

The Movie Issue

The New York Times Magazine

NOVEