

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

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Sam Neill is my guest. Sam is a wine grower in central Otago, New Zealand, where he shares his home with a menagerie of pigs, sheep, ducks and cows.

And in addition to making pinot noir, Sam Neill makes movies.

He's appeared in nearly 100 feature films and dozens of TV series, from My Brilliant Career through to Jurassic Park.

Sam's acting career took him by surprise,

but it has brought him a lifetime of memorable experiences.

Meryl Streep identified him as the greatest kisser she's ever worked with.

And one night in Rome, Sam was given the keys to the Sistine Chapel to spend as long as he wanted, lying on his back, gazing up at Michelangelo.

Last year, Sam had a close call with mortality,

and it set him to writing his funny and touching memoir.

It's called Did I Ever Tell You This?

Hello, Sam. Hello, sir.

You're very easily described as a New Zealand actor or an Australian actor, but actually it's Northern Ireland that has the first claim on you.

How is this so?

My family came from there originally, about 150 years ago, 1861 to be precise, and we came out to New Zealand at that point.

But we've always had those Irish connections,

and my mother's family and my father's family were both army.

I should have been army too, but I'm sort of too hopeless for that.

But my father's family always had connections to the Royal Irish Fusiliers, who no longer exist.

They're a Northern Irish regiment, British Army,

and he left school, went to Santerst and became an officer.

He was with British Army for 20 years,

and I was born in Oma, Northern Ireland, as a result of that.

We left in 1954 or five, something like that.

And as a result, I was spared all the agonies of the troubles,

and I was brought up in New Zealand.

But I feel very connected to Ireland.

I love going back there.

And as soon as I get off a plane,

there's something about the place that makes me feel comfortable and as if I belong there.

And I've never known whether that's to do with DNA

or whether it's to do with my first six or seven years of my life.

But I feel at home there, but I know it's not my home.

How had your mum and dad first met one another, do you know?

It was at school, actually.

Dad was sent across like a lot of colonial boys.

He was sent to school in England.

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He went to Harrow School, which I imagined was a pretty miserable experience.
Not a barrel of laughs.

I would think so with all those toffs bullying you and all that stuff.

But his housemaster was very kind to him and took an interest in dad.

And dad was always grateful to him for that.

And his housemaster's family knew my grandmother's family.

And they were introduced to school,

but I don't think they had a romance or anything

until they were perhaps both 27 or something in the war was beginning.

And dad realised that he'd have to hurry things along

because my mother was being posted abroad.

And he went down to Waterloo Station

and demanded that the lover's life should not be sent abroad.

And somehow or other he pulled that off.

And so mum left the army.

She was in the women's army corps and instead had a family.

What did they look like at that stage of their lives?

My mother was so pretty.

She never wore any makeup or...

I saw her perhaps once with lipstick on her whole life.

And my father was a very distinguished, very handsome man.

And we were all rather in the shadow.

He was a very charismatic man.

You spent a lot of time with your Welsh grandmother.

Your mum's mum when you were a little boy.

What are your memories of her?

I think my love of animals comes from her as much as anything.

She was a widow.

Her husband, my grandfather, was killed in 1917 in France.

And she'd lived on a widow's pension for many years.

Lived on the smell of an oily rag.

She'd had a riding school at one point.

I was sent there for about six months before we went to New Zealand
to spend that time with her.

And I was put into school and I just absolutely adored her.

She was the kindest person.

She was sort of a person that had a menagerie of animals around her,
including when I was there, a crow.

A crow who had fallen out of the nest

and she'd taken it inside and fed it with an eyedropper.

And this crow sort of ran the place.

She had dogs and cats and things, but the crow was in charge.

It sounds a little bit witchy, Sam.

I have to say.

