust that the Pentagon has banned media coverage of American soldiers returning home in coffins, an act he calls "shameful, disgraceful, cowardly".

Typically for Cusack, this small, personal film comes in the wake of a box-office smash. After a relatively quiet patch since the turn of the millennium, the actor's fortunes have been revived with the US success of this month's *1408*. While firmly a genre picture, the horror film (which sees Cusack trapped in a haunted hotel room) gave him the opportunity to deliver a tour de force, virtually solo performance.

Empire's Nick de Semlyen caught up with Cusack in L.A. "He's serious, talks in low tones and can be

notoriously prickly in interviews," says de Semlyen, "especially when the conversation veers off films and onto his private life. But his answers are always honest and devoid of hype or hyperbole. Bring up a subject he cares about — the people he admires, the state of the world, Joe Strummer's fretwork — and he really comes to life."

EMPIRE: You spend most of 1408 by yourself, in a hotel room, getting attacked by unseen forces. Wasn't that a daunting prospect?

CUSACK: Yeah, but that was the fun of it. When I read it, I thought, "This is something I don't know I can pull off." It was an exciting challenge, to try to navigate my way through everything that happens. The level of intensity was huge >>

— it was like I was in one long psychotic dance.

EMPIRE: Did you draw on memories to get appropriately freaked out?

CUSACK: Yeah, of course. That's what actors do.

EMPIRE: Any in particular?

CUSACK: I'm not going to share them. It wouldn't be as interesting if I did.

EMPIRE: Do you believe in the paranormal yourself?

CUSACK: Actually, yeah. I definitely think there's more of a reach to believing you're alone in the universe than to think there's stuff going on besides what you know. It's a tougher sell the other way, I think. Nothing bad or too insane, but I've had a couple of experiences where I've been with people and seen things move and we couldn't figure it out. We tried to Encyclopedia Brown (*fictional boy detective*) the thing and couldn't do it. It didn't feel like a bad spirit or bad energy, but it definitely felt like there was no way we could rationally explain it. And I've had times where I've been thinking about someone and they've called, and you feel like you've connected with them. I don't know if that's what you're talking about, but I've definitely felt presences in a room. Never anything as overt as 1408, of course.

EMPIRE: This is the second Stephen King adaptation you've been in, after playing the dead brother in *Stand By Me*...

CUSACK: Well, I was a lot younger on that one but I enjoyed the experience a lot. I was only in it for one scene, but I had worked with the director, Rob Reiner, before on *The Sure Thing*, and I was happy to be a part of that.

EMPIRE: With that and *Sixteen Candles*, you spent a good chunk of the '80s on the periphery of the Brat Pack. Were you friends with those guys?

CUSACK: When I was a teenager? No, no, I wasn't a part of that whole thing. But I was having a great time.

EMPIRE: Your brother and sisters all became actors too, including Joan, who of course appears in a lot of your movies. Was there a very creative mood in your home?

CUSACK: We were exposed to the arts at an early age, I guess. We always seemed to go to a lot of plays and concerts. We were lucky that way — we were able to follow

our interests. My parents didn't encourage us to become actors, or any specific thing, but just encouraged us to do what we liked. They didn't try to get us into the business, but they didn't discourage us.

EMPIRE: Didn't you stage Cusack family plays — including a production of *Cinderella* in which you played the role of a dog?

CUSACK: No, no, that detail's not true. Not really. I think that's from earlier articles and just keeps getting repeated. But yeah, we used to do things like that, but it's just like any family putting on plays when you're a kid. It was nothing too major.

EMPIRE: When did you first start to think about getting into acting?

CUSACK: Probably when I was ten, 12 years old. In the summer there was a revival cinema, in Evanston, Chicago, where I lived. You'd be out for school and there'd be these great programmes of movies. You know, classic movies, European, all different types.

A double-feature of Kubrick, of this actor or this director, and you could go see all these black-and-white classics. Movies from the '70s, you know? I just loved them. So as I was becoming a teenager I used to do that quite a bit, and it made me fall in love with cinema.

Around 15 or 16, I started to work. I did a couple of voice-overs, commercials, an industrial film. Anything I could get.

EMPIRE: Your big breakthrough came with *Class*, which saw you excused from real class so you could act in a movie-set classroom. Wasn't that slightly odd?

