



Susan Sarandon, stunning at nearly 60, uses her celebrity status to champion social and political causes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FABRIZIO FERRI

desperately seeking Susan

Would you fly 31,000 kilometres to spend an hour with someone? **David Leser** would, but only if that someone was the fascinating Susan Sarandon.

LET'S FACE IT, there aren't many people in the world you'd fly 15,572 kilometres to see just for an hour. Take in the return journey and it's actually more like 31,000 kilometres for the dubious honour of spending 60 minutes in that person's company. That's about 520 kilometres for every precious minute you're with them.

He or she would have to be a special somebody, right? Maybe Mother Teresa or John Lennon, were either still alive. Somebody endowed with qualities you don't normally find – a combination, perhaps, of shining intelligence and earthy wisdom, deep humanity and a fierce social and political conscience; somebody smart and wise and empathic, and, well, yes, in this case, bosomy and beautiful, too, in an ageless sex-goddess kind of way.

Remember the time she squeezed lemon juice on her breasts in Atlantic City, playing opposite Burt Lancaster? Remember her as the shameless hussy to both Tim Robbins and Kevin Costner in the baseball classic Bull Durham? "There's never been a ballplayer who slept with me that didn't have the best year of his career."

Sorry ... it's easy to get carried away here, but, let's be honest, she's portrayed some alluring and, at times, ill-behaved women during an illustrious 36-year career: Catherine Deneuve's lesbian lover in *The Hunger*, Brooke Shields' prostitute mother in *Pretty Baby*, James Spader's smouldering paramour in *White Palace*, and, of course, fugitive ballbreaker that she was, Louise Sawyer, in the feminist road movie, *Thelma & Louise*. (And that's not counting, more recently, Jude Law's older temptress in *Alfie*, or the groupie gone straight, Lavinia Kingsley, in *The Banger Sisters*.)

So, yes, it's true these roles might help determine whether a middle-aged man such as myself would want to consider travelling across the world to spend an hour with someone like that. Yet would it be enough to get me across the line? Probably not (*liar, liar, pants on fire*).

Surely you'd need something else, such as her Academy Award-winning performance as the New Orleans nun, Sister Helen Prejean, in *Dead Man Walking*, or her unforgettable portrayal as that lioness of a mother in *Lorenzo's Oil* (for which she received one of her four Oscar nominations) to get a man to take out his suitcase.

Yet even then you'd be ill-advised not to throw into the mix the real-life attributes we've read so much about – her devotion to her children, whom she began having when she was nearly 40; the love of a partner (actor/writer/director Tim Robbins) 12 years her junior; and the championing of various political and social causes – women's rights, an end to the death penalty, the saving of rainforests, the plight of Africa – and, more recently, her fierce opposition to the war in Iraq, for which she has been vilified and threatened.

Add to that her status as "Hollywood's sexiest older woman", the screen icon who had a belly-dancing party when she turned 58 and now, at nearly 60, still turns younger men's heads and, yes, I think it's safe to say the suitcase is packed and the ticket is bought.

The only question now is a strategic one: how long will it take me to get to the airport without appearing over-zealous?

IT'S FUNNY HOW OFTEN you read articles about Susan Sarandon arriving for an interview dressed casually in jeans >>>

and sneakers, titian hair tied back, sunglasses perched on her crown, no make-up or hint of surgical enhancement in sight. Perhaps that's because it's true. Susan Sarandon arrives for this interview dressed like the description above, drop pearl earrings adding to her appearance of chic insouciance, a red-striped shirt unbuttoned fetchingly at the top, a look of no nonsense in those remarkable almond eyes and a firm handshake at the ready.

WE MEET AT her favourite Greenwich Village bistro, where she has just finished lunching with her daughter, Eva Amurri, the 21-year-old multilingual actress from Susan's relationship with Italian director Franco Amurri in the mid-'80s. (Eva has appeared with her mother in two films, *The Bangers Sisters* and *Anywhere But Here*.)

Susan sits down, unbuttons her jacket and, with very little prompting, begins to regale me with how a journalist recently took creative licence with her quotes, so much so that she was totally confused by what she'd supposedly said. "You can only be as smart as the person interviewing you," she offers with a smile that suddenly looks like a warning. "So if they already have an angle before they go to meet with you, then they're not listening – just as some actors do when they're in a scene and they come already deciding what's going to happen between you.

"It's a little bit like public officials picking and choosing their information before they start a war. They just listen to that information

"I'VE THOUGHT WE WOULD HAVE TO LIVE ELSEWHERE. THERE WERE DEATH THREATS [AND PHONE TAPS] AND SUGGESTIONS THAT PEOPLE DO SOMETHING TO ME. AND THEY STARTED PRINTING MEAN STORIES ABOUT MY KIDS IN THE PAPER THAT WEREN'T TRUE."

that supports their invasion, as opposed to listening to information that might question whether or not they should go in."