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Well, the crow was, you know, they were a very assertive bird and everyone did what they were told.
And then one day I wasn't there, but one day she had a garden out the back. She'd grown vegetables.
This was in Wales, Tenby in Wales.
And the crow would accompany my grandmother gardening out the back. And one day she was aware that the crow was talking to a bunch of crows up in the trees behind her and they were talking down to the crow.
And to her surprise, the crow who never flew couldn't be bothered, flew up and joined them and had a bit of a chat and then flew away and disappeared.
And she thought, well, that's good.
You know, he or she has gone off to join the friends and we won't see him or her again.
But about a year later, she was in the garden digging and she heard a familiar sort of that ugly crow call, ah, ah, up in the trees. And she looked up and without question, that was her crow who was looking at her with a partner.
And it was as if the crow had come back to see my grandmother and say, look, I'm all right now.
I'm married.
And the crow flew down, landed on my grandmother's shoulder and had a long chat into her ear explaining things, flew up, joined the partner.
They both looked down on my grandmother and they flew away, never seen again.
But she had that sort of connection with animals and she also, I have two or three paintings by her. She could paint horses beautifully.
She loved horses.
I've got a painting she did of my grandfather's horse.
My grandfather, there was an expedition into Tibet in, I think, 1906, something like that.
It's called the Young Husband Expedition.
My grandfather was an officer on that trip.
It was an invasion really and they went all the way to Lhasa and my grandfather took his polo pony in there who got lame in Lhasa. So he had to lead the pony all the way back.
He wasn't going to leave it there.
He led it all the way, like 600 miles back into India.
And I have this beautiful painting that my grandmother did of that little polo pony. It wasn't a pretty pony.
It was called the unt, which means the camel in whatever the language there is.
Well, it had other virtues if it made that journey, that pony.

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Your mother inherited this love of horses
and when you were a little boy living by the Irish Sea,
she'd sometimes get back and forth to town with a donkey and a cart.
Do you remember riding in that cart behind the donkey?
Well, I remember the donkey very well and that's how we used to get into town.
Dan had a little car, we didn't have one,
and we would go and get our groceries and things on the donkey cart.
And also, it was a very bad tempered donkey, a lot of donkeys are.
It's got to say, as opposed to those famously good nature donkeys.
Well, this one is called Jenny and beautiful donkey,
but I was riding on the back of Jenny one day and she decided to eject me.
Like, you know, the ejector seat and I shot over this barbed wire fence
and I still bear this scar on my left knee for when Jenny decided
she didn't want me on her back anymore.
In her later years in New Zealand,
your mum would sometimes drive her pony and trap into town there to do her shopping.
What happened one day when she encountered some Hell's Angels bikeies?
Yes, she was a very bold woman, my mother.
I was horrified one day.
I said, dad had died and she was on her own.
I said, are you still picking up hitchhikers?
She said, oh yes darling, of course I am.
And I said, do you feel that's safe?
And she said, of course it's safe.
I said, how is it safe?
She said, I make them drive.
I said, what?
I said, what are you thinking?
She said, well, if they've got their hands on the wheel, what can they do to me?
It does make sort of sense.
But she had a pony and trap and she'd drive into Moscow.
I think it was the only person who would do that.
And driving to town just for fun.
And she loved motorbikes.
She'd driven a motorbike in the war delivering dispatches.
And the Hell's Angels were in town.
She was very intrigued by motorbikes.
She'd stopped and she saw the guy that was clearly the leader.
And they started chatting and she said,
can I have a ride on the back of your motorbike?
And he said, oh, okay.
So this little old lady got on the back and they roared around Moscow, the local town.
And she'd made a deal with him that if he gave her the ride,
she would take him for a ride on her pony and trap.

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So when they got back, all the bikies were having a good laugh because whatever his name was, had to get on and go on the block on the pony and trap. It's a little undignified for a Hell's Angel.

That's the greatest bikey story I've ever heard, I think.

So as you mentioned, when you were still just quite young, and also the family sailed to New Zealand to make your homes there, what did the other kids make of you young Nigel Neil as you were then when you arrived with that name and a plummy accent?

Well, I think that's the origins of being an actor, really.

And I often ask my friends, what did your parents do, my acting friends?

And a lot of them had sort of itinerant backgrounds.

Hugo Weaving, who's a friend, for instance, his father was in BP oil, I think, and they moved around. Hugo was actually born in Nigeria, you know.

And if your parents are in the diplomatic corps or in the army or something, you're always being sent to a different school.

And what you want to do at school is to fit in more than anything else.

So I arrived in New Zealand with a very plummy accent, and at playtime, I would get the hell beaten out of me.

So I thought, well, if the accent's a problem, I'm going to change it.

This is, you know, at seven years old, you're thinking, I've got to sort of perform as something else.