CUSACK: It was. And it really took the glow off the high-school experience, that's for sure. After being on a movie set with Jacqueline Bisset, it's hard to go back to study class. *Class* was set in a prep school for rich kids, which I never went to, so that was strange, too. But it was a life-changing experience for me, like any first gig. The director was a really cool guy and it was like getting into the big league for the first time. I was excited by the whole thing.

EMPIRE: Is it weird that you can kind of relive your childhood by putting a DVD on?

CUSACK: Which I won't do...

EMPIRE: Really? You won't watch any of your films?

“Why would your ego be so crazy that you think your sex life would be an interesting thing to share?”

CUSACK: No, not really. It's funny to catch something occasionally, on cable or the TV. I pass by and might watch it for a moment. But no, I never look at them.

EMPIRE: Was it soon after *Class* that you first met your friend Tim Robbins?

CUSACK: Yeah. Tim and I met on one of the first films I did, *The Sure Thing*. And we worked together again on *Tapeheads*, towards the end of the '80s. We instantly sparked off each other — we have a lot of the same interests. He's a great guy, intense and very committed to whatever he's working on. Very active politically

and very well-read, a tenacious and ferocious mind. I've been in some of his films, *Bob Roberts* and *Cradle Will Rock*, and then he came and did a couple of mine, like *High Fidelity*. He's a very serious person and a very silly person at the same time. It's a great combination.

EMPIRE: You both share a deep interest in politics. When did that start for you?

CUSACK: From a real early age. I remember my parents' dinner-table conversations, with people who were friends of theirs, all revolving around that stuff. I don't know if all that talk got me

interested in politics, but it got me interested in the world around me. Also, a lot of the films from that era were about politics and culture, about where people and societies are going and where they've been. I was born in '66 but got to see all those movies from the late '60s, '70s, at that revival cinema. I would see 'em all on the big screen.

EMPIRE: Are those the kinds of films that you try to emulate with your own work?

CUSACK: Definitely. So many of those films were great and provocative, and I guess I try to recreate that in my films, especially the ones that I produce or write or

have a hand in creating. I think it has to do with ideas. If you're interested in ideas, and how they land in reality... Take *1408*. I love *The Twilight Zone*, I think it's filled with mind-bending ideas, and so we tried to throw those types of things into *1408*. It's entertainment, but just because it's entertainment doesn't mean you don't have to be smart or thoughtful or provocative. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. Serious things can also be entertaining. Entertaining things can also be serious... Serious is probably not the right word, but something like that.

EMPIRE: Do you think there are fewer ideas in Hollywood films today than in the ones you watched as a kid?

CUSACK: It's probably a cliché that everybody says it's getting worse and worse, but I think it actually is. I know they're making fewer and fewer films, the studios. More sequels and more huge, huge tentpole movies that cost \$200 or \$300 million and eat up all the oxygen, take all the screens away. It's becoming less and less likely that they're going to be daring, which is why it's nice that *1408* is doing really well this summer. It's very nice, but by any measure it's a

very small film, to compete against all these behemoths. It's more an exception, I think.

EMPIRE: But you've done one of those huge tentpole movies yourself, in *Con Air*...

CUSACK: You're right, that's the biggest-budgeted movie I've made.

EMPIRE: What made you want to get involved in that?

CUSACK: Well, it was Nic Cage and Malkovich and a lot of other good actors. I was doing *Grosse Pointe Blank* at the time with Disney, when Joe Roth was over there. I've worked with him a lot, he's kind of a benefactor. He worked with me on that, and the math was >>

pretty simple — you do a movie like that so you can make a movie like *Grosse Pointe Blank* or *Max*. You've got to be a box-office success to have the freedom to do what you want artistically. It's standard math. So it was kind of like that. And though *Con Air*'s not my kind of movie, I really liked it. Jerry Bruckheimer, too, was one of the straighter guys I've worked with, as far as producers go. He was hands-on and kept his word, and I've got nothing bad to say about him. But it's definitely that kind of movie.

