

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Until their latest collaboration, *By The Sea*, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie hadn't worked together on screen since they first consciously coupled. So, why now?

BY JANE CORNWELL



BRAD PITT IS sitting in the middle of a vast white room in a London hotel, backlit by blazing sunshine. “Hey, how you doing?” drawls one of the most recognisable men in the world. I’ve just been watching him on screen in another room, mooching about a seaside resort in 1970s France, frowning, chain smoking and getting slapped across the chops by a tearful leading lady played by his wife, Angelina Jolie. “Beautiful day,” he marvels.

As he turns his handsome 51-year-old profile towards the hotel’s sash windows, I notice there’s a longish strand of someone else’s hair stuck in the hinge of Pitt’s blue-tinted glasses. For the next few minutes, as he chats thoughtfully about *By the Sea*, which was written and directed by Jolie, I fight the urge to reach over and pluck it off.

“This is a very subtle film to do with that second stage of a relationship when the honeymoon is well worn,” says Pitt. “The point that either makes or breaks a couple.” He’s wearing a blue beret, black sweatshirt, jeans, trainers. His eyes, behind his specs, are bluer than blue. “That destroys them or strengthens them.”

UNSINKABLE DREAMBOAT:
Brad Pitt at 51: father of six, Oscar-winning producer and humanitarian.

CLOSE UP:
(right) Brad Pitt
and wife Angelina
Jolie playing
a struggling
married couple in
By The Sea.



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Pitt’s recent films have included the zombie apocalypse blockbuster *World War Z* and last year’s World War II action thriller *Fury*, for which he spent four months preparing for the lead role as the buzz-cut army sergeant Wardaddy.

Since then, he has also been here in England to film scenes for *War Machine*, a satirical comedy directed by Australia’s own David Michôd. You can’t really blame Pitt for wanting to a) make “a quiet film about grief and the banality of life” and b) spend some quality time with his family.

He has previously spoken of the way he and Jolie “hopscotch” when it comes to filmmaking. A movie for him, then a movie for her, so that each gets to hang out with the other, often with their six home-schooled children in tow. But it was during the last months of 2013 and early 2014 – when Pitt was in the UK making *Fury* and Jolie was in Australia directing *Unbroken*, her Oscar-bait portrayal of former Olympic track star and POW survivor Louis Zamperini – that the arrangement became unworkable.

“The kids would come back and forth,” Pitt told *GQ* magazine. “Some would be there [in Australia] and some would be with me. And we’d be flying back to see each other for, you know, just a day. Twenty-four hours R&R. We really felt it.”

So they decided to go off and explore something together. “We wanted to make something small and autonomous and free from any outside influence or pressures of result,” he says. “Angie sat down on the bed next to me, started at page one and wrote it in a matter of weeks. I’m surprised at how it’s turned out – not at the storytelling, but because it’s very European in its cadence and beautifully so.” A smile. “I kind of adore it, really.”

An item ever since they co-starred rather magnificently in the high-grossing

2005 action-comedy *Mr & Mrs Smith*, the Pitts had only just got hitched themselves – in July 2014, at a chateau in the south of France – when they rounded up their brood and decamped to a cove in Gozo, Malta (standing in for France) to make *By the Sea* during what was effectively their honeymoon. “A few friends asked if we were crazy,” Jolie has said.

“We lived in some houses on a hill, and the kids would come down onto the set and run around,” says Pitt in his relaxed yet measured way. “It was very much a family affair.”

PERHAPS INEVITABLY, news of the film’s subject matter has seen an untidy corner of the internet piled high with rumours about the demise of the Hollywood activist-hydra known as Brangelina. “I’d be pulling out parts of him that have an aggression towards me, or [the parts] when you’re frustrated with the other – it was very heavy,” Jolie has also said, which has only fed the gossip.

By the Sea (out November 26) is being tipped for an Oscar. Does it bother Pitt that some people will persist in confusing art and life?

“What do you mean?” The strand of hair quivers. “I’ve played a serial killer,” he sighs, “but I’ve never killed anyone, you know?”

Indeed, since leaving the hills and lakes of Springfield, Missouri in 1987 for the bright lights of Los Angeles, this Baptist-raised son of a trucking company owner and a school counsellor has run the gamut as an actor. There was his career-launching turn as a toy-boy/cowboy hitchhiker in 1991’s *Thelma & Louise*, followed two years later by the homicide recidivist in *Kalifornia*. He has since played everyone from a vampire and a Greek god to a bare-knuckled fighter, wizened old man and Death. He’s been a detective, soldier, gangster and, as in Terrence Malick’s passion project *The Tree of Life*, an authoritarian father.

Pitt has also become an influential and visionary film producer through his company Plan B Entertainment: responsible for such Oscar-winners as *The Departed* (2006) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), as well as commercial successes including *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and the baseball comedy-drama *Moneyball* (2011). Then there’s the edgy neo-noir likes of 2012’s *Killing Them Softly* by New Zealand-born Australian director Andrew Dominik.

1987



PITT DROPS OUT of college in Missouri to pursue acting in LA, where his pre-fame jobs include chauffeuring dial-a-strippers and dressing up in a chicken suit to spruik fast-food chain El Pollo Loco. Appears, uncredited, as "Guy at Beach with Drink" in the film *Hunk*.