So the accent went pretty quickly,

and I guess I turned myself into a New Zealander pretty fast.

You were sent off to boarding school in Christchurch, which you did not enjoy, but what were some of the things that made that time bearable?

Look, I think boarding school's a mixed blessing, really.

And while you don't want to be sent away from home and not see your parents for three months, which seems like an eternity when you're a small child, there were things to be said for it, too.

I learned self-reliance, I learned how to make friends, and I learned how to survive.

So there are lessons to be learned everywhere, even at boarding school.

And I retreated into books and so on.

I was never a sporty boy, but I learned to love books, and there were sort of some tentative steps into a bit of acting, I suppose.

We would do little plays.

There was one teacher who would make us do plays on the lawn, but I could never get into the major production at Midbury School.

That was my prep school, because in order to be in a musical, it was important to be in the first eleven and play cricket as well, so...

Of course.

So in the parents' appearance, I was a bridesmaid, you know.

You had a stutter as a kid,

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and what happened with that when you were acting?

Yes, I did. I have a very bad stutter, actually.

So I was a very silent child, I guess,

and I lived in fear of adults talking to me,

because as soon as I did, I would clam up and just sort of go...

Like that.

But that gradually faded.

It sort of disappeared around adolescence, I think.

And I think acting had a lot to do with that,

because they talk about doctor theater.

You find actors suffering from all sorts of things.

As soon as they step onto stage, they disappear,

and then come back as soon as they step offstage.

What's that about? Why?

It's a sort of miraculous thing.

There's something about theater that does that to people.

That's what happened to me.

I found that I could actually have clarity on stage,

and that helped me in life.

Were movies and TV a part of your life while you were growing up?

Yeah, we didn't have television until I was, I don't know, 12 or something, so that wasn't a part of my life.

But we had the movies, and in the holidays, in Dunedin, which is a medium-sized city,

I think there were seven or eight different cinemas,

and it often rains there, a terrible climate.

There's nothing better to go to the movies,

and that was where my sort of imaginative life lay, I suppose,

and I was particularly fond of British movies rather than American movies.

So, you know, we were very free-range kids.

You wouldn't see your parents all day.

I'd take the bus into town and go and see a movie.

I didn't have the imagination to see myself as ever being in the movies.

That was such an unlikely thing.

But, you know, I always talk about you should have dreams

and you should follow your dreams.

I didn't have any dreams.

It never occurred to me that I could possibly have a life on celluloid.

Besides taking refuge from the rain in one of those cinemas in Dunedin, how else would your family spend their summer holidays?

Yes, we never had a holiday house or anything like that,

but we had some terrible old boats

and we had a crappy old English fan, a Bedford dormer bill, dreadful thing.

And we were tutel off to the mountains.

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And it's, you know, that's always been my sort of dreamland of the mountains of New Zealand, the rivers and the peaks. Our greatest family times were up there. Dad taught me to fish. We would ski together. And we camped in all sorts of unlikely places. Mum cooked. She was a better fisher person than the rest of us. She was quietly competent at everything, my mother, but she made it always seem like my father was better than her. He wasn't. And as a result, that's always been my sort of dream time place, the mountains of New Zealand. And that's where I live now. And one of the great blessings of my career is that I've been able to afford a little farm and grow wine. That's how I ended up there. I think you started taking on paid work when you were just 12 or so. What were some of the more memorable jobs you had back as a teenager? Yeah, well, kids worked in those days. We didn't have dreams, but we worked. So I think probably my first job was we'd get chucked out of the house at 12 during the school holidays and find a job. I worked in timber yards. I emptied rubbish bins at a camping ground. I was a groundskeeper at a golf club. I put jam into tarts in a bakery. Yeah, rather repetitive. You get RSI and your wrist from the jam. So all sorts of strange jobs, but they were always good for you. You know, you always had, you learned how to, learning how to get on with people and make friends and stay under the radar and all that stuff. After school, you took some time finishing an arts degree. Tell me about the role that the late, great, satirist John Clark played in you actually managing to finish your degree. Yes, it's funny, isn't it? I mean, I took five years to get a BA. You could have got a medical degree in that time nearly. That's right. If I'd actually gone to lectures, which I never did. I mean, I had a wonderful time at university. Actually, as it turned out, a very useful time, even though I wasn't doing the things I should have been doing,

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I was acting in plays and getting involved in politics
and all these things were really useful and more than anything,
I was meeting my people, I think,
meeting my tribe, people who were interested in acting and politics and stuff.
And one of those people was the great John Clark
and I saw him in satire reviews
and we became friends at parties and things
and I was incredibly sort of taken with him.
He was the funniest person I'd ever come across.
He still remains the funniest person I've ever known.
But, you know, I had one unit left to do that was philosophy.
There was three papers and one was called Logic
and Logic had a strong resemblance to mathematics
and I'd just sort of droned out in the first lecture
and never went back to anymore.
So I realized it would be another year of the BA
if I couldn't pass this Logic paper
and I was looking pale and worn and shaky
for about two or three weeks before exams
in a queue at the cafeteria
and John was there in front of me and said,
what's the matter with me?
I explained the situation.
He said, don't worry about a thing.
Meet me in the library at six o'clock.
And he had previously passed this very same paper.
He said, we can get this done in three hours.
And indeed, he gave me a tutor for three hours
and I passed that paper.
A whole year's work reduced to three hours with John Clarke.
He was genius.
Every struggling philosopher should be so lucky
to have John Clarke in the cafeteria line
willing to help you out.
Were you ambitious back then, Sam?
I mean, were you wondering where your life was heading
or were you quite happy taking things
at this somewhat lazy, hippie-ish pace,
smoking dope and drinking bad wine?
Yeah, look, I mean, I was a sort of...
not a very conscientious hippie, I suppose.
And I was completely ambition-free.
I didn't know where I was going to go or do or any of that.
You weren't doing bits and pieces of acting,

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but you eventually put acting to one side
or so you thought to get a proper job
with the New Zealand National Film Unit.
Please tell me about the groundbreaking
and perhaps essential documentary
you made for the Post Office.
Oh, gosh, I wish you hadn't raised that.
But, yeah, I had some friends that were working.
You know, there was very little film being made in New Zealand
at that point, mostly documentary.
There was a little bit of drama being made
at the New Zealand Broadcasting Television.
But virtually nothing.
And I had some friends
who were working at the National Film Unit.
They were directors.
So I said, I think I might try for a job there.
Anyway, I got a job
and I spent six or seven years there at the Film Unit.
I learned how to edit films, how to lay music tracks.
I did all sorts of things there,
and I did become a director.
And the sort of informal agreement was
you would do a film for them
and then a film for yourself.
Now, it was a government organization,
so you did films for government bodies
like Tourism Publicity,
you did tourism films.
In my case, my first film was for the New Zealand Post Office,
who also ran the telephones.
It was very little free enterprise in New Zealand.
At that point, it was more or less...
Soviet state.
It was more or less Soviet.
So the Post Office ran the phones.
And my job was...
We need you to make a film about telephone courtesy.
That's to say, how to answer the phone
without giving a fence.
Had there been something that New Zealanders were struggling with?
Why was there such a need for such a film?
I'm still... I'm still...
still baffled by it, but...

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That was a challenge for a documentary filmmaker.
I can tell you that.
Do you remember what your key...
what the take-home messages were?
What was your advice on appropriate telephone etiquette?
You're going to take messages and things.
Is it something you pride yourself on these days, Sam,
as it stood you in good stead?
No, it absolutely has not.
And what is more...
the problem with ever having done anything on film
is it still lurk somewhere, you know?
You can find this horrific piece of work on the internet.
Please don't do it, but you can if you want to.
These things are never erased.
Well, perhaps not surprisingly,
after this groundbreaking work,
you were invited to star in Sleeping Dogs.
The first feature film made in New Zealand
was everyone involved as new to this moviemaking caper as you were?
Yeah, there was a sort of nascent film scene
that was beginning to build,
and people were making little films.
I did a film called Ashes.
I would get lots of time off from the film unit
because they never had enough money
because it was a Soviet state.
They never had enough money to pay overtime,
so you'd get time off and lose.
So I'd get like three months off at a time.
So I went off and made a film called Ashes,
in which I played a priest.
And Roger Donaldson and Ian Mune,
who subsequently made Sleeping Dogs,
saw me in that and thought,
oh, maybe that's the guy.
So that was a really lucky break for me.
I had no idea how to make a feature film.
But then again, none of us did.
It was a bunch of amateurs,
and we sort of had to work out as we went along.
Was that exciting being new to it together?
It was exciting and absolutely terrifying at the same time.
There was no one there to say,

