

≡ *the* **EMPIRE** *interview* ≡

SPACEY

FROM SEVEN'S JOHN DOE TO SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD III TO HOUSE OF CARDS' FRANK UNDERWOOD, KEVIN SPACEY IS A MASTER OF EXPLORING THE SOUL'S DARK RECESSES. BUT, HE INSISTS, "I'M NOT GOING TO PLAY THE EVIL GUY IN EVERY MOVIE I GET OFFERED"

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN PORTRAITS MILLER MOBLEY

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As Beltway Iago Frank Underwood in House Of Cards, Kevin Spacey breezily manipulates,

coerces or terrorises everybody in his path, displaying all the compassion of a tiger shark. So, given **Empire** spent the night before our interview marathoning this year's episodes, it's natural we feel a tad intimidated as he advances into the room.

Like Underwood, he moves at a no-nonsense clip, rapidly assessing the options in the London hotel suite — conference table or sofa? — before making a decision. (Table.) Like Underwood, he carries a silver MacBook. Unlike Underwood, he's gripping his laptop precariously with one hand like a harried student (an iced coffee is in the other), and it turns out to be loaded not with lewd state secrets but the brand-new trailer for his forthcoming documentary, *Now*, which he wants to show us. "I'm not Googling myself," he assures us as he taps away at the keyboard. "Now where did I put that damn thing?"

Spacey made his name in Hollywood playing men of ambition; whether a monstrous movie mogul, a meticulous serial killer or a slick narcotics detective, his characters have ferocious drive. The same can be said of the star himself: he is almost unique for having never made a sequel to one of his own films (although he will cameo in *Horrible Bosses 2*). In 2003, he walked away from a life of easy blockbuster pay cheques to become artistic director of the Old Vic in London. Now he's raring to return to movies full-time.

He can be intense, pounding his fist on the table and maintaining eye contact to hammer home a point. But more often, as he slips effortlessly into trademark impressions of his A-list confrères and cracks himself up mid-anecdote, he's as un-Underwood as could be.

Empire: Your Twitter profile line reads: "Former shoe salesman now making a go at film and theater"...

Spacey: Well, I was. I sold shoes at the Gallenkamp shoe store for two summers when I was in high school. Oh, it was *such* a terrible job. I was doing stand-up comedy at the time, so the only way I got through it was by doing impressions all day long. I'd sell shoes as Jimmy Stewart or Johnny Carson. And either people would get it, or they would have no idea what I was doing and think I was awfully eccentric. And I had a job at a jeans store. And for a while I was selling ON Subscription Television, one of the very first pay cable services in California.

Empire: Was that door-to-door?

Spacey: Door-to-door in Orange County. We had to knock, and literally our opening line — because it was ON Subscription Television — was supposed to be, "Hi, have you turned *on* yet?" Slam! So yes, I had a lot of odd jobs.

Empire: Did you have any horrible bosses?

Spacey: I had a couple. I mean, not as bad as the ones in that movie. Mostly they were just mean idiots. They aren't good at what they do, so they give underlings a hard time.

Empire: Did you stand up to them?

Spacey: My problem is I stand up to just about everybody. That sometimes bodes well, and sometimes just gets me in trouble.

Empire: What was a Kevin Spacey comedy routine like?



• Clockwise from left: With Robin Wright in *House Of Cards*; With Mena Suvari in *American Beauty*; With Richard Pryor and Joan Severance in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*; With Jason Bateman and Charlie Day in *Horrible Bosses*; Spacey's documentary *Now*.

Spacey: Heavy on impressions. I love impressions. I first discovered what they meant to me when I realised that I could make my mother laugh. That was one of the greatest sounds I ever heard. Then I discovered I actually had an ear for it. I started studying and studying. Even to this day, I love trying to learn how to do someone that I'm working with, or admire.

Empire: Who's the latest in your repertoire?

Spacey: (*Rumbling*) Morgan Freeman. Because Morgan Freeman... understands the art of... the pregnant pause. And he can make... almost anything... sound like poetry (*laughs*).

Empire: That's uncanny.

Spacey: It's been in the lab a little while.

Empire: Who does the best Kevin Spacey?

Spacey: I've seen a very funny guy on YouTube, an impressionist who does a whole bunch ①. He does Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt. When he does me, it's very sardonic. But it's a weird thing, because I don't think I have anything that's distinctive. There must be something, I guess. People were always surprised when I would do an impression of William Hurt.

Empire: What's the essence of William Hurt?

Spacey: (*Ragged*) The essence of William Hurt is that everything is *painful* and *difficult* to say. I mean, it is hard enough to breathe, let alone to speak... (*Back to his regular voice*) I always thought he would have been really good casting for Starman. Jeff Bridges was good, but I wonder if William Hurt would have been... *better*.

