

# 'Hollywood is like Ancient Egypt: it's all about power'

From *Alien* to *Avatar*, SIGOURNEY WEAVER has starred in some of cinema's most iconic films – and her new blockbuster *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is her most 'epic' yet. *Elaine Lipworth* finds out how the 65-year-old actress has stayed at the top of her game for almost four decades

PHOTOGRAPHS Karen Collins

**S**IGOURNEY WEAVER is singing the praises of Bill Nighy. 'I think he is adorable,' says the actress. 'I read an interview with him in which he said, "I'm working on living each day without anticipation of tomorrow and without regret for yesterday" and I thought that was wonderful and exciting.'

Over macarons and tea at a café in New York, Sigourney and I are discussing the nature of happiness and her admiration for the British actor's philosophical approach to life. Sigourney – the star of blockbusters ranging from *Alien* to *Avatar* – is also focusing on living in the moment. She celebrated her 65th birthday in October and has an unusually positive perspective on getting older: 'I say bring it on. What other choice do you have? Pretend it's not happening? I do not feel 65 and I don't miss being 20. There are a lot of benefits to being older, so many things to enjoy about life: my garden, each beautiful sunrise.'

Almost six feet tall, Sigourney is an imposing presence. She looks terrific in black Comme des Garçons trousers and a Dries Van Noten top. Her reddish hair is cut in a neck-length bob and there are lines around her sparkling brown eyes, though she doesn't judge those who do have plastic surgery.

'Whatever is good for your morale, do it,' says the actress, who is married to theatre and film director Jim Simpson; they have one child, Charlotte, 24. 'My tip is to wash your face before you go to bed and put on moisturiser. I try to beat that into my daughter. I have been in the sun and I haven't been as good as I could have been with my skin, but I don't want someone to laser my face. I'm always afraid of having anything done.'

Sigourney is a New Yorker. She grew up in the city with her brother Trojan, her English actress mother Elizabeth Inglis and her father, TV executive Pat Weaver, who was president of the US TV network NBC. Starting out in the theatre, Sigourney's first major film was Ridley Scott's *Alien* in 1979. A Hollywood trailblazer; as Ellen Ripley she became the first female action star, soaring on to the A-list. With a slew of hit films including *Ghostbusters*, she has received three Oscar nominations for James Cameron's *Aliens*, *Glenn in the Mist* and *Working Girl* – the latter two both in the same year (1989).

She last worked with Ridley Scott on *127 Hours*. *Conquest of Paradise* and is reunited with the British director again for the Biblical epic *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, starring Christian Bale as Moses. Joel Edgerton plays the Pharaoh Ramses and Sigourney plays his mother, the calculating Queen Tuya.

An enthusiastic Anglophile ('I feel completely at home in England'), the actress is currently in Manchester where she is filming new movie *A Monster Calls* – based on the children's book by ➤

◀ Patrick Ness – with Liam Neeson and Felicity Jones. Next year she will be in Los Angeles to film three *Avatar* sequels with James Cameron.

Sigourney's co-stars have included some of Hollywood's most talented leading men: Harrison Ford, Bill Murray and Sam Worthington. So far she hasn't worked with Bill Nighty. 'I'd love to work with him! Put that as the title of this article. I want to be in the present, without fearing the future or regretting the past...with Bill!'

Here the actress opens up about marriage, motherhood, gardening and the Beatles...

**I had a privileged upbringing but I wasn't spoiled.** I got to grow up in New York City and travel all over the world with my parents. We had a little apartment in France. There was no kitchen and no bathroom, we slept on camp beds – it was fun. My parents were very close. My father was

home with a girl I had just met. A limo came around the corner towards us and it was the Beatles. They waved and slowed down; they were so close to us. It was incredible. I remember lying down for 48 hours just going over it in my mind.

**John was my favourite Beatle.** I liked him for the most terrible reason. He used to make sandwiches for the VIP lounge at an airport and he once said he would put his shoe in the bread after he made them. I thought, 'Oh my God, he's such a revolutionary.' Now I think that is disgusting, but at the time I thought he was a hero, because we were all about the generation gap.

**I've made a lot of movies, but this one, *Exodus*, was the first time I went, 'Wow, I'm really in an epic.'** Everyone knows the story. It is about the exodus of the Jews from Egypt with the plagues and the Red Sea, so it was a perfect canvas for Ridley to go to town on. I loved his historical films *Gladiator* and *Kingdom of Heaven*. This is such a juicy script and the set at Pinewood Studios was like being in another world. There were cheetahs, cobras, eagles and gods made of Styrofoam.