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what do you do to be a leading man in a film?
And here's the thing, Sarah.
I mean, I've never had an acting lesson in my life.
I'm sort of grandma Moses, really.
I'm a primitive.
I've just had to learn on the job.
And when we were doing that film,
we were all learning on the job.
For instance, the special effects guy,
it was a guy called Jeff Murphy.
He was also a trumpet player.
And he'd never done special effects before.
When they shoot me at the end of the film,
I had a thing on my back which was an explosive device.
The sort of thing that they trigger,
if they're going to blow up a hillside,
if they're mining, it'll be the sort of explosive thing
that lids off the dynamite.
So when I asked him,
do you think this is safe, Jeff?
They strapped this thing onto the back
with a sort of sack of blood beside it
so it would explode out my back.
I think it's safe because I'm a little bit nervous.
I had the trigger in my hand.
I had to sort of explode myself
as I walked down the hill and people shooting at my back.
And he said, oh, yeah, probably.
You know, that counts for enthusiasm.
Podcast.
Broadcast.
This is Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
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So, Sam, this big career of yours
began rather inauspiciously in New Zealand in the 1970s.
And back then, you got to have a look at your casting file
with TV in New Zealand.
What was their assessment of your promise as an actor?
Yes, that was actually when we were casting Sleeping Dogs.
And I looked up my own name
because I had, you know, auditioned for a couple of dramas
at New Zealand Broadcasting.
And I found my name under N, Sam Neal,
and it said, could be all right in homosexual roles.

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And so I thought, oh, well, that's something, at least.
But it doesn't fill you with confidence
for a great range of things
or a very, very bright future.
Nonetheless, out of Sleeping Dogs,
you were invited to come to Australia
for some publicity around that film.
What was your sense of this country
before you first came here, Sam?
Like a lot of New Zealanders,
I had very little comprehension of Australia.
I just thought it was a big desert
and there wouldn't be anyone very interesting here.
And I'm not sure why that was.
And so when I arrived here,
we were publicising Sleeping Dogs.
And I thought, this is really rather wonderful.
I was in Melbourne, and then I caught a train to Sydney.
And this was the sort of clincher moment for me
at the moment that I absolutely fell in love with Australia.
I was on a sleeper train.
I don't know if they have any more of these things.
But I was on a sleeper train from Melbourne to Sydney.
And I loved sleeper trains.
I had this little cabin to myself.
And I woke up about five in the morning
and I raised the blind beside me.
And I found myself looking at this most beautiful land.
I was probably somewhere about the Victoria,
Wales border, and I could not believe my eyes.
And I completely fell in love with the country at that point.
I got to Sydney and realised what a vital, interesting place this was
that just sort of eclipsed anything that I knew in New Zealand.
And I thought, I'd really like to spend time there.
And then coincidentally,
they were casting a film called My Brilliant Career
about the same time.
And how they Margaret Fink and Gillian Armstrong found out.
I was in town.
I went and auditioned for it
and found myself being asked to come to Australia
to be in an Australian film.
And I went back to New Zealand.
I resigned my job and I found myself living in Sydney

and being in this rather wonderful film.
You know, things changed so quickly.
And you were 30 or so when that happened
and when you suddenly, it sounds like,
found yourself with this professional film career.
James Mason was one of the British actors
you'd admired as a kid in New Zealand.
How did he come to play a pivotal role in this new career?
Well, My Brilliant Career became a success
and it was part of...
That was not a bit of extreme good luck.
There were, you know, Peter Ware and Fred Skepsy
and Bruce Beresford, people like that.
There was this new wave of Australian cinema
that happened about the same time.
And My Brilliant Career is one of those.
So there was a great deal of interest
that was suddenly spiking abroad in Australia,
in Australian culture, in Australian people.
And James was married to Clarissa K.
She was an Australian woman.
They were obviously taking an interest in this as well.
I was doing an ABC job down at Melbourne.
An assistant director came up and said,
there's a phone call for you.
And that never happened.
You know, this is before mobile phones
and no one ever called you on a set.
And I said, who's calling me?
And he said, it's someone called James Mason.
And I thought, well,
I wonder how many James Mason's there are.
So I picked it up and indeed,
it was that very distinctive voice.
And he said, you don't know me.
My name's James Mason.
And I think you're really rather good.
And we'd like to send you a ticket to Europe.
Come and stay with us for a few days
and go on to England and find you an agent.
And I'm sort of lost for words.
It was out of the blue.
I didn't know James or his wife.
And so, you know,

