

# A Change of Pace

**Suave leading man Pierce Brosnan talks about the pain of his childhood and how it fed into playing a role with “a resonance of emotions” in the new, based-on-fact Evelyn**

by Laurel DiGangi

Pierce Brosnan was, as he tells it, “a bit apprehensive about the whole area of opening my mouth and singing.” But as Desmond Doyle, the Irish working-class father in *Evelyn*, Brosnan sets aside his Bond persona to belt out a few Irish folk songs while nursing a Guinness. In fact, *Evelyn* gives Brosnan the opportunity to explore the full range of un-Bond-like character traits. As opposed to the cool, suave 007, this Brosnan cries, gets sloppy drunk, uses poor judgment — and desperately needs assistance from the fashion police. “I come from humble origins,” says Brosnan. “Desmond Doyle is closer to me than anything I’ve played.”

The true-life events upon which *Evelyn* is based concern Doyle’s struggle, in 1950s Ireland, to regain custody of his three children, Evelyn, Maurice and Dermot. After Doyle’s wife abandons him, the Catholic Church and the Irish courts, on the strength of an obscure law — place his children in orphanages. Doyle battles both Church and government to reunite his family, enlisting emotional support from new girlfriend Bernadette (Julianna Margulies), and legal muscle from lawyers played by Stephen Rea, Aidan Quinn and Alan Bates. Doyle’s struggle becomes even more crucial when he discovers his daughter Evelyn has been the victim of a physical beating at the orphanage where she’s living.

There’s much in the story of *Evelyn* that resonates for the Irish-born, Catholic-raised Brosnan. Like Doyle, a personal tragedy left Brosnan struggling with single fatherhood (Brosnan’s first wife, Cassandra Harris died in 1991 of ovarian cancer). Brosnan was also abandoned by a parent—in his case his birth father—at an early age, and suffered brutality at the hands of the Christian Brothers, who educated him. Yet Brosnan still has much respect for

the “truly religious, compassionate” members of the clergy whom he knew as a child. “I have fond memories of being an altar boy and being part of the congregation,” says Brosnan. “In a sense it was the first performance I gave.”

As a project, *Evelyn* came to Brosnan six years ago, soon after he formed his production



Brosnan as devoted father Desmond Doyle in *Evelyn*, based on a true story of social reform

company, Irish DreamTime. After reading the script, Brosnan sent it to director Bruce Beresford (*Driving Miss Daisy*), whom he worked with 12 years ago on *Mister Johnson*. “Once we had Bruce on board,” says Brosnan, “we were off to the races with a real filmmaker and a text that we had faith in.”

Brosnan vacillated between wanting to play Doyle and wanting to play his attorney Nick (a part that later went to Quinn). “It wasn’t until we had a couple of play readings in Santa Monica and I sat down with the actors and heard myself say the lines that I began to fall in love with the part,” says Brosnan.

Recently, *Entertainment Today* sat down with Brosnan to talk about playing a role with “a resonance of emotions” versus what he might do if he were really James Bond for a day. The conversation is excerpted below.

*Entertainment Today: What did you enjoy the most about working on Evelyn, both as an actor and as a producer?*

**Pierce Brosnan:** I loved every moment of it. I loved every aspect of the film. It was the most... it was the happiest film I ever worked on. It was just a joy to do. I loved playing the role. I loved working with Bruce Beresford again. When he said ‘yes’ to it, it gave me the greatest confidence to really invest heart and soul into the part. I never realized that until he said yes to it. When he said yes it gave me the confidence to show a part of myself that audiences haven’t seen before, to show a part of myself that I haven’t played before.

*ET: Was that a challenge to you as an actor?*

**PB:** It was a challenge only in the sense that I hadn’t done it in some time. I had done this kind of work when I was a younger actor starting out in drama school, when I was involved in theater. I did two plays — one was with Tennessee Williams, the other was with Zef-

relli. Both plays required a certain emotional commitment to character. I haven’t done it since those days. I came to America 21 years ago and fell into this suave, sophisticated, “I’m just a handsome guy” kind of “dude role.” That won’t look too good in print, but you know what I’m saying...

*ET: I know exactly what you’re saying...*

**PB:** You know, then playing Bond was beginning to cement one’s whole entity... there’s got to be more as an actor, as a human being. So I enjoyed it enormously... The story kind of came about, the making of it... on the heels of Sept. 11, a painful time in the whole world and for everyone involved in *Evelyn*. We felt some kind of sanctuary filming in Ireland, making a film about faith and courage, family and love.

**“I remember being beaten by sticks and chairs, being kicked. I saw children standing at the blackboard with shit running between their legs because they were smacked when they couldn’t get their sums right. There were other men who had a sense of faith and Christianity, love and compassion, but within that tiny environment, the Irish Church ruled.” — Brosnan, on his childhood**



Brosnan as the dashing



*ET: As an actor, how do you get from playing a role of this very invulnerable character to playing one who's extremely vulnerable?*

**PB:** There's an enormous shift within yourself, and ultimately there is only yourself to feed both characters, and hopefully a text that supports you into that transformation of the character, and hopefully a director like Bruce Beresford to support you there.

*ET: Did you have to draw upon a lot of your childhood experiences?*

**PB:** Of course I had a sense memory there. In many of the scenes... being brought up in Ireland, being brought up in a small country community, being brought up Catholic, being brought up by a father who abandons you. So there [were] many emblems there to use.

*ET: And your mistreatment as a child by the Christian Brothers. Surely that plays into your feelings...*

**PB:** Oh yeah. A fire rises in my gullet every time I see her [Sophie Vavasseur, the actor who plays 10-year-old Evelyn] being smacked by the nun. I remember being beaten by sticks and chairs, being kicked. I saw children standing at the blackboard with shit running between their legs because they were smacked when they



charismatic Bond

couldn't get their sums right. So those were the few men that were there. There were other men who had a sense of faith and Christianity, love and compassion, but within that tiny, tiny environment, the Irish Church ruled.

*ET: Do you have any take on why there was so much brutality?*

**PB:** Oh, control of the masses. Isn't that what they say? Keep them down, keep them under their thumbs. People need love and being married to the Church isn't the right way. Living in those cloistered communities. Not all men, not all women, can deal with it.

*ET: You've produced three films now. Do you have any aspirations to direct?*

**PB:** I do. I think about directing. But then I sit on a set and I look at someone like Bruce do it, and oh my God I could never do that — the artistry and the simplicity and the economy which he tells his stories. Or [to watch] someone like Lee Tamahori do *Die Another Day*, when I see the sheer volume of information that he has to sift through...

*ET: [Do you have] a dream role as an actor?*

**PB:** No. But the role I've just had... I'd like to play along these themes.

*ET: Now the obligatory Bond questions. If you could be James Bond for a day, what would you do?*

**PB:** Get bin Laden and take him out. Of course that's easier said than done.

*ET: And if you could add any fantasy 007 feature to your Aston Martin, what would it be?*

**PB:** I wouldn't mind being able to levitate, a little hovercraft thing going and just turbo jet across the 101.