And there it is at the outset. The actor and the activist. Susan Sarandon brandishing her fist at perceived injustice the way she's been doing since the civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests of the 1960s and '70s. In the mid-1980s, as her film career was beginning to flourish, she was also being put under surveillance for her opposition to the Reagan Administration's covert war against Nicaragua. In 1993, she caused an outcry at the Oscars when she and partner Tim Robbins decided to use their 37 seconds on the podium to talk about the plight of AIDS-afflicted Haitians interned in Guantanamo Bay (this was a decade before anybody had heard of Guantanamo Bay!).

In 1999, she was arrested for "disorderly conduct" for protesting against the shooting

of an unarmed African immigrant by four New York policemen. And from the time of the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, she has been railing against what she sees as her government's hypocrisy and deceit. "Somehow it became anti-American to ever discuss anything," she says, clearly infuriated by the turn her country has taken.

Three years ago, with the American-led invasion of Iraq, the tone of things turned decidedly nasty. Radio hate jocks began baying for her blood over her public denunciations of the Bush Administration. Film studios were asked not to hire her – not that that had much effect – and even the Baseball Hall of Fame, in theory a non-political organisation, cancelled her and Tim Robbins' appearance at the 15th anniversary of *Bull Durham*.

"And there have been all these other little things, too," she says now, sipping a glass of water. "My niece in Virginia was doing a production of *The Wizard of Oz* and the drama teacher said to my sister, 'I hope your sister isn't planning to come because we won't let her'. My nephew in New Jersey was at a class and his teacher said, 'I'd like to smash her teeth in'."

Just recently on Christopher Street, in the heart of Greenwich Village, the star of more than 35 feature films was abused as she was leaving a restaurant. "I was with my younger son and his friend ... and a carload of young guys was going by and they said, 'Hey, Susan'. I always look up with a smile and they said, 'You're a terrible American. You should die'."

Then, in that same period, a friend was arrested in the Hamptons for wearing a sign with the number of dead American soldiers on it. "This was the *Hamptons*," Susan exclaims, referring to upstate New York's playground for the rich. "But that's the environment of fear [that's operating] and people don't know what to do. They see celebrities being silenced and they think, 'God, that can happen to them?'"

"And I'm not that far left," she continues. "I'm really in the middle. It's just the way that they would have me presented – that I'm a leftie. But, in fact, the values I stand for – unions, education and healthcare ... most Americans stand for."

With all these dark reminders of McCarthyism returning to haunt her country, Susan Sarandon admits she has thought of leaving, as did so many actors and directors in the early 1950s. "I've

thought we would have to live elsewhere," she says. "There were death threats [and phone taps] and suggestions that people do something to me. And they started printing mean stories about my kids in the paper that weren't true. And things like that made my children very anxious and I did think we might have to leave."

And, yes, New Zealand loomed large in her thinking. "I love New Zealand and I think they're probably the closest [to my way of thinking] in terms of a government trying to give people a fair shake. At least it seems like a government that has a dialogue going ... But I really don't want to leave. I love this country. And my children love this country and they love this city. We've lived through the 11th [the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001] and it made them and myself even more committed to being New Yorkers.

"Also ... as a privileged person, I hate the idea of just picking up and leaving. I kind of feel as if I'm going to stay here until they throw me out. I want to make it clear that if I were to leave, I want to make it public and make people understand why I was leaving – that I was given no alternative."

SUSAN WAS BORN in New York but raised on the wrong side of the tracks in New Jersey, which probably helps explain why she plays working-class women so well (*Atlantic City*, *White Palace*, *Thelma & Louise*).

The oldest of nine children, her father was a big-band singer with Celtic roots and her mother an emotionally damaged woman of Sicilian ancestry. Her mother, Lenora Tomalin, now in her 80s and living in Virginia, was born to a 13-year-old mother and abandoned when she was two, brought up first in foster care and then in a Catholic boarding school.

Susan's grandmother had links to the Mafia, but was not entirely beyond redemption. "She came back into [my mother's] life when she was 17," Susan says now, "but the nuns wouldn't let her visit. She didn't look like a mum, whatever that meant. And then, later on, we realised she was running numbers [illegal lotteries run by organised crime] at one point. She ran a jazz club somewhere in the mid-town and went to the [horseracing] track. I have no idea what happened to her."

In 1967, at the age of 20, Susan Tomalin married the first man she slept with, acting student Chris Sarandon. Three years later, both arrived for an audition in New York for a film called *Joe*. Susan, who had no burning ambition to become an actor, got the nod ahead of her husband.

