

# TRU

# NORTH

## Still hungry after all these years, actor and icon Donald Sutherland is crossing borders and generations By Kim Izzo

**I** KISSED DONALD SUTHERLAND. By accident. Or, rather, by miscalculation. You see, he had already rolled up his pant leg and shown me the scar from his knee replacement, so I took that to mean we had bonded. When I reached for his hand to say goodbye, he held onto mine and leaned toward me. And as any woman within inches of a handsome movie star's face, naturally I leaned forward, too, and instinctually kissed his cheek. Only after my lips brushed his snow-white beard (full and soft like a lamb) did I realize he wasn't leaning in to kiss me goodbye – he was asking me a question. "How tall are you?"

The horror came on as fast as the colour rushed to my cheeks, yet as though on some sort of kissing auto-pilot, I continued the process I'd begun and leaned in to buss his other cheek while stammering, "5-10 but in these heels about 6-1." My embarrassment was made all the more unbearable by his long-time publicist standing in the room watching. I choose to believe she didn't see a thing.

As I left the Beverly Hills Montage Hotel that August morning, I decided not to be too hard on myself. After all, who could blame me? The man is Donald Sutherland. Canadian icon. Movie star. Outspoken activist. And at 79, his 6-foot-4 frame is as lanky as ever, his blue eyes as bright and soulful as when he first burst onto the scene in Robert Aldrich's 1967 Second World War drama *The Dirty Dozen*. It wasn't his first on-screen part but arguably it was the role that brought the young actor from New Brunswick to the Hollywood table and granted him access to other seminal parts of the era of discontent such as *MASH*, *Kelly's Heroes* and *Klute* (where he began a passionate affair with co-star Jane Fonda).

From there, his filmography runs the gamut from *Animal House* to *Ordinary People*, *JFK*

to *Pride & Prejudice* to his latest star turn as President Snow in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Indeed, a quick scan of his IMDB entry and you're hard-pressed to find a year since 1962 that Sutherland hasn't appeared in a film or television show – and many years there are several entries. He's a busy guy.

*The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1* is out this month. Sutherland portrays President Coriolanus Snow who rules with ruthless vigour. In case you haven't read the YA novels or watched the first two films, *The Hunger Games* is set in a dystopian world called Panem, a country consisting of the wealthy Capitol and 12 districts in varying states of poverty. Every year, children are chosen to participate in a compulsory annual televised death match called The Hunger Games. The main foil to his rule is Katniss Everdeen, a teenage girl who originally volunteered for the Games to save her sister and, as the third film opens, she is at the forefront of a rebellion.

Every great movie needs an even greater villain, but to create such a character requires a certain level of finesse and humanity. "It's easy to judge a character if that character happens to be the antagonist of a story. Donald doesn't do that and didn't do that with President Snow," explains Francis Lawrence, the director of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay, Parts 1 and 2*. "He loves the character. He filled him with humanity, conviction and many other layers that bring a rich and honest life to the character. Donald also has a gravity, intelligence and elegance that no one else can match."

To wit, when I refer to President Snow as a malevolent dictator, Sutherland very quickly corrects me. "He is not! He's old and he has a society that he's maintained and, for the most part, except for 23 kids [each year] he's done very well. The rest of them have suffered but not as badly really as the poor in this country for which this is an allegory for," he explains emphatically. "We kill loads of people in this country. We have loads of war criminals in this country from George Bush to Lyndon Johnson. So I don't think he's malevolent. In fact, the person who he would have succeeded him would be Katniss Everdeen because that's the person that he recognizes himself in. She delights him and gives him such joy, and he ►

relishes it. He tries to control her but he can't."

Katniss Everdeen, as anyone who doesn't live in a cave knows, is played by Oscar-winner Jennifer Lawrence who Sutherland calls "a bloody genius. She's Joan of Arc."

Suffice to say, Sutherland knows how to recognize talent in young artists. He is the father of five, after all: Kiefer and Rachel, from his former marriage to Canadian actress Shirley Douglas, and three sons, Rossif, Angus and Roeg, with his wife, Francine Racette. Rossif has been making a splash in Canadian independent films, most recently in *Big Muddy*, a neo-noir flick that premiered at TIFF in September. And, of course, Kiefer is familiar to many, most indelibly for his role as Jack Bauer on *24*.

Sutherland and Kiefer first began discussing their desire to make a film together 25 years ago, and now that dream has become a reality. While they have appeared on screen before in *Max Dugan* and *A Time to Kill*, this latest picture marks the first time they have starred in a leading role opposite one another. *John Henry Clayton* is a Western shot on location in Alberta and helmed by *24* director, Canadian Jon Cassar. The story idea was Kiefer's, and he commissioned a screenplay from writer Brad Mirman. Before shooting began, father and son reworked the script to make it their own.