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never look a wonderful gift horse in the mouth.
And I was on a plane about three weeks later
staying with these wonderful people.
They were just kindest, sweetest people
near Lausanne in Switzerland.
And then about another four weeks,
I found I was in a feature film in England
playing The Antichrist.
So, yeah.
They all make sense.
And this is, you know,
my life has been a whole lot of really strange, funny
and mostly wonderful accidents.
Such a marvellous act of generosity
from that couple too, isn't it?
Just delightful.
Absolutely.
So, out of that, you began your life
as a jobbing actor on film sets all around the world.
And I guess it was at boarding school
where you first learned to make friends, you know,
to suddenly be in a world with people who were strangers
and out of self-preservation and enjoyment,
make connections with them.
Is that a skill you took to your film sets?
Yes.
And I think that's much aided and abetted
by other actors who I love actors.
They tend to be funny and smart and sociable.
And I think one of the great blessings
of what I do is I get to get up,
have a shower and go to work.
Hopefully I've learnt my lines
and be with the most delightful company imaginable
because a whole bunch of actors,
you can't imagine a better bunch, really.
And I think, yeah, I think that boarding school thing
and learning to make friends, learning to survive,
was a help in that, yeah, for sure.
As I mentioned at the beginning, Sam,
Meryl Streep identified you as the best kisser
she worked with, which is quite an accolade.
When did you first work together?
I think she was joking.

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I wouldn't say that.
If Meryl Streep said that about me,
I would at no point say I think she was joking.
What was she like to work with?
Because you've worked with her a few times.
Yeah, she was so impressive by the concentration she has
and the commitment she has to the part.
When she was playing Lindy, Chamberlain,
she got a lot of criticism, actually, for that accent.
But actually, if you listen to Lindy herself,
she talks just like Meryl did in the film,
because Meryl studied that strange hybrid accent
because she's sort of somewhere between New Zealand and Australia.
She'd studied it very well.
So no one had listened to Lindy well enough, actually,
when you think about it.
And one of the things they hadn't listened well enough to
was her accent.
But we got on very well.
I found her very daunting initially
because she'd already won three or four Oscars
or some damn thing.
But we were very good friends and remained so.
You mentioned that you never went to acting school.
Do you think of acting as a craft that you can learn?
Or is it more of a gift that you're born with or not?
Look, I think it's a bit of both.
I think you've got it or you don't.
But certainly the craft thing is something that you learn.
And I've had to learn it on the job.
It's a different craft from when I began.
There were all sorts of technical things
that you had to remember as an actor.
You had to hit your marks.
And if you were three inches off your mark,
the camera would be out of focus.
Now that seems to have completely disappeared.
You can go wherever you want and you're still in focus.
And yeah, it's a different craft now.
But look, it's a bit of art.
It's a bit of craft.
And it's a bit of low cunning, is what I would say.
Well, speaking of low cunning,
you've played some fiendish, horrible villains over your career.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

What's your approach to those kind of characters?
What's your trick to try to find something sympathetic for an audience in a villain?
Every villain has his reasons, doesn't he?
That's something a villain would say, Sam.
Well, you know, for instance, television series I did, Peaky Blinders, I played the horrible, horrible character, Major Campbell, who was in pursuit of our heroes, who are villains themselves, of course.
But I always thought, you know, he was from Northern Ireland, and I imagined him growing up in some bleak rectory, being beaten by a brutal father and never really having recovered and takes it out on the rest of society.
Yeah, I think, well, talking back to playing the Antichrist, well, it doesn't get more evil than that.
But I remember having the Rolling Stones, sympathy for the devil, rolling around my head.
I'm a man of wealth and taste.
And yeah, and I did feel sympathy for the devil.
You thought there could not be any more lonely job than being the Antichrist on Earth, because you can't actually tell people what your job is.
You know, I'm the American ambassador, but I'm also the Antichrist.
But would you be good enough to go out for dinner with me?
Honestly, I'm harmless.
Major Campbell, the character you mentioned from Peaky Blinders, he's from Northern Ireland, and that accent, was that something that came easily because of your early years there, or was it something you had to find as an adult actor?
No, it was something I had to find.
And it was a lovely thing to find.
I had a dialogue coach in England, but there was a New Zealand actor called Michael Hearst, who's a friend who is very good at accents.
And he gave me a note before we started.
He said, here's what to remember about that Ulster accent.
He said, it can be very, very harsh, but also it can be so tender.
And I thought, wow, that's a lovely way of looking at it.
And I found it the richest voice I've ever had to work with.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