Empire: Your Pacino is legendary.

Spacey: Pacino's fun. I actually surprised him on Letterman recently. They called me last year and said, "Dave's taping two shows in one day. Pacino's on the first show and he's going to talk about actors who do impressions of him. Can you come and

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① Presumably Ross Marquand, whose John Malkovich is particularly good. Google "Impress-A-Vention!"

② More formally referred to as Henry Stafford, Second Duke of Buckingham. Supported Richard's ascension to the throne.

③ Spacey played Mel Proffitt, a heroin-addicted arms dealer with a fixation on his sister. It's subtle stuff.



be the surprise?" So Letterman goes, "People do impressions of you. Kevin Spacey does a really good one." Al says, "No, I don't think he's good. People seem to like it, but it stinks." Then I walked out from backstage and sat next to Al, doing him. All I did was what he had done through the interview, which was look like the absent-minded professor who'd forgotten where his hair was. Al loved it. It made me laugh so hard.

Empire: The two of you have something in common, in the form of your mutual obsession with Shakespeare's Richard III.

Spacey: Yeah, I was his little Buckingham ②! And then I got to graduate to play Richard. I was very grateful to Al, not only for asking me to be in his film, *Looking For Richard*, but for coming to London two years ago to see me playing Richard and being incredibly kind about it. We do have that in common. It's weird: his documentary was about a play that he never did. And then I went and did the play and now have my own documentary.

Empire: What's yours about?

Spacey: When Sam Mendes and I started *The Bridge Project*, with the idea of bringing together Brits and Americans to do classic work, one of the reasons was that you can go back 40 years before you find a company that went around the world. Olivier took *Richard III* to Australia and many other countries in 1948. But the notion of touring, rather than just taking a play to Broadway or to Beijing for two nights, has faded away. So the idea of taking this big, barnstorming play to 12 cities around the world was alluring. We've made a film which I'm calling *Now*, because it is the first word of the first sentence of the play — "Now is the winter of our discontent" — and because that's what theatre is. It's *now*. This is not an inside, luvvie home movie. It's a real, intimate look at how that family works. I'm self-distributing and it will be available exclusively on my website this spring.

Empire: Richard's skeleton was found a year ago in a Leicester car park. Do you have a take on where it should be interred?

Spacey: I watched that documentary. It was so interesting to me that they found the Richard that [the Richard III Society] didn't want them to find. The one that was deformed. I guess there are a lot of issues: some people think it should be kept where it was found, others think it should be somewhere else. I don't think they're going to end up having a royal funeral, but it is sort of interesting. Look, after doing 200 performances, it's a wonder they didn't find *my* bones in some fucking car park.

Empire: I'm guessing *House Of Cards* is pretty draining too?

Spacey: I think, for the second season, I shot something like 115 days. I've never done a movie that's shot more than 40 days, because I just don't do those kinds of films. And previously, the only television experience I'd been involved in was a thing called *Wiseguy*, where I only did seven episodes ③. But I came into Season 2 with a greater knowledge of how much energy it required. I take that role very seriously, and I don't want the crew to see me falling asleep in a chair. I had a better time doing the second season, and I was having a blast doing the first season.

Empire: Are you in the gym a lot when you're filming?

Spacey: I play a lot of tennis. I've got a great coach and been playing pretty obsessively of late. I mean, I've always played, but the last two or three years I've been following Andy Murray around the world like a groupie. This year I'll be at Indian Wells and Sony. I couldn't go to Melbourne because it was just too far.

Empire: Did you see some sights when you were touring?

Spacey: We had a lot of adventures outside of the theatre, for sure. Climbing the Sydney Bridge was incredible. Driving in 4x4s over sand dunes in Doha. Taking boats out in Naples. I feel incredibly fortunate, because quite often it's work that will take me to these amazing places. Plus, in the last six years I've done a better job of carving out time for myself. I'm going to do much more of that as life goes on.

Empire: Is there a place you escape to when the stress builds?

Spacey: A number of places. I love going to Cape Town. I like Brazil a lot. And I love disappearing into Paris.

Empire: Have you been to the Rio carnival?

Spacey: I did, one year, go to the carnival. It was a fucking shit show. Jesus Christ. I believe we were molested just walking down the street. It was just insane: a road packed with mad, drunken, beautiful people having the time of their lives.

Empire: Total carnage?

Spacey: Total carnage, man. But it's so epic. I had a nice time.

Empire: I want to take you back to your very first movie job. You played Subway Thief in 1986's *Heartburn*, a role which required you to wink at Meryl Streep...

Spacey: Yeah, that was a scene I had to shoot on the subway in New York City. It happened to be on my 26th birthday. And I was so nervous, I literally couldn't wink. I kept not doing it right.

Empire: That's a problem if your sole job is to wink.

Spacey: It's a big problem, if you're being paid to wink at Meryl Streep. The director, Mike Nichols, was very patient with me.

He had given me a great break when I became the understudy in *Hurlyburly*, a play he directed that I later did the film version of. But yeah, I was very nervous. And at the end of that day, I was walking down the street and suddenly someone grabbed my left arm, someone grabbed my other arm, and it was Meryl Streep and Mike Nichols. They took me for a birthday dinner at Joe Allen's and that was pretty cool.

Empire: And how did the wink work out?

Spacey: The wink is alright.

Empire: You progressed to making another pass at a famous actress in *Working Girl*...

Spacey: Oh Jesus.

Empire: So how did you end up pawing at Melanie Griffith as coked-up stockbroker Bob Speck?

Spacey: You have to understand the context of how that happened. I came home at about 9.45 in the morning, after walking my dog in Washington Square Park, and my phone rang. It was Mike Nichols. He said, "I'm over here at Silvercup Studios. We're about to wrap this movie called *Working Girl*. It's going really well, but I had to fire an actor this morning. And I would love it if you could come over here and do the scene, because otherwise I can't get on a plane to Paris tomorrow to marry Diane Sawyer." So I went over there, got hustled through make-up, got thrown in a car, and there I was, blowing coke off Melanie Griffith's lap. Going, "This was not the way I thought my day was going to end up!"

Empire: Not long after, you played a baddie in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*. Was that fun?

Spacey: Richard Pryor was going through a very tough time. I'm not even sure he had revealed he had MS, though he was very frail. But he made me laugh enormously and I was a huge admirer of his. I just watched this extraordinary and brutal new documentary about his life 🍌. I don't know if you've seen it—it's just harrowing, some of it. But Richard was one of a kind.

Empire: I think that film might have marked your first big-screen death: murder by gunshot...

Spacey: Really? I've never seen it, so I have absolutely no idea.

Empire: Glengarry Glen Ross is more of a highlight on your CV. But you've said, "It was depressing to be shooting a movie in which the greatest actors around were calling me a pussy every day for six, seven weeks..."

Spacey: Oh no. I made a joke about that at one point, but it was an incredible experience. I had two auditions. Then two weeks later I was asked to come to a read-through at Al's office, which Jack Lemmon was flying in for. I said, "Please don't tell Jack that I'm going to be reading." Because at this point we had done *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, we had done an NBC movie called *The Murder Of Mary Phagan*, and we had done a film called *Dad*. So I'll never forget: I walked into Al's office on the Saturday, Lemmon was already there sitting in the corner with the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, and he looked up and went, "Oh Jesus. Is it possible you could get a job without my



“Jack Lemmon told me that I was born to be an actor.”

fuckin' help? I'm so tired of holding up your fuckin' end of it.”

Empire: He was your mentor, wasn't he?

Spacey: He was a mentor and a collaborator and a friend and a father figure. When I was 13, I went to a workshop that he was running. He gave me such extraordinary praise, and told me that I was born to be an actor. He suggested I go to New York to study. There's not a day that goes by when I'm not grateful for everything he did for me. And not a day goes by when I don't feel Jack hovering somewhere nearby, going, "Do your job, kid!"

Empire: Who is more intimidating to have yell at you: Ed Harris or Al Pacino?

Spacey: Pacino. Because this is what he also did to me, the little fucker. You know that scene where I fuck up his deal and then he reads me the riot act? I didn't know that Al had said to the sound department, "Don't record," and suddenly in the middle of the scene he starts going to me, "You think we don't know how you got this job, Kevin? Because I know how you got this movie." He started talking about me, and making all these kind of horrible accusations. When we got done with the scene, I was like, "I don't know what the fuck that was." Al said, "Oh, you were so good. That was such a good reaction. Look, it's like this. If you saw me tomorrow morning on 57th Street and yelled across the road, 'Hey, Al, I heard about what you did last night!' I would jump. Because we're all guilty." I thought it was pretty remarkable that

NOTES

🍌 Richard Pryor: *Omit The Logic*, directed by Marina Zenovich.

🍌 R. Lee Ermey was originally up for the part of John Doe, but David Fincher felt that his portrayal of Doe was too "cut and dry".