By 1975, she was on her way to cult status by having played the luckless Janet in *The Rocky Horror Picture* >>>

It's easy to see why Susan has portrayed some alluring women in her movie career.

BEAUTY NOTE
Susan wears Revlon Age Defying Makeup with Botafirm for Dry Skin in Medium Beige, ColorStay Eyeshadow Quad in Berry Bloom, Luxurious Lengths Mascara in Blackest Black, Super Lustrous Lipstick in Soft Suede and Super Lustrous Lip Gloss in Nude Lustre.

Show (she lost her virginity to a transvestite!). Three years later, she appeared in French director Louis Malle's debut American movie, *Pretty Baby*, becoming his lover during filming and then moving to France with him for nearly three years.

By 1980, she'd earned her first Oscar nomination for *Atlantic City*, playing a croupier in that famous lemon-squeezing scene. *Playboy* magazine dubbed hers "the nipples of the decade" and pursued her, unsuccessfully, to be a centrefold.

"You've got to be careful," she once said, "not to be upstaged by your breasts. I'm at least a [37] C, sometimes a D, depending on the bra, and I have gotten curvier as I've gotten older. Directors cast the men they want to be and the women they want to have."

Her lovers were all fascinating: Louis Malle, Richard Gere, Christopher Walken, David Bowie – but not Sean Penn, as I wrongly suggest. "Well, I didn't have Sean Penn as a lover," she says in her deep, silky Manhattan inflections. She pauses. "But it's a nice rumour to start." The timing just happens to be perfect, her laughter infectious.

"But considering how old I am," she continues, "and how long I've been in the business ... I've had serial monogamy. These poor girls who are now in tabloids constantly, they can't sow their wild seeds without getting in the paper. I feel bad for them. I got married really young, so I've always been more of a one-guy gal.

"For me, the whole sexual thing is a pretty intimate act. I'm not that *sportif* about it. So then, really, considering my station, I haven't been with hardly anybody. In fact, when I first went to California,

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somebody said, 'Do you know why you're so popular? Because you're the only one in this town who hasn't f****d all the Eagles'."

Except in *The Banger Sisters*, I suggest. "Except in *The Banger Sisters* [with Goldie Hawn]," she says, laughing and placing particular emphasis on the word "banger". "And I had fun doing that."

Diagnosed with endometriosis earlier in her life, Susan was convinced she could never have children. Then, in 1984, she fell pregnant to Italian director Franco Amurri while working on a film about Mussolini. Like Tim Robbins, he, too, was 12 years younger than Susan, although the relationship didn't last. In 1987, on the set of *Bull Durham*, she met Tim and, by the following year, they were seeing each other regularly. They have been together ever since and have two boys, Jack, 17, and Miles, 14.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FABRIZIO FERRI



There's a striking resemblance between Susan and Eva Amurri, 21 (her daughter with Italian director Franco Amurri), seen here with their pet Maltese Pomeranian cross, Penny.

I ask her what it is about men 12 years younger and she replies, "It has to do with the person, not the age, really. I hadn't met anyone Tim's age before who was even aware of my politics and he was very political. He had this theatre company. He'd grown up in the [Greenwich] Village ... And my daughter [who was two at the time] really liked him from the beginning. I don't think I would have even thought about it if she hadn't."

The best relationships, both on and off the screen, happen because of a convergence not easy to define. "What reads as sexual heat on screen is really about connection," she says. "[And off screen] it's the belief that a person sees you as nobody else sees you and something about the surrender to that incredibly courageous act of deciding to be intimate with another person.

"So, therefore, it can happen between people of any age. It can happen between people of any gender. It can happen between a small boy and an older woman. That's what encourages people to be the protagonist in their own lives ... these kinds of acts of courage."

And so, yes, while it's "cool" to be considered the "thinking man's sex symbol", these balloons have a way of being punctured, particularly by one's children. A few years ago, when the Lincoln Centre in New York hosted a gala tribute to Susan, they showed excerpts from several of her movies, some of which were steamy, if not erotic.

"I mean, there were love scenes, but not nipples or what I would think of as being naked," she says, laughing. "But I didn't even have to be naked. Every time something would come on the screen, I would look over and my son [Jack], who was 12, would be going ... [she screws up her face like a sick child] and when it was over, I asked my young guy [Miles], 'Well, what did you think?' And he said, 'I thought it was cool, Mum, but scarring.' And >>>



Susan with her husband Tim Robbins, daughter Eva, and sons Jack (right), 17, and Miles, 14.

then I said to Jack, 'Well, what did you think?' And he said, 'Did it never occur to you that you might have children?'

"So I think they have to accept at a certain point that I can be sexual, but I don't have to take my clothes off. And I have to consider their humiliation."