EMPIRE: It must have been a different set to what you were used to. Was it a fun one?
CUSACK: Yeah, in a weird way it was. I got a lot of leeway to make my character a real eccentric, to give him some life. The experience was fun in a way, like being on a giant theme-park ride. Just the scope of that thing was massive. Cars flying about, explosions... But I wouldn't say it was a unique experience for me. I've done a lot of stuff, you know, so I feel like I've had cars flying at me a lot. (Laughs)

EMPIRE: Was there an appeal in doing something so over-the-top, almost like a pantomime?

CUSACK: Well, I thought for an action movie that one had kind of a winking absurdity to it. It wasn't one of those testosterone-ridden movies — like most of the old Arnold Schwarzenegger ones — where it's homophobic but homoerotic at the same time. With those, not only do you have to kill somebody, but you have to take an orgasmic pleasure in doing it. And then as soon as you're done with it, you have to have the post-death quip. *Con Air* didn't have too much of that. It had Ving Rhames and Malkovich and Steve Buscemi — it was kind of like a black comedy.

EMPIRE: Would you do another huge action film?

CUSACK: I don't really get offered them these days. Not good ones. I am going to do one more, actually, later this summer in Germany. It's a Jan de Bont movie (*Stopping Power*) about speed, about the autobahn. It's about a person who has to keep driving for an hour. The concept is pretty interesting — the guy gets into a situation where he gets into a car and just has to keep going.

Kind of like *Sugarland Express* or *Speed*, one of those types of movie — a 60-minute French Connection car chase. I don't know if I can pull it off, but it's like 1408 that way. It'll be fun to try.

EMPIRE: You've turned down some big movies during your career, including *Apollo 13*, *Platoon* and *Indecent Proposal*...
CUSACK: "Turned down" isn't quite right. Sometimes I didn't think I could do well with it, and sometimes I just didn't think the movies would be good. *Platoon* I thought would have been good, but I was 18 and getting ready to go to college. That would have been great to be in. *Apollo 13*, I was offered the character that Bill Paxton played. Ron Howard said, "Well, there won't be enough for you to do and we'd have to have you here for 15 weeks." I also

it doesn't matter how much effort you put into it, you'll just be flailing away. You have to feel that there's enough meat on the bone, that the movie has a pulse. Of course, theoretically any idea is great — I can play a writer or the mayor of Paris in 1823 — but you have to work out whether there's enough on the page. With the actor's ego you go, "Oh, I can play anything," but the quality has to be on the page.

EMPIRE: Is there anything you have done that you wish you hadn't?
CUSACK: Are you kidding? Most of it. I'll give it to you in baseball terms: in baseball, if you succeed three out of ten times you're batting 300. I definitely don't think that everything I've done is a great film. It's hard to pick out something that really works, and there's definitely a couple that

CUSACK: No, I've been lucky — I've got along with most of the people. Sometimes you have better chemistry than other times. It's a lot to do with the script, you know? The chemistry has a lot to do with the script. It's not just casting — you can't just work out from meeting someone whether it's going to work on the screen.
EMPIRE: Going back to politics, you're very outspoken against the Bush administration, going so far as to write a blog for the Huffington Post website denouncing his policies. Do you sense that most of Hollywood feels the same way?
CUSACK: I just don't know. I would say that Hollywood's probably more quietly conservative than you think. I wouldn't know whether I can make the statement for everybody — I haven't talked to everyone in Hollywood — but I get that feeling.

EMPIRE: It was interesting that Michael Moore got booed at the Oscars a few years back for attacking Bush...

CUSACK: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I think that's one of the myths that the right wing spreads, that Hollywood is a liberal sector of progressives who are trying to turn everyone into lesbians and Communists. You know, homosexuals are coming to rape your sons, illegal immigrants are coming and they have leprosy... It's just another kind of way to control people, manipulate and scare them. Divide them. It's just more of the same bullshit.

EMPIRE: So have you found it difficult to get things like your upcoming anti-Iraq-war film *Grace Is Gone* made?

CUSACK: No, no, that's usually not the issue. I don't know whether people sort of expect it of me now so they just factor that into their thinking or not. I'm not making huge waves.

EMPIRE: You've said that *Grosse Pointe Blank*, which you co-wrote, has a subtext about the first President Bush's regime.

CUSACK: Sure. All these administrations are dirty. It's not like if you take away Bush and Cheney that all of a sudden this strain of thought is going to go away. I mean, they're just the head of a hydra, really. Mostly it's a kind of obsession to obliterate the New Deal, to go back to this absolutely unregulated

should never have seen the light of day. I don't want to bring them up by name — I'm hoping they'll just lie there dormant.

EMPIRE: You've done a lot of romantic comedies over the years. What's the appeal?

CUSACK: The pay cheque. (Laughs) I'm kind of joking but not. There's a great version of any kind of genre, but mostly they're kind of dreck. In Hollywood, you can get big money two different ways: you can do a romantic comedy and get paid to tell lies about love, or you can do an action movie and get paid to tell lies about violence.

EMPIRE: And you'd rather tell lies about love?

CUSACK: Well, I'd rather make good movies of *all* of them, but sometimes you get caught in the in-between.

EMPIRE: Have you done rom-coms where the chemistry just hasn't been there between you and the actress?

"I was offered one of the astronaut characters in *Apollo 13*. Then they figured out I was too tall for the shooting space."

think they figured out that I was pretty tall to be one of the astronauts. I'm about 6'2" and maybe they wanted a shorter guy.
EMPIRE: There are height restrictions to being an astronaut?
CUSACK: What I mean is I'm too tall to be a *movie* astronaut — I guess it's just that there was a contained shooting space. I don't know if that was the reason, but *Indecent Proposal* I definitely did turn down. I just didn't get it, what was good about that film.

EMPIRE: You say that sometimes you worry whether you'll be able to pull off a role — do you have that doubt often?

CUSACK: If you don't understand what's good about a script and don't know how to do it well, if it's not there, then you can't see a road-map of how to do the performance. You ask yourself, "Is it there in the script? Are the bones there?" And if they're not,

The Top 5 John Cusack Performances

SELECTED BY DAN JOLIN



5 High Fidelity (2000)
The role of commitment-phobic *über-muso* Rob Gordon is so well-suited to John Cusack's charms, the character's translocation from Nick Hornby's *Crouch End* to JC's Chicago is rendered painless. The key Cusack talent exploited here is his deadpan delivery, balanced perfectly against Jack Black's bug-eyed shoutery. It surely says something about Cusack that Black fails to steal the show.



4 Being John Malkovich (1999)
Cusack's never been one to let wigs and make-up do the acting, but it was refreshing to see him undergo his only physical transformation as bespectacled puppeteer Craig Schwartz in Spike Jonze's indelible debut. It's a departure for other reasons, too — weak, whiny, pretentious and selfish, Schwartz is a difficult man to like, and Cusack happily deepens our dislike throughout.



3 Grosse Pointe Blank (1997)
It's hard to imagine any studio boss picturing the eminently amiable Cusack as a contract killer, which is why only Cusack himself, producing the film under his own New Crime outfit, could cast Cusack as Martin Blank. Not only does it give JC the chance to show off his kickboxing skills, but it subverts his teen-heartthrob background. It's as if he's asking: what if Lloyd Dobler grew up to become an assassin?



2 Say Anything... (1989)
And speaking of Lloyd Dobler... Cameron Crowe, making his directorial debut, knew how to have the young Cusack play to his strengths. And so we have, in Lloyd, the ultimate incarnation of li'l John's '80s high-school-movie persona: unconventional, uncannily sage, self-assured without being arrogant, an underachiever but comfortable with that and, crucially, very easy to fall in love with thanks to smooth delivery and a babyface that is — a rarity, this — in no way slappable.



1 The Grifters (1990)
Then, a year later, Cusack said goodbye to adolescent things (about time, too — he was 24), and in his first collaboration with Stephen Frears provided his first, and finest, adult role. As beleaguered con man Roy Dillon, pinned between the machinations of his mother and girlfriend, Cusack nails the personality of a young man who has to face up to the fact that his ambition outstrips his talent. For once, he's the underdog who doesn't prevail. And it's heartbreaking.

marketplace — like, you can't even touch it. There are forces who have it in their best interests to prop up a dictator, to put millions of dollars of funding into protecting a despot. It's this international, global thing.

EMPIRE: You sound quite cynical about the state of the world...

