

C A M E R O S



Liam Neeson Nancy Savoca

John Robotham Chloe Webb

Euzhan Palcy Sheila Kelley



ACTOR

LIAM NEESON

SOMEWHERE IN THE wilds of Africa or the Orient, a film based on John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is still drawing raves from evangelical Bible-school students more than ten years after its release. In it, a tall, striking, and serious young actor from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin made his celluloid debut as Jesus with a determinedly Irish brogue. "They actually put the cross up on a beautiful hill," says Liam Neeson. "It was the weirdest thing to be Christ overlooking Belfast."

From such auspicious beginnings—and after a heart-stopping performance as Diane Keaton's lover in *The Good Mother*—Neeson has developed the kind of screen presence that leaves critics spouting superlatives and women gasping for breath. That a provincial Irish lad has become a not-so-obscure object of desire leaves Neeson, who is as scrupulously polite and mild-mannered as Clark Kent, distinctly embarrassed. This is the kind of actor who, having moved to Los Angeles in January 1987 for strictly professional reasons, lives in an unpretentious book-and-script-strewn bungalow in the Hollywood Hills, has no discernible vices, and refers to Beverly Hills as "the enemy camp"—and means it.

The uninitiated should stop mispronouncing his name (it's "LEE-am," not "LIE-am") after they see him as Patrick Swayze's brother in John Irvin's *Next of Kin*, which Neeson describes as "*Deliverance* meets *The Godfather*." Neeson went down to Kentucky three weeks before shooting started to work with dialect coach Robert Easton and to immerse himself in rural America. "Many people [there] are of Scotch-Irish descent. Luckily, I found a lot of similarities—not just in the rhythms and accents but in the attitudes to life," says Neeson. "John Irvin took a big chance casting me—it's a classic American part."

Born and raised in a staunch Catholic family in Ballymena (population: 16,000), Northern Ireland, the 37-year-old Neeson initially planned to be a boxer (which explains his bashed-up nose), then an architect before answering an ad placed by the Lyric Players' Theatre in Belfast. The two-minute part called for an actor over six feet tall; at six four, Neeson won the role over the phone. After two years with the Lyric, he moved to the acclaimed Abbey Theatre.

Neeson had found his career. "Northern Ireland is a great amateur dramatic circuit, with all these

towns doing festivals," he explains. "It doesn't matter if it's Shakespeare or Ibsen or Tennessee Williams, these farmers and IRA terrorists will just sit there and watch the whole thing. The private pubs stay open till five in the morning, and you'll get dissertations and criticism from everybody. I don't mean you have to talk like Einstein's bloody theory of relativity, but there's a richness to it. I really miss that stimulation."

In 1980 John Boorman discovered Neeson in a Dublin production of *Of Mice and Men* and cast him as Sir Gawain in *Excalibur*. "It was a wonderful eye-opener," Neeson says, "just to get that smell of a really big movie." He then moved to London and began his film work in earnest, appearing as a priest in *Lamb* (his first starring role), a sailor to Mel Gibson's Fletcher Christian in *The Bounty*, and another priest in *The Mission*, where Father Daniel Berrigan, on location as an adviser, left an indelible impression and nearly recruited another Jesuit. From there Neeson embarked on an enviable stint of eight films in two years, playing an IRA hit man in *A Prayer for the Dying*, Julie Andrews's lover in *Duet for One*, Cher's homeless deaf-mute client in *Suspect*, and an aging rock star in the unsatisfactory *Satisfaction*.

"I have no intention of ever seeing *Satisfaction*,"

he says, laughing. "I was doing *Suspect* and feeling a wee bit depressed and really ugly and awkward, and the script had pretty girls running around, and I thought, 'This sounds great.'" Next Neeson played a shlockmeister director in *The Dead Pool*, Clint Eastwood's fifth Dirty Harry movie. "Irish boys don't just dream of being in a Clint Eastwood movie," he explains, "they dream of being Dirty Harry." He followed these performances with a romantic turn as Leo the sculptor in *The Good Mother* and a farcical romp as a 200-year-old ghost in Neil Jordan's *High Spirits*.

After *Next of Kin*, Neeson will star in *Darkman*, "a tongue-in-cheek thriller" written and directed by Sam (Evil Dead) Raimi and costarring Frances McDormand. Neeson plays a scientist out for revenge after becoming horribly disfigured by acid-wielding gangsters. Then Neeson's off to Scotland to star in David Leland's *The Big Man* as an ex-coal miner from Glasgow who becomes involved in the drug underworld. "It's a gritty, seedy drama—a bit of *High Noon*, with the same feel as *Mona Lisa*," he says.

Neeson's recent spate of work has kept him on the road, and his spare, unfurnished-looking bungalow suggests a man who either can't be bothered with accumulating things or isn't home



BONNIE SCHIFFMAN/ONYX

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enough to assemble the necessities. But he has held on to a few mementos of his remarkable rise in Hollywood, most notably—and lest he forget from whence he came—the first item of clothing he bought on his initial visit to L.A.: an oafish shirt, as garishly colored as the BBC test card, that hangs in his closet beside his purloined knight's outfit from *Excalibur*. It's the sort of reminder a guy might need: that being all too human is what makes him good at playing heart-throbs and noblemen.

KAREN MOLINE

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