**Ridley is like a kid.** He hasn't changed over the years and it's such a pleasure to work with him again. He is filled with excitement about what he's doing and it's great to see him in action again at the age of who-knows-what. He's working with six cameras, extras, chariots and God knows what else. He's such a pro. We're very fond of each other and I think he's a lovely, dear man.

**Christian Bale is charming and funny.** He made jokes about the wigs they tried to put on him. He could have been a lot of different Mosesses, let's just put it that way. In the end he didn't wear a wig. Christian is fearless and incredibly versatile. He's very serious but he doesn't take himself seriously. Joel [Edgerton] is an amazing, complex actor and a sweetheart. Before the shoot he gave all of us little Egyptian stamps as gifts.

**Tuya is a tough cookie.** Unlike some of the famous queens before her, she did not have a lot of power and that was a pretty difficult environment for her. Her whole focus is on her son Ramses. She is trying to make sure he can survive all the threats he is facing, including the popularity of Moses, which is undeniable. She is fascinating and I was able to go to the British Museum and do a little research on her.

**Tuya is the queen of Egypt and her own son won't even listen to her.** I often play people who aren't listened to! I am not listened to in my next

film *A Monster Calls* either. Your children don't listen to you.

**Hollywood is not unlike Ancient Egypt** – a world which is all about power and how to navigate it. You are always asking yourself: 'How am I doing?' Similarly, every day Tuya has to take the temperature of the court and make sure the pharaoh wants her son to be in power, so it's about constantly keeping lots of plates in the air. I don't live in Hollywood but I can imagine that years ago in the studio system, someone had to choose between Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, which star to put in the new movie that's going to be a runaway hit. And it was probably like the pharaoh having many queens! Everyone was wondering: 'Which queen is he going to take?'

**Ridley wanted me to look like a million bucks with lots of gold and snake armbands.** The costume designer Janty Yates is wonderful and the costumes were exquisite, handmade in Italy. I had a pheasant headdress, a peacock headdress and a headdress made from real scarab beetles.

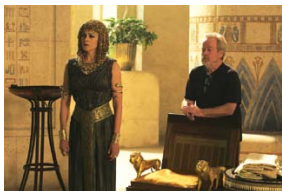
**I don't think you can love science and love studying the universe and not believe in God.** But I don't believe there's an old man with a beard sitting up there. I hope it's a beautiful woman! I am not a regular churchgoer but I certainly think that there is a spark of something higher in each of us and that it's not a bad idea to try to connect with that spark.

**I play a grandmother who is not very grandmotherly in my next film *A Monster Calls*.** It is about a boy whose mother has cancer. He has dreams in which he summons a yew tree monster who takes him on amazing journeys. Liam Neeson is playing the monster and Felicity Jones plays the boy's mother.

**I like to live in the moment.** I walked by a young guy who was on his phone the other day; he was with his kids. I was looking at the sky, which was getting really stormy. It was twilight and it was such an exciting sky. But the father had forgotten to look up because he was so busy with his kids. Maybe you have to be older to realise how fast life goes by.

**I hope Hillary Clinton becomes America's next president.** Oh, please, yes, finally! I think she's incredible and a great leader and we need her. Women are hopefully going to run the world one of these days and then everything will be better.

**I would move to London in a second.** There's a great energy and I love to stroll in the parks. In ►



Sigourney with director Ridley Scott on the set of *Exodus: Gods and Kings*

merciful, charming and funny. My mother was strict and very disciplined. I don't know that I knew her as well as I might have liked. I think English people are a bit hard to get to know... I don't know if that's a terrible generalisation but they're private: 'Pull your socks up and get on with it!'

**My mother was a great role model.** She was very athletic; she played tennis and golf and could have done anything. She could have climbed Mount Everest if she'd set her mind to it. I think she sacrificed her career for her family. My father was so successful and busy, and in those days the women were the power behind the men.

**I saw the Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl in LA 50 years ago.** I had just moved to California so I didn't know anyone and I went to the concert by myself. I was surrounded by girls hysterically screaming 'Paul' and 'George'. I love the Beatles but I was not crying. The best part was walking



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◀ Hyde Park you can feel that you are miles and miles away from London; you almost expect to see cows. I would love to go to the Lake District and visit Beatrix Potter's house. I'd be so happy living in England, but my husband's from a Scottish family and I am not sure he feels the same way about England as I do. Not that he's anti-English, so I hope that some day we'll be able to stay there for months at a time.