CUSACK: I don't know if that's cynical as much as it's just true. If you take any soundbite of what I just said and put it out there it probably won't sound true, but that's the history of what's going on. Going back to *Grosse Pointe Blank*, that was more about mercenary ethics. I was always interested in these kinds of people, like how Reagan was. He was a friendly guy, but if you looked at what he did in his first term, he's a ruthless, fundamentalist, ultra-right-winger. He supported murderous regimes in Central America at the behest of corporations that wanted to serve their economic interests without any kind of thought about the population. But he was a totally nice guy — he'd go home and host dinner parties, a grandfatherly figure. Like guys at the Pentagon, who would plan mega-death encounters, then come home and have family time. It was interesting that who people are isn't connected with what they do, and I thought that was a very interesting comic idea.

EMPIRE: And you mixed that stuff up with a high-school reunion story...

CUSACK: I just thought that was a cute device for the idea of an assassin having to come from somewhere, having high-school photos. I thought it would be funny. Then I made a promise with my writing partners that if we got the movie financed we would go back to our own reunion, which we did. It was fun but a little odd.

EMPIRE: Another movie close to your heart is *High Fidelity*. How did that come about?

CUSACK: Well, as a music geek, that was a great chance just to shoot the shit about records. It was also a great book and I'm a huge fan of Nick's (*Hornby*), so we had a lot of fun writing the script. One of the great truths of Nick's book was that people use music autobiographically, to mark their lives. Songs have certain meanings for certain parts of their lives, >>

but the meaning also changes as your life changes. I just thought he understood the power of music in a way that most people don't.

EMPIRE: In the book your character, Rob, is obsessed with The Smiths; in the film it's The Clash. Apparently you're a huge Clash fan yourself.

CUSACK: Oh, a huge fan, for sure. No doubt about it.

EMPIRE: What other bands are you into?

CUSACK: I would have to put Dylan in there, and I'd probably have to say The Beatles too. Their stuff just keeps holding up better and better — I keep going back to it. I keep up with new music but there's nothing I love as much as that old stuff. It just doesn't get down into your DNA like the other stuff does. Growing up, I was lucky enough to be exposed to a lot of ideas by my parents, but when I heard Strummer and Mick Jones and all those guys doing their thing, it was kind of a moment of awakening. I thought, "Oh man, it's not just the energy or rebellion. The price of entry is that you have to *think*. You have to go explore the world and find out what's going on." Not just question authority, but go out and do some work. It was a call to arms that way. Suddenly to connect your instinct for rebellion to your thoughts and ideas and consciousness. That was, to me, pretty revolutionary. These artists were writing about the world in such a fascinating, wonderful way.

EMPIRE: Did you ever consider life in a band yourself?

CUSACK: There was a time, yeah. But it passed. I can probably play a little guitar — badly — but that's it, I'm afraid.

EMPIRE: Of course, you also have basic puppetry skills now, after Being John Malkovich...

CUSACK: That was one where I said to my agent, "I want to know what the weirdest things you have are — the scripts you think will never be produced." They said, "Well, there's this thing by some guy called Charlie Kaufman..." And I read it and said, "This is the greatest thing in history. If anybody does this but me and you don't track this, I'm leaving the agency." And they said okay and did their job and tracked it, and I got in the door first. So I recognised right away that

Kaufman was major. The writing was extraordinary — it was a completely original metaphysical comedy, an absurdist black comedy. One of the good things about it was that you couldn't put it into a category. And Spike had never done it before — it was his first film — so it was nice to watch his evolution.

EMPIRE: The movie's got a loose, easy feel to it. Was that reflected in the mood on the set?

CUSACK: Sure. There were a bunch of terrific actors — including John (*Malkovich*), who I was friends with from Chicago and had worked with on that *Con Air* movie, and a Woody Allen movie, too. We did some very funny, almost Marx Brothers routines with the dialogue. And we brought an incendiary, vaudeville element to it — I mean, Charlie likes that stuff. I knew it was going to be special right from the script. Spike was a great video director, all indications were that he was incredibly talented, but nobody quite knew what he was going to pull off. We *did* know that the script was something completely wild and original and groundbreaking. It was just a matter of putting it on film.

EMPIRE: Do you have a favourite moment from it?