Having said that, it would be disingenuous not to admit being pleased when her trainer tells her — as he does — that the young man on the treadmill finds her highly attractive. "Yeah, sure I feel flattered," she says, "but I don't feel unusual. I mean, I think that's the way of the world now — that men and women over 40 are still asking questions and living life, and trying new things and trying new people and being active."

"It just never occurred to me that that was not going to be the case. But I don't feel like I'm forging new territory. I'm particularly exhausted today. I've had a rough last few days and I don't feel much like that person, but, you know, I look around me and I have friends who are older. I have friends who are younger. I have friends who are straight and gay, male and female, and they're all pretty awake in their lives. Crazy, a lot of them ... and getting more eccentric as they get older."

Why should it be incompatible, therefore, that such a woman as Susan Sarandon has become the face of Revlon? It shouldn't ... "not unless you think that women who have rights can't be beautiful, too", she says, touching up her lips with what she assures me is a Revlon product.

"Initially, I turned [Revlon] down because I just couldn't imagine posing for something. But then when they asked me later and I was mentioning it to my friends, they said, 'What a great idea'. Because, at that point, most other [cosmetic] companies were firing people who were at least 10 or 15 years younger than I was. I thought it was kind of great to be able to say to women, 'We are still interested in you. We still see you. You haven't become

invisible because you're over 40. We want your vote. We know *you* think you're important. We know that you still care about the way you look. You don't have to borrow your daughter's make-up. This is for you.' I kind of like that."

IT'S EASY TO PROJECT onto film stars qualities they don't necessarily have. You watch them in countless movies and become convinced that the range and depth of emotions they display on film they possess in real life as well.

Call it empathy, moral imagination, an intuitive reading of life's characters, but Susan Sarandon seems to do it nearly every time she appears on screen, be it as Jude Law's lover or Orlando Bloom's mother. Over the next 12 months, she will again be showcasing her considerable talents in three films due for release, including *Romance & Cigarettes* with James Gandolfini and Kate Winslet, *Bernard and Doris*, in which she plays opposite Ralph Fiennes as the eccentric tobacco billionaire, Doris Duke, and *Irresistible*, the film she worked on over seven rainless weeks in Melbourne last year with Sam Neill and director Ann Turner.

In *Irresistible*, she gives a stunning performance as Sophie Hartley, the wife and mother who unravels from fear and paranoia because she's convinced she's being stalked. Her portrayal of this shipwreck of a woman begs the question as to whether, in real life, Susan has ever fallen apart quite like that.

"Oh sure," she replies with her refreshing frankness. "I don't trust anybody who hasn't completely fallen apart at least once in their life. Until you completely fall apart, you can't build up a new belief system. I think it happens in everybody's life at least once, as you go from one phase to the other."

"My major breakdown happened when I was in my mid-20s. As the oldest of nine kids, I was the person who always held

everything together, so I never really had the room to indulge in a good breakdown and rebuilding. I think that was the way I found the space to re-examine and move on, and it involved the breaking up of my marriage."

In the dappled light of a Manhattan spring afternoon, Susan has talked almost non-stop from the time we've met, one sentence colliding with another, one train of thought ploughing into a second, a level of candour and intimacy on display that you wouldn't hope to find from some friends, let alone a stranger. We've talked, not for the allotted hour, but for 95 minutes and if there's a grace note struck during our time together, it's not when she's upbraiding her political masters or discussing her career, or even singing paens to her family and tribe of lifelong friends, sincere and disarming though these comments are.

No, it's when she's discussing, firstly, her role as a celebrity and, secondly, her concept of love that you come to fully appreciate why Susan Sarandon is the object of so much adoration and respect around the world.

Her celebrity status means for her that in the absence of a responsible, truthful government or a more questioning media, she can use her fame to bring attention to issues of public importance, be it the plight of starving millions in sub-Saharan Africa or a horrific war in the Middle East and its resulting erosion of civil liberties back home. "I think what's really great about [being a] celebrity," she says, "is that we can get information to people that they're not necessarily getting. And then they can make up their own minds."

On the question of love, she says finally, "As you get older and you get some perspective, you realise that forgiveness is really the name of love for those who love badly, and everybody loves badly. So you start to understand that it's not necessarily called compromise. It's called forgiveness."

"But when you are younger and everything is black and white, and you haven't made as many mistakes, I don't think you invest people with the ability to forgive and to accept you with all your flaws. In fact, it's those flaws, including physical flaws as you get older, that you realise makes people who they are. It makes them individuals."

Didn't I tell you? You'd be absolutely crazy not to make a 31,000km round trip to be with such a person. Do you remember that scene in Thelma & Louise where she ...?

Irresistible, starring Susan Sarandon and Sam Neill, will be released in Australian cinemas in October.