

Fearlessly outspoken and super fun
Susan Sarandon



It's not just Susan Sarandon's wide-eyed looks and languid voice that distinguish her from all the other actors of her generation. Her range of roles, from ingénue Janet Weiss in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to cinema's most stylish lesbian vampire ever in *The Hunger*, has marked her out as fearless and brilliant in equal measure.

Famously outspoken about her political convictions, Susan says she hopes Barack Obama will be more courageous in his second term. She has to be the youngest 66-year-old out there, having just become the owner of a successful string of ping-pong bars called Spin and continuing to light up the screen, most recently as Richard Gere's wife in *Arbitrage* and as a male Indian scientist in the soon-to-open *Cloud Atlas*.

Text by Jina Khayyer
Portraits by Juergen Teller
Styling by Jodie Barnes

the
gentlewoman



Jina: Someone told me they'd seen you riding on the New York subway not long ago. Was it really you?

Susan: Quite possibly. Last night I went to Brooklyn on the subway, to visit the Brooklyn art museum. I walk a lot, too, and have a bike. One of my favourite things about New York is going down the High Line at odd times of the day, or just walking the streets. That's the problem with

living in LA – the business of being in your car all the time. If you run into somebody you weren't expecting to see, it means you've had a car accident, you know? If you're in New York, you bump into people, you see an exhibit, you hear a funny story, you talk to someone you would never talk to.

People must recognise you.

Yeah, but they're fine. They smile, and you know... New Yorkers are very cool. They don't start screaming. They're like, "Hey, how are you doing? I like your work. You're looking good," or whatever. If they do scream, they're usually from Argentina or Brazil or Italy or one of the more emotional countries.

There must be moments when you'd like to be invisible.

It was more difficult when the kids were little. But you're in this business because you want to reach people, and it's great to know that you do. The problem with making films is that you never have any sense of what's going on with the audience. I always say the difference between theatre and film is the difference between making love and masturbation. When you make a film, you just have to get one little moment right, practically by yourself; in theatre, you have a relationship, for better or worse, with the audience. You can see their faces, they're crying, they stand up at the end.

You seem to be embracing a wide range of roles at very different scales now, both on the stage and on the screen.

Now my kids have gone their own way, I've been able to do seven films in two years! I can go in and work with a new director every time – something I've never done before – diversifying my stock, expanding my portfolio. So if some of my stocks succeed and

some don't, then it's not a problem. That was a choice that I didn't consciously make but has kind of happened. There was *Bernard and Doris* in 2006, for example – a two-hander with me and Ralph Fiennes – that was divine. And I love the Duplass brothers, who are kind of the indie darlings, who did *Jeff Who Lives at Home* in 2011 – I play the mother who's trying to figure out what life means and looking for signs in the universe. Last year I just went to Berlin again to work with the Wachowskis on *Cloud Atlas* – in it, I play a number of characters across time, including a male Indian scientist. Those were all tiny parts, and it was so much fun. And of course, I just did *Arbitrage* with Richard Gere. I'm like a temp secretary who goes in when there's a problem for a few weeks, and then I leave.

What determines whether or not you take on a role?

It depends. I think it's probably easier for women who have had families to age and go through the career change, because their identity's not all tied up in who they were in their 20s or 30s as movie stars. Sometimes it's harder for guys who used to be the leading man and are now character actors; they might feel it's like a step down. I've discovered that working with interesting people and challenging myself is something I can do in two weeks; it doesn't have to be two months.

It also sounds a lot less disruptive than camping out on a film set for months.

I've lived all over North America making movies – Vancouver, Toronto, St Louis, Montreal. A lot of the big ones were made in the summer vacation, to accommodate the children's schooling when they were little. *The Client*, *Thelma & Louise* – I'm trying to think of which other ones – were all in the summer on location.

Your kids were travelling with you? You must be incredibly organised.

The other day I found a list I'd written for the person at the accommodation I was moving into somewhere with the kids. It said to take out all glass furniture, put tape around the edges of everything, how many boxes of diapers, so much soya milk... I would just move with boxes of toys they hadn't played with much, and then I would donate them when I left, leaving them behind. I had a whole system. It wasn't until I was in Winnipeg with Richard Gere and Jennifer

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Lopez doing *Shall We Dance* in 2003 that I was without a nanny or kids. The boys were in camp – I have two sons, Jack and Miles – and I think my daughter, Eva, was in Italy visiting her father. I didn't know what to do with myself. Normally I'd be finding the children's museum, making schedules, and shopping or planning the meals, and suddenly I was just by myself on location. I got so self-conscious, because I had so much time all of sudden. Not that Winnipeg was the most fabulous city to find your identity in.