CUSACK: I loved the scene where I actually put Malkovich into the tunnel and he comes out and says, "I'll see you in court," and I say, "How do you know I won't be seeing what you're seeing in court?" (*Laughs*) That is a good fucking line.

EMPIRE: On another note, did you know that you're listed on one magazine's list of Top 25 Most Intriguing People?

CUSACK: I am? I don't get those lists.

Your Q

John, your best buddy Jeremy Piven is amazing in *Entourage*. Do you watch the show?

Melissa Ter Horst, via email
I watch the show from time to time to check out Jeremy, you know, but I don't really follow it. It's not as interesting maybe for people who are in the business themselves. We see it all going on around us on a daily basis, in real life.

It's probably because I don't talk about stuff that much, so I must have an air of mystery about me.

EMPIRE: Over the years, you've been cagey about discussing your personal life in interviews...

CUSACK: Well, why should I? If you can give me a good reason to talk about it, I will. I can't think of one, though. I suppose if your editors are telling you to find out my opinions on girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, and make some headlines, I can understand what's in it for them, but what's in it for me? Like, what do I get out of pimping that stuff?

EMPIRE: Does it surprise you that there's a hunger for information about your personal life?

CUSACK: A little, yeah. I don't think it's strange, it's predictable, but I just don't want to play. I mean, I don't even think I'm that private — I'm not a private person at all. But we have this celebrity culture where any mood you have is supposed to be worthy of writing about and being printed. People will talk about anything ad nauseum, from their sex life to the bell-graph of any current relationship they're in, in print. And for what? Who cares? You know, why would your ego be so crazy that you think that would be an interesting thing to share? And they're just going to replace you with another celebrity talking about another juicy, tabloidy kind of thing, and nobody even cares specifically about you. It's just, "Did we get a celebrity talking about another celebrity? Did we get one? Get another one. Get 15 more." And it's not even specific to you. Right from the start, I just never talked about those things — it would never cross my mind.

EMPIRE: Do you never feel the lure yourself to read about what other stars are up to in the tabloids?

CUSACK: Sure, I can relate. But it's like cotton candy. You can eat it, but it's all sugar and it will make you sick. I mean, it's all over the place — you can't really get away from it. Gossip is front-page news.

EMPIRE: Maybe a way to dissipate your "air of mystery" is to say which of the characters you've played you think you're most like...

CUSACK: I don't know. I think there are probably good qualities and bad qualities in all of them. I think when the movie's good, it's usually because you've revealed

something of yourself, made a pollination of yourself into the character. Whenever the movies have been good, there's been some personal expression there. Even with my characters in, say, *The Grifters* or *Being John Malkovich*, you'd be surprised. It's not really that I live in a hovel and cultivate a ponytail, but I can be isolated or micro-focused or precious, sure. Or I know people that way, someone in my family, a cousin, or an acquaintance. A lot of my movies are about people who are inert or stuck, and wanting a more glamorous life, and I can certainly relate to that.

EMPIRE: So would you say you're more of an introvert than an extrovert?

CUSACK: I would say more of a combination of both, which I can't control or modulate.

EMPIRE: In both your social life and your working life?

CUSACK: Everything. I think most actors are introverts and extroverts at once. When I'm out working I'm in that mode of being an extrovert, so I can kind of get on a roll and go out a lot. And then I can go through periods of time when I don't, and I isolate more. Cocoon it up. So I can do both.

EMPIRE: Are you satisfied with where your career is? You don't seem to crave a Tom Cruise level of stardom...

CUSACK: No, no, I think I'd like to take it — I'll take all his money. If I could have the whole system decide to make me that big a star by still doing what I want, then I'll do it. Which of course is a totally insane request, so I don't know if it'll ever happen. But I don't really want to do *Mission: Impossible*, that type of movie. If somebody offers it to me, I would consider it, but it's not like I'd say, "Oh my God, I can't wait to do this thing!" The scripts come in spurts and *1408* is doing really well in the States, so I should get a big spurt of different kinds of movies. It's fun, I'm at a good place. But it all depends on the movie that's doing well. All of a sudden people think, "Oh my God, he's a great actor!" And when you're not in a movie that's making a lot of money, they think someone else is a better actor. That's how the system works.

>> 1408 is out on August 24 and is reviewed on page 48.