"It had our blood in it. Our morality. Our commitment to each other. Our respect and love for each other," explains Sutherland passionately. "It was the two of us and, finally, it was him. He actually edited it. It's his vision. He created a film that I'm thrilled with. He had it in his hands and he did a wonderful job, and I'm very proud to be a part of it."

The high praise is mutual. When I spoke to Kiefer on the phone to discuss the project, he was equally passionate. "He's one of the most prolific actors in the English language. He's made something like 120 films," says Kiefer proudly. "There are very few people you can have a conversation with and ask what was it like to work with Bertolucci? And what was it like to work with Fellini? And what was it like to work with Nicholas Roeg? There's not a lot of people who can put those three names out there, and Donald is one of them."

Respect for Sutherland's work ethic and

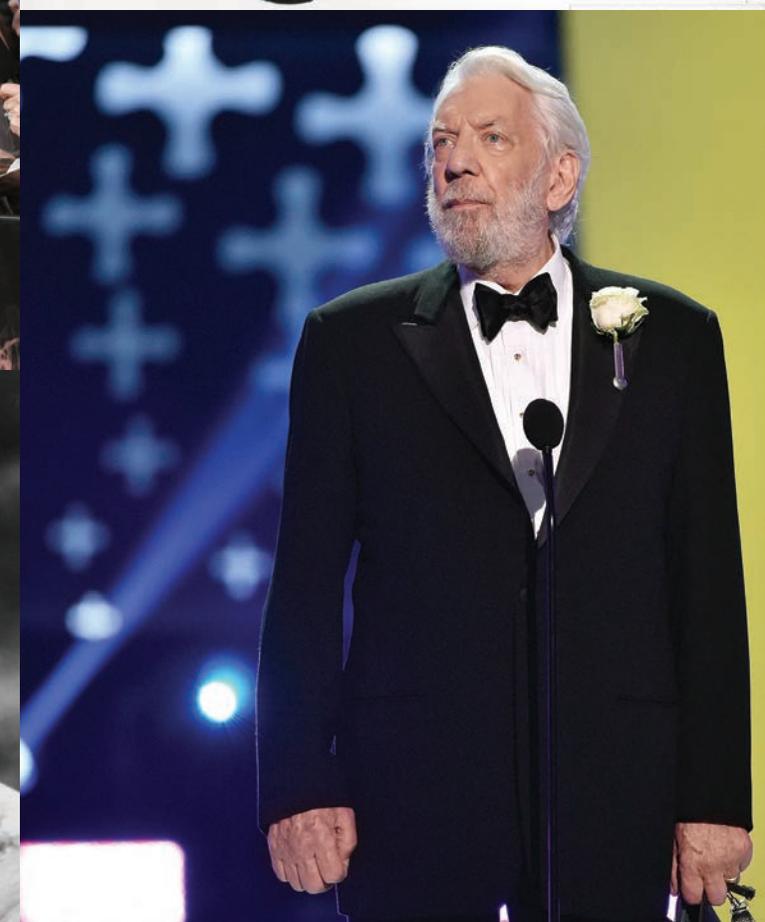
technique goes beyond family. Francis Lawrence writes in an email about one day in Atlanta while filming *Mockingjay* where a massive outdoor shoot was disrupted by bad weather so the crew had to improvise. "We were going to have to cancel the rest of the day. Our only other option was to change locations midday and shoot a really important interior scene with Donald and Jen," he explains. "Trying to move everyone to the stage was going to be hard enough but, to make things worse, that interior scene wasn't scheduled to be shot for several days. We were concerned about giving Donald, who had the bulk of the dialogue, zero time to prepare. But Donald, the total professional that he is, showed up with every single one of his lines already memorized and absolutely nailed it."

It's that kind of technique and skill that inspires actors of all ages, although working with a star of Sutherland's stature would be enough to send most actors into new heights of stage fright. I asked Kiefer if he was a little in awe of working with his father? "There are a couple of moments in the film where he and I really do go after each other. And I felt that dynamically as actors, we would really be able to handle that and, having said all of that grand stuff, when I went to go do it with him, I was scared to death! I don't think I've ever been that nervous as an actor in my life!" he says with a laugh. "I can't deny that I'm working with this force of nature of an actor, and a couple of times I'd kind of fall out of a scene because I was watching what he was doing. It ended up being the greatest experience I've had as an actor. It was that special. It hit a level of intimacy for me as an actor that I haven't experienced before."

These are sentiments that are echoed by Sutherland when I ask what the experience of working with his son was like. "It was like butter melting. Like ballroom dancing. Like goodnight kisses. That easy. That smooth. That organic. That passionate," says Sutherland. When I read his father's words to Kiefer, he laughs warmly. "Oh, he's much more articulate than I am. That's very sweet. That's wonderful."