It was so great for that character.
Your life as an actor has given you entree
to some amazing places,
a US Navy nuclear submarine,
a midwinter sleigh ride through Polish mountains,
a palace in Rajasthan.
What happened one night in the Vatican?
Oh, yeah.
Well, it's just about 1980.
And John Paul was not long the Pope at that point.
And Christoph Sinusius was commissioned to make a film
that was sort of about the Pope,
but wouldn't have the Pope in it much.
Curious.
Yeah, his agent's a nightmare to work with, I think.
Very hard.
But anyway, I was the only actor left,
and I get to wander around the Vatican.
We were filming in the evening mostly.
And one night the film crew
preoccupied somewhere else doing something.
So I wandered down to the Sistine Chapel,
and there was just a Swiss guard there looking after things.
And he said, come on in.
I had an hour or two in the Sistine Chapel all to myself,
lying on the ground mostly with Michelangelo,
completely undisturbed.
It was wonderful.
I guess that counts as being one of the perks of the job, Sam.
I sometimes think, well, that's odd.
You know, that's an odd accident.
What is an actor anyway?
And actors get a lot of attention sometimes,
because I think actors are often over-celebrated,
but at the same time underrated.
You know, if I express myself, if I have a view about things,
you get this feedback, you know,
what would you know?
You're just an actor.
And, well, they're entitled to that view,
but it's an odd business,
and it's not quite like anything else.
I've never been a celebrity,
and I've done my best to avoid any of that stuff.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

Famous and good for people,
and I've never been famous.
I've just been, I think, just well enough known
to get the next job.
And that's about the right place to be.
It's a very sweet spot.
You've created a second career as a winemaker,
and objectively, I'm sure, and modestly,
described two paddocks as the world's greatest producer
of organic Pinot Noir.
Yes, there's no exception.
What was it like opening that very first bottle
from your new vineyard?
Well, you know, I started off very humbly.
I planted five acres of Pinot,
because it's my favorite red wine,
with no great expectations,
except that a couple of friends in Central Tiger
were beginning to produce some very promising Pinot.
So I thought, if they can do it, let's have a go.
And I really had no great ambitions for it.
I thought I'd just grow some decent drinkable wine
for friends when they come around and see how we go.
But my wife and I opened this first bottle,
which I had picked up with some trepidation from the winery,
and took the cork out.
I still use corks in those days, poured it, sniffed it,
and it seemed incredibly promising, tasted it,
and I couldn't believe what had happened.
It was an actually transformative moment.
And that led to me sort of becoming more and more ambitious
in the wine field.
So that was 30 years ago now,
and I've got four little vineyards.
We're still a very small producer,
but I think without, you know, patting myself in the back too much,
I think we make great Pinot noir, and I'm terribly proud of it.
It's organic.
I'm very much interested in the whole process of how we grow it now.
We were growing wine conventionally initially,
but now, for the last 15, 20 years,
we've been very involved in organics.
We don't use any agrochemicals or fertilizers.
We're all about sustainability.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