🍌 Other films Spacey has produced through his Trigger Street Productions include *Star Wars* comedy *Fanboys* and Jason Statham actioner *Safe*.

he did that so I would have the appropriate reaction. And literally, that's the take in the movie. I look like a car wreck.

Empire: Have you got him back for that?

Spacey: I'm still getting him back.

Empire: The two roles that really changed your life came back-to-back, in the form of John Doe and Keyser Soze. Did you know at the time what you had?

Spacey: No. It's very funny. I shot *Usual Suspects* first. I did *Swimming With Sharks*, *Usual Suspects*, *Outbreak*, then *Seven*. I didn't know whether anybody would even fucking understand *Usual Suspects*, because it took me a couple of reads of the script before the fucking nickel dropped. I decided ultimately I wanted to play Verbal, because Bryan was like, "Take any part you want." They had written Verbal for me, but I didn't know that. I had no idea whether that film was going to work or not. It was incredibly complicated. But it was an incredible shoot and we had an incredible time. Then I did *Outbreak* and went back to New York. I had auditioned for *Seven* but hadn't gotten the part. And on New Year's night I got a phone call from Howard Kopelson, the producer. He said, "Hey, Kevin, how are you? This thing with this other actor didn't work out 🍌, so we want you to fly out on Sunday, go into make-up on Monday and start shooting on Tuesday." So I read the script again and I remember saying to my manager at the time, "I think I'd like to do this,

but there's going to be a caveat. If any of the films that I've just done break out in any way, I'm going to have a presence in film that I don't have now. And if I'm billed in it people will start to connect the dots and figure out I'm John Doe." So I said I didn't want any billing, they couldn't use my photograph and they couldn't publicise my name at all. It was a shit-fucking-fight that went down for 48 hours. And ultimately I was able to prevail, primarily because I had them over a barrel because they wanted to start shooting on Tuesday.

Empire: It worked. I remember seeing the film for the first time and being shocked when you walked into that police station...

Spacey: When I saw it the first time, I was shocked too! I thought, "This movie is going to tank. It's so dark and how can you possibly make a movie in which Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt lose?" Yet it turned out to be a gigantic success. (*Laughs*) So what do I know about what's going to make it, right?

Empire: You got your first Oscar for *The Usual Suspects*. The second came in 2000 for *American Beauty*. Is getting the hat trick an ambition of yours?

Spacey: That is not something I think about at all.

Empire: Do you keep them out on display?

Spacey: They are occasionally out on display, yes. Sometimes I look across the room and go, "Oh... there they are."

Empire: Did the success ever go to your head?

Spacey: Sure. I went through what I like to call my period of the attitudinals. And, you know, there's a cost to that. Ultimately I was able to determine that that cost wasn't worth it. So I made some decisions that, while at the time some people looked at me like I'd just fallen out of a tree, paid off. In the year 2000 I decided to move to London and start a theatre company at the Old Vic. I felt that I shouldn't be an actor who just makes movie after movie in a quest for prestige and money. It's interesting: about five years ago people started stopping me on the street and saying, "Hey, I miss you in the movies." So to find myself in the situation I'm in now, coming into my last 18 months at the Old Vic, it's just perfect. I know the experiences I've had here have made me a better actor. I wouldn't have been able to play Frank Underwood ten years ago. And it's been really good playing him. I couldn't imagine something asking as much of me as *House Of Cards*. It's a great warm-up for coming back to the screen.

Empire: What sort of roles will you be looking for when you're back in Hollywood?

Spacey: I'm interested in doing characters I haven't done before. I'm not going to play the evil guy in every movie I get offered.

Empire: Speaking of which, have you any advice for Jesse Eisenberg, to whom you're handing the Lex Luthor baton?

Spacey: I just heard about that! First of all, I think he's a remarkable actor. He's just going to fucking own it. I think it's a great idea and I wish him the best with it. I had a blast doing Lex. But now I want to explore different terrain. I will say that I'm most happy at the two incredible films that I produced, *The Social Network* and now *Captain Phillips* 🍌. I am very proud to have been involved with both of those. There's a lot more I want to experience. But it's early days.

Empire: *House Of Cards* has reunited you with people like David Fincher and James Foley. Which directors that you haven't worked with yet are on your bucket list?

Spacey: I wrote Woody Allen a letter last year, saying I'd be keen to do something with him. And he wrote back, very charmingly, so I'm on the list now! I set him up with a Netflix subscription too, but I don't know if he's used it. So yeah, it would be great if that happened. And yeah, I'm going to write to Scorsese. There's a lot of directors I need to get letters out to...

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HOUSE OF CARDS: SEASON 2 IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE ON NETFLIX. NOW IS COMING TO WWW.KEVINSPACEY.COM THIS SPRING.