And now your time is completely your own?

Sort of. All the kids grew up in New York, and they love it here. I've had my apartment in Chelsea for 21 years, and they still regard it as their home. My youngest, Miles, is still at school, at Brown, but he DJs, so he comes back every weekend to do gigs. Then my next up is 22; he graduated from the University of Southern California and is making films. He's not quite sure which coast he wants to be on, so he's still got his room.

“I believe every film is a political film; some reinforce the status quo, some challenge it.”

Did you have both boys with Tim Robbins?

Yes, both Jack and Miles. I found out I was pregnant with Miles when I was doing *Lorenzo's Oil*. I already had a two-year-old and a six-year-old, and Tim was doing *Bob Roberts*, and it was clear that I could not be home for dinner. That's when we came upon the formula that he would live in a hotel and I would be in the house with the kids.

So he's off in a hotel with 24-hour room service and no children crying. Who took care of you?

Nobody. I don't know how I did it, now I think about it. Especially when the nanny went away and didn't come back. I would walk my daughter to school across the street – we were living in a neighbourhood that had a school – and then I would take my son to work with me. But I started bleeding, so I couldn't go up the stairs, and someone else, like my driver, would have to help me at night. I really wasn't very good at planning help. You get in those situations and you're so overloaded. I only got an

assistant, like, 15 years ago. And then one of them stole from me.

That must have been horrible.

Yeah, because your assistant becomes like a part of the family and knows everything. At one point I had a publicist, and at another I had a nanny, and then eventually I got a housekeeper, but that support was often in spurts. To have one child and not have any help is fine, but when you're outnumbered and working, it reaches a whole other dynamic. I don't know how my mother did it – she had nine kids. Though she says now that she wishes she'd enjoyed her kids the way I enjoyed mine.

Was it the experience of being a working mother that got you interested in politics?

No, it was the times. When I was at college studying drama in DC in the '60s, we saw the city burn. Kennedy was assassinated. And coming of age in that time, you saw what was going on. It wasn't like now,

where the corporate media really regulates what you see. The journalists were allowed right in to report what was happening in Vietnam; the government will never make that mistake again. Then there were the civil rights marches in the South – you saw pictures of dogs and hoses, and if you had half a brain and any empathy at all you were in the street yourself. I got arrested a few times. We were probably less informed than the Occupy Wall Street kids are now, but it made perfect sense, you know? But the drugs – the drugs were something that were more inclusive. There's this amazing thing that starts to happen when people take hallucinogens; that was a big, big factor. I wasn't a huge fan of LSD. But back then – peyote, mushrooms, mescaline, weed, sure. That has to help your framing of things. But I'm very sensitive to drugs; my body isn't strong enough to get addicted. I don't have the constitution for chemicals.

Would you describe yourself as an activist now?

If you have empathy and if you have any imagination





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– which hopefully as an actor you do – then the next step is becoming an activist. Because how can you *not* do something? If you’re connected to the media, then how could you not take advantage of that to disseminate information that other people aren’t getting, to represent people who don’t have a voice? It’s not that I have all the answers, but once you stand out from the crowd and say, “I’m listening,” they will get you information. Sometimes it’s difficult information that people don’t want to hear, and that’s where you get in trouble. But it’s not because I loved being on the steps of the library with 30 microphones; that’s always been really daunting to me. I don’t know who that person is.

Is cinema a good political medium?

I believe every film is a political film, because every one tells you what it means to be a woman, what’s funny, what the justice system is, or whatever. Some films reinforce the status quo and some films challenge it. The ones that challenge it are called political

because everything I do I see as a love story. It wasn’t just about the death penalty, it was really about these two people – a nun falling in love with a man on death row. Tim did a brilliant job of writing and directing it.

When did you two split up?

In 2009. Leaving a long-term relationship at that point was very scary, and very thrilling. I still don’t understand where I’m going to end up, but I’m trying not to focus on that.

Did you enjoy being married? How old were you when you married your first husband, Chris Sarandon?

I was really young, just 20, and I never thought it would be forever – we did it just to be able to live together. He made me feel safe, and he was the first man I slept with. But I never really wanted to get married; I didn’t have the yearning for possessions. I didn’t dream about having a house and a husband and kids, which at that time was unusual.