We're going to eventually convert the whole thing to solar and electric.
So it's an ongoing project, and it's been a very rewarding one.
What's your favourite time of year on the farm?
Yeah, it's coming up very soon,
because it's a very extreme climate there.
We have brutal winters, and we have gorgeous summers,
and then these lovely interim springs and autumns.
I think spring, I hope I'll get back in about seven or eight weeks,
and everything will be just thundering along.
Out of that bleak winter, you get these fantastic green shoots,
and life is full of optimism, and I couldn't be more happier then.
You wrote this memoir, Sam, as you were undergoing treatment for blood cancer.
Was it intended as a kind of distraction while you were dealing with that news?
Yeah, it all came on very quickly, and I suddenly realised
that I was going to be confined to quarters in Sydney,
and I was having chemotherapy.
I had nothing to do. I couldn't go to work.
I was very much on my own.
I thought I'd better do something with my brain,
because one of the great things about my job is my brain's always working.
I'm learning lines and working out how to do stuff.
I had nothing to do with my brain, so I thought I'll start writing.
I had no intention of writing a book.
I'll just write anecdotes from my life, and maybe the kids will enjoy it.
So I'd go to bed thinking, what will I write about tomorrow?
And it would be stuff that would, I think, oh, yeah, that might be good.
And I'd get up in the morning, and it became quite obsessive.
Then when I got to about 50,000 words, it seemed to be quite a lot.
Now, I went out for lunch with the great David Ma,
and I said, how many words do you need for a book?
I don't know, what do you think?
I've got 50,000 words.
He said, you're halfway there, dear boy.
So I thought, well, I'll carry on, and we were telling stories.
And at one stage, I said, did I ever tell you this?
He said, stop, stop, stop right there.
That's your title.
Did I ever tell you this?
Very good title.
I said, all right, well, you know what you're doing.
I'll use that.
So that's where the title came from.
And the book, it wasn't written in any sequence or anything.
I didn't start at the beginning and end at the end.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

And it was written in a hurry, that's the truth of it, because I actually wasn't sure how long I had to live. So I thought, better get this done. If it's a book, I better write long enough for a book. So I keep thinking of other things that I would have liked to put in, but it's too late now. It's a big thing to think that I suddenly have this limited time. I imagine death goes from being something quite abstract and something that's way up in the distance, we all like to think. What did it do to your sense of death that thought that, okay, maybe this is a matter of months that I have left? Yeah, well, I mean, that's still true today. I'm still having treatment every fortnight. And that's the thing about cancer, you're living with it all the time and it can roar back at any point. So I'm pretty much resigned to that idea and I'm at peace with it. I've had to work out, am I afraid of dying? We're all going to die and that doesn't worry me. The only thing that concerns me is not getting things finished. I wanted to finish the book and I'm doing a little job over here at the moment. I don't want to cancel it. I want to finish that job. I want to finish the next vintage. There's things I want to do with my kids that I haven't finished yet. So it's unfinished business that would get me rather than the death thing itself. You describe yourself in the memoir as a crusty bachelor, but it's clear that you've got such a talent for friendship. How important was having friends to lean on over the last year and a half? Yes, it does really throw into relief who cares for you and who doesn't. And I've had wonderful support, really wonderful support. I'm immensely grateful for my friends and the ones that have rallied around me and family too, of course. The last thing the Beatles ever said was the love you take is equal to the love you make. That's always resonated for me. In thinking about the trajectory that your life has taken, Sam, you refer to it as being like a driverless train, careering along and every now and again the direction switches. What kind of life might you have led, do you think, if you hadn't said yes to that first film in New Zealand? Where might the train have taken you instead? Well, you know, when Dad retired from the Army, he went into the family business, who were wines and spirits, actually, mostly, and home appliances and things like that, to need in a cargo base. And he did offer me a job there, and wisely, I said, no, I don't think business is for me.

[Transcript] Conversations / Sam Neill's menagerie

And at one point he said, what about a short-term commission on the Army?

You've got to get a proper job, my boy.

I said, I don't think I'd be much of a soldier to Dad.

If I hadn't done this, I don't know where I would have gone.

But I think one of the great things for me was actually coming to Australia.

And Australia's been so good for me, and completely opened my horizons.

And some of the work I've done here is some of my favourite stuff,

things like The Dish and Sweet Country, Death in Brunswick,

Dead Calm, that was an important one, and Yeah, Evil Angels.

Films like that have been not necessarily the biggest films in your career,

but ones you're terribly attached to.

I have to say, I'm not sure that I would have had an hour with Dunedin's

greatest home appliance salesman.

So I'm, for one, I'm glad that you pursued the train to Australia

and then on to all those other roles.

Sam, it's really lovely to hear some of your stories.

Thank you for being my guest on Conversations.

Thank you so much, Sarah.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Konoski.

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