It tickles Sutherland to know that his reach spans the generations and has found an entirely new fan base with the tweens ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY, LAWRENCE SCHILLER/POLARIS COMMUNICATIONS/GETTY IMAGES (SUTHERLAND & GOULD); BAXTER/ABACAUSA.COM/NEWS.COM (LAWRENCE & SUTHERLAND); WARNER BROS. (KLUTE); KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES (TEEN CHOICE); GO RENTMEESTER/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION (WITH SON KIEFER); JOHN SHEARER/WIREIMAGE (THE HUNGER GAMES)



Opposite clockwise from top: Sutherland and Elliott Gould in *MASH*; with Jennifer Lawrence at *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* premiere; the poster from *Klute*; accepting the Choice Movie Villain award at the Teen Choice Awards; a portrait with eldest son, Kiefer, in 1970; with young fans at a *Hunger Games* premiere

“I have a Canadian passport. Everytime I go through they ask me why I don’t have an American passport, and I say because we have a different sense of humour”

and teens that storm the multiplex to see Jennifer Lawrence kick ass. Take his being voted Choice Movie Villain at this year’s Teen Choice Awards. He walked on stage wearing a white rose and carrying a leather satchel and spoke to the cheering throngs of teenagers in that familiar plush velvet voice, “You named me the most villainous?” he teased. “My wife, I have been married for 42 years,” he pauses for effect. “My wife asked me to tell you that she agreed with you.” The crowd erupts into laughter, but Sutherland isn’t done. “I, on the other hand, do not. I think on the contrary that I am very nice, sweet-tempered and generous. So generous that I’ve brought you souvenirs from Panem. They’re berries. I wouldn’t eat them if I were you.”

The last bit is in reference to the poisonous berries in the films. I ask him how he feels about having such young admirers.

“Somebody told me that they were speaking to teenagers and tweens and were talking about the character [President Snow] and me and they pointed out, ‘He’s the father of Kiefer,’ and the kids asked, ‘Who’s that?’ Those are the kind of splits that happen.”

But for Sutherland, who came of age as a man and an actor during the tumultuous late ’60s and ’70s, a time rife with political protests and activism, reaching the young generation means far more than merely extending his already enormous fame footprint.

“It’s wonderful,” he begins. “I just wish they’d go see *Klute*, but they never will. It’s my hope that these films [*The Hunger Games*] will instil in them a need for ...” Sutherland hesitates, like he’s not sure he wants to get into it, but then he continues. “Well, you can’t say revolution. I said revolution once and I’ve been dealing with it ever since. But I’d like them to recognize that the government they have, the government in Canada, Stephen Harper, doesn’t serve the interests of the people. They serve the interests of profit, and that’s what these films are about. And if that can get into their [young people’s] heads and into their hearts, if they can deal with that passionately, then it would be the best gift that anyone could give me.”

His fans of all ages can get another dose of Sutherland when the animated film he produced and co-wrote, *Pirate’s Passage*, a com-

ing-of-age story of a boy set in Nova Scotia in 1952, airs on CBC on Jan. 4, 2015. Based on William Gilkerson’s Governor General’s Award-winning novel, Sutherland also voices the role of Captain Johnson. The film attracted other Canadian talent, including Colm Feore, Carrie Anne Moss and Paul Gross as well as his son Rossif.

“The story relates to me and my own childhood and me and the CBC and W.O. Mitchell and *Jake & the Kid* ... kind of what I did in 1952,” Sutherland explains. “So I took it to the CBC, and they agreed to do it as an animated film.”

He takes out his smartphone to show me several of the lush, eye-catching stills from the film by Pip Animation Services in Ottawa.

In case it isn’t obvious yet, Sutherland is proudly Canadian. He was one of eight national icons who carried the Olympic flag into BC Place Stadium during the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. He also appeared in a commercial for the games and was spotted at the hockey events with his wife. Although the couple own a home in Paris, most of the year they live in Quebec. “I have a Canadian passport,” he says proudly. “I do not have an American passport. Every time I go through they ask me why don’t I have an American passport, and I say because we have a different sense of humour.”

An example: when I ask him about the dreaded R word – retirement – he quips with characteristic wit, “Yes, I think of retirement all the time. I do. In acting, it’s called dying. It’s obviously a concern.”

Turning serious, he says what keeps him working is passion and love of the work. He quotes the late Russian-American Nobel Prize-winning poet laureate Joseph Brodsky, who said during a commencement speech in 1988: “‘Try to stay passionate. Leave your cool to the constellation. Passion alone is the remedy against boredom.’ When I read that, it became my mantra,” Sutherland explains. “It embodies what happens with me and work, and there’s nothing more joyful. Acting is a passionate endeavour, the pursuit of truth of a character.”

Well, let’s hope my mistaken peck on his cheeks was just such a remedy. ☐

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