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films; the ones that reinforce it are called comedies. But if you see *The Nutty Professor* with Eddie Murphy, that’s incredibly political. The whole audience roots for this girl to be with this fat guy. I think you have to take seriously what you’re saying in a film, and I think you have to know that you’re affecting people. I took my kids to see *The Truman Show*, and afterwards we had the most interesting conversations about what you would exchange to be safe. What freedoms would you give up to be safe? What is friendship? And so on. That’s what’s interesting to me – giving people something to talk about at breakfast the next day or have an argument over. It shouldn’t tell you what to think, but it can give you the opportunity to see the world differently.

Like Dead Man Walking, which went on to change the discussion about the death penalty.

Yes. I’d met Sister Helen Prejean previously and read her book and was determined to make a film about her. What I loved about it was the love story,

I have to ask you about Louis Malle. How did you get together with him?

He cast me in *Pretty Baby* in 1977. I’d already done some major roles, but when I landed that one, I kept thinking: He thinks he’s cast someone else. That movie was a really interesting experience because of Sven Nykvist’s cinematography and the way he worked, and also because Louis had cast a lot of people who weren’t actors – local girls he’d found in Mardi Gras whose work ethic was very different. They didn’t really understand how tedious it is to make a movie. Then there was Brooke Shields, who was in a very volatile situation. Her mum ended up in jail, and they asked me to take custody of Brooke for the duration of the film. Then Sven Nykvist’s son killed himself and he had to leave and come back. And Brooke kept disappearing. That’s when I fell in love with Louis.

How long were you together?

Three and a half, four years. He was much older, and I had never lived in France. I started living in

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Paris; that was a very interesting experience. I loved his two kids. And of course we did *Atlantic City* together also.

Is there anybody now?

I'm still a searcher; you're in trouble when you stop looking. I have a tattoo on my wrist, *ANDAND*, that stands for "A New Dawn, a New Day", meaning that every day you get to see things afresh. If you've made a mistake or someone's hurt you or whatever, you can get another shot. So I just throw it out to the universe, and it always answers. I'm always surprised. How would I build a ping-pong business, for example? I mean, like, seriously – did I think I would do that? No.

So, let's talk about Spin, the ping-pong club you've set up with Jonathan Bricklin. How did it happen?

Well, I like the idea of ping-pong because it cuts across the idea of age and gender and body type. It's the one sport where little girls can beat great big guys, and a sport you can play until you die, until your 90s – there are people competing into their 100s. So it's very easy for me to get behind it. It's not expensive; you don't get hurt. We've provided tables and instructors to 40 schools in New York that had no phys ed programmes. It's perfect for urban areas where kids don't have space in their schools. And it's inexpensive.

Are you making it cool again?

It's never been cool, has it? But we're trying to make it cool to be geeky. I see Spin as a kind of glamorous, fun rec room. We've got 17 courts at East 23rd Street, and Todd Oldham, who is a friend of mine and has built a lot of things, helped with some of the design, doing things to scale, getting art and sourcing things inexpensively.

It sounds like great fun!

Yeah, totally! I'm very happy. I would like to keep upgrading, and we've learned through trial and error how to create a larger profit margin, because since this project is the first of its kind, the computer systems and everything about the way to run it had to be started from scratch. Now we've got that pretty much down, and we've got a club in Toronto and Milwaukee. We opened one with André Balazs in the Standard downtown in LA last December, and we'll probably open more with him in Berlin and Miami. We've had

requests from a lot of places, and we've done contracts with Chicago. Portland would be great, San Francisco...

Are you turning into a businesswoman?

I'm not going to be the franchise person, and it's still very mom-and-pop, though we're at the point where we have to decide whether to go bigger or not. Jonathan came up with a great idea of a social network where you can challenge people and have ladders. You can pick up a game with anyone, anywhere, and wager an amount of money, and there'll be 10 or 15 charities that I've suggested, that I know are legitimate, who'll get the winnings. You'll play against someone for \$10 or \$100 or whatever, and the loser pays that money to the charity of the winner's choice.