1991

BREAKS THROUGH in *Thelma & Louise* as J.D., a thief on parole who, while shirtless in a hotel room, shows off his hold-up technique using Thelma's hair-dryer as a gun. "That scene, right there, is the beginning of Brad Pitt! Bingo!" director Ridley Scott told *Vanity Fair* in 2011.



SEPARATES FROM

his first wife, Jennifer Aniston, who describes him as missing "a sensitivity chip" when he appears shortly afterwards with Angelina Jolie in a 60-page fashion spread in *W* magazine, entitled "Domestic Bliss".



2005

2006



JOLIE AND PITT'S first biological child, Shiloh, is born. The couple establishes the Jolie-Pitt Foundation to aid humanitarian causes around the world. (A year later, Pitt launches the Make It Right Foundation to build sustainable, affordable housing in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina). Stars with Cate Blanchett in *Babel*.

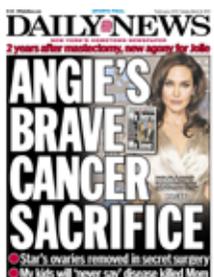
2014

12 YEARS A SLAVE

is named Best Film at the Academy Awards, delivering co-producer Pitt his first Oscar following three nominations for acting: in 1995 for *12 Monkeys*, 2008 for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and 2011 for *Moneyball*.



2015



SUPPORTS HIS WIFE Angelina Jolie through ovary-removal surgery to reduce her risk of cancer. Said Jolie in October: "This wasn't something where I was going to feel less of a woman, because my husband wasn't going to let that happen."

“It’s all a fight against injustice.”



GOOD-HEARTED GLAMOUR: Jolie and Pitt have donated millions of dollars to charity.

"I'm working with another Aussie right now on *War Machine*," Pitt offers. "David [Michôd] is a friend of Andrew Dominik's, and I was a fan of *Animal Kingdom* [Michôd's celebrated family-crime-drama from 2010]. So we started a conversation about what David wanted to do and we've adapted this book by Michael Hastings called *The Operators*, which is the General McChrystal account."

General Stanley McChrystal, played by Pitt, was the commanding "rock star" general of multinational forces in Afghanistan who was fired by Barack Obama in 2010 after mocking senior US administration officials in a *Rolling Stone* story by Hastings (who was killed in a car crash two years ago, aged 33). A satirical comedy rather than a serious mainstream biopic – which allegedly caused the film's original backers to pull out – *War Machine* will open in cinemas next year courtesy of Netflix, which will also stream the film online.

"We're changing all the names and taking events from the book to tell the story of the politics, the Pentagon, the media and everything that co-mingles in making decisions to send young men to war," Pitt says. "It's comedy until it's tragedy, if you know what I mean. Anyway, David is doing something really special here."

PITT LIKES WORKING with Australians, just as he relished his time in Queensland, mainly the Gold Coast, where he and Jolie rented the Coomera property owned by former motorcycle racing champion Mick Doohan. "Angie was filming her film [*Unbroken*] and I was going back and forth. It's beautiful down there. The people felt quite similar to where I grew up. There's an honesty, heartiness, vigour for life. Comfort in the outdoors. Great barbecues."

He smiles and claps his hands together, and I seize my chance. You've got something stuck on your glasses, I say, before removing the stray hair and showing it to him.

Had Pitt been here with his great mate George Clooney, whom he has said is "as funny as shit", he might have cracked a joke about this. For despite admitting to being "quiet by nature", Pitt has a gift for comedy, evidenced in roles including the bug-eyed asylum patient in 1995's *12 Monkeys*, the goofy personal trainer in *Burn After Reading* (2008) and as Rusty Ryan, Clooney's flashy sidekick in the *Ocean's* films. Not to mention his recent hilarious cameos on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*,

break-dancing up car-park walls, yo-delling across New York rooftops.

"Oh," is all he says now, blinking. "It's a hair."

We move on to other topics. Music: lately he's been revisiting Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and other familiar stuff that makes him happy. Contemporary art: "I have a great interest in painters and sculptors working today, I'm kind of jones on them," he says. Fame: the older he gets, the more the pressures associated with being one of the world's most recognisable men, and one half of one of the world's most recognisable couples, have eased off.

"People overall are rather kind and respectful." He picks up his smartphone, which is glinting on the table between us. "It's just these damn camera phones," he adds with a sharp laugh.

Still, celebrity cachet helps when it comes to his humanitarian causes, which span everything from New Orleans social housing and AIDS research to donations to Médecins Sans Frontières and UN refugee agencies through the Jolie-Pitt Foundation, the charitable organisation the couple established in 2006.

"It's simple," Pitt says, when asked how he chooses his battles. "Injustice. You've just gotta get in there. It's all a fight against injustice, and if you look at anything I do and especially what Angie does – and it's a full-time job for her – it will all be under that title."

Your wife is pretty amazing, I say. Pitt smiles, and brings things neatly back to *By the Sea*.

"I was very impressed with how she directed this film," he says. "It's a difficult one to craft because it's so subtle. But Angie is really decisive, with good instincts. I've worked with some great directors, and in the end I just want to know I'm in good hands."

He flashes a grin. "And I absolutely felt that with my wife." ■