#### **I'm half-English and the other half of me is tourist with a capital T.**

I love British food – tea and biscuits. I went to Fortnum & Mason and found a yummy box of shortbread in a tartan tin with a big stag on it for a friend [in New York] because she's British. She had me over for tea and I got to eat some of those delicious biscuits.

#### **The most interesting thing I've ever done is to have a family.**

I became a mother quite late – I guess I was focused on my career and didn't think about it much. Then you meet the right person and it's like, 'Oh, we should have a family.' I did have to spend a lot of time away from home working. I missed some stuff when my daughter was growing up and I'll never get it back. I think it's a very difficult thing to balance work and being a mother: I only have one child and the years go by very quickly. When my daughter went away to college it was hard, but I don't sit around thinking about it. It is so exciting that she is off in the world. That's what they're supposed to be doing. We're really close and I feel so lucky.

**My daughter has no interest whatsoever in acting – which I think is great.** It's a tough business. I don't know how I made it, I really don't. There are people as talented as I am who are still unknown. My daughter is a writer. She has written a children's book and a couple of radio plays and is also working in a divine jewellery store in New York. I think it's great to be young and doing different things.

**I hope I get to have grandchildren while I can still function.** I don't want to be 90! But these kids today are so busy living their lives and I can't even imagine my daughter settling down.

**My husband and I have just celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary.** We were in upstate



New York [at their house] for two months and I feel as though we celebrated all summer. We meant to give a big party, a square dance, because that's how we met. I gave a Halloween square dance when I started filming *Ghostbusters*, he came to it and that's when we started going out. So we were going to do it again, but it takes a lot of energy to organise a big party. These days couples are so busy, there's no time to spend together so it was just nice for us to loaf around and enjoy nature.

#### **I don't know why our marriage works**

except that I think it's because my husband was born in Hawaii and has a lot of 'aloha' in him. I don't know how to translate that! And I'm an intense New Yorker; I just think we're really lucky.

#### **We have record players in**

**almost every room.** Because of that, people give us their old records. [Someone at] a local radio station gave us 1,500 classical records that were going mouldy in his garage so we're playing a lot of Purcell and Rachmaninoff and Schumann. My perfect Sunday is reading the paper and listening to music with my husband. My husband has always been a big jazz guy and now he's fallen in love with classical music. It is so different to hear it played on a record player. The sound goes into your stomach in a different way.

**I can't tell you anything about *Avatar* except that Jim [Cameron] is doing three films simultaneously and I don't know how!** One is hard enough, but if anyone can do it, he can. I have a wonderful character in all three. I think people love *Avatar* because it's a primal story that takes you to a fascinating, wild other world and it is about themes that are timely and relevant – the destruction of the environment and oppression of native people – but it's also a great love story.

**We try to be together as a family at Christmas.** It's always fun to get our own Christmas tree and chop it down. It's usually a pretty straggly looking tree but if you put enough stuff on it, it looks good. I cook recipes that my mother would have cooked – roast leg of lamb and turkey and all those English things. ■ **Exodus: Gods and Kings** will be in cinemas from *Boxing Day*

## **So Sigourney**

**MOTTO** It's my mother's: onwards and upwards. She was always saying that.

**MOST TREASURED POSSESSION** Bracelets that my daughter gave me for my birthday, which are made of braided fabric. She picked them out for me from the shop where she's working. I'm thrilled to be wearing a little bit of my beautiful daughter on my arm.

**ON YOUR BEDSIDE TABLE** I have a little Nook electronic book. I've just finished reading *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn.

**HOUSE RULES** Turn off the lights and make sure that the dog's water dish is filled. I wish I could say I made people take off their shoes when they walk in the door – that would be a good one.

**FAVOURITE TV PROGRAMME** I love English shows such as *Cash in the Attic* and *Escape to the Country*.

**DREAM ROLE** I'm always looking for comedies and love stories. But I'm sent grisly things.

**DO YOU BELIEVE IN SOULMATES?** Well, if my husband is not my soulmate, I don't know who is. But I think marriage takes work and I'm sort of astonished that we've been together for 30 years. It feels like three – it's gone by like that.

**GOALS** I work with the New York Botanical Garden and I'd like to do botanical photography and take a course in botanical drawing.