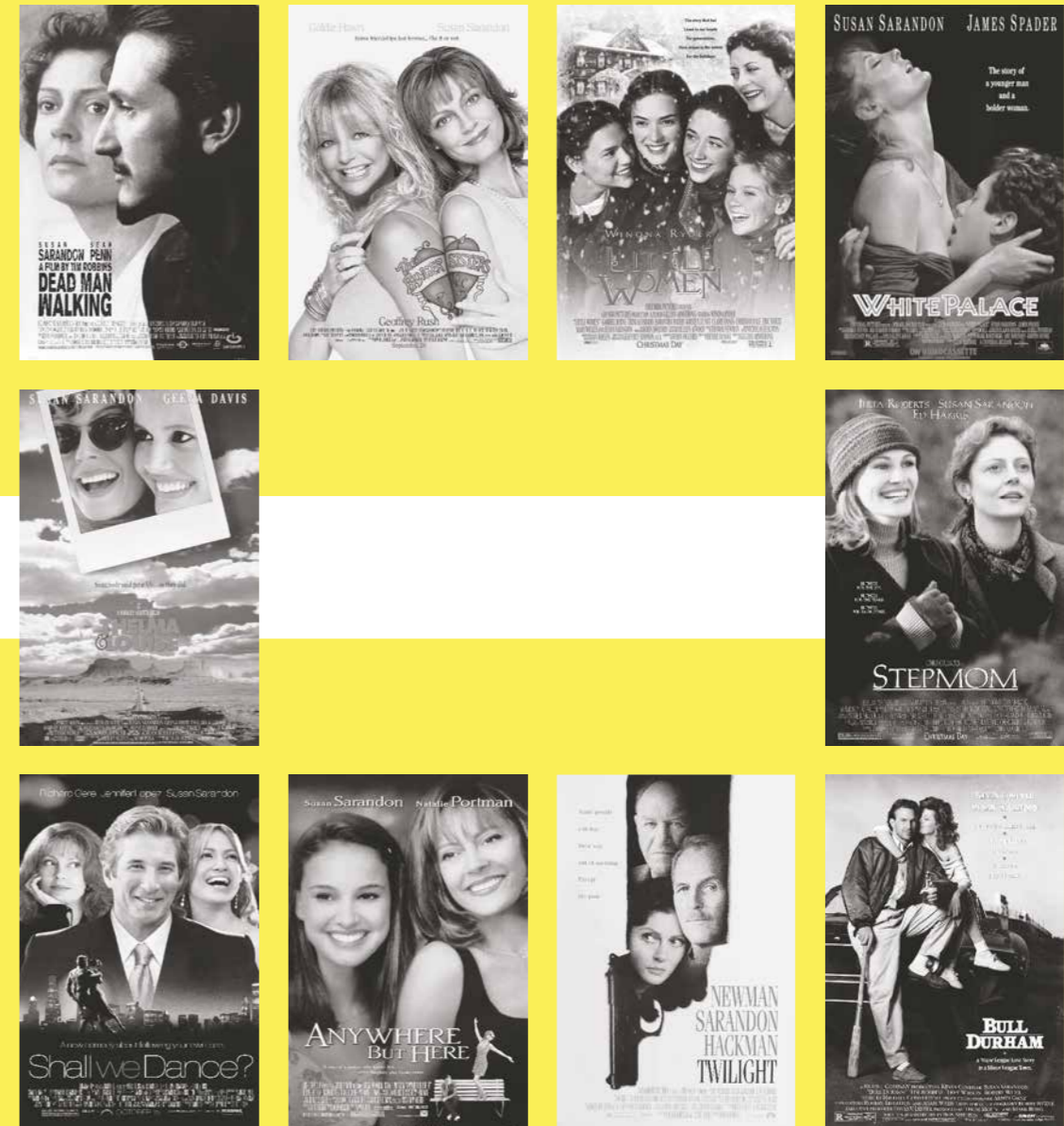
So, when can we expect your memoirs? If any!

I've seriously thought about telling people to shoot me if I ever decide to write anything.

Green-fingered journalist Jina Khayyer plans to add a lavender bush and a Japanese maple tree to her collection of plants at home in Paris this spring. She'll also be throwing dinner parties every Thursday to show them off, where she'll serve her saffron chicken with a pomegranate salad and crispy rice.

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Hair: Keith Carpenter. Make-up: Genevieve Herr. Styling assistance: Timothy Chernyaev. Production: George Miscamble at REP Limited.



Susan has appeared in 75 films. Some of the roles she has played, clockwise from top left, include a nun, an ex-groupie, a mother, a waitress, a divorced mother, a baseball groupie, a movie star, a delusional mother, a suspicious housewife and a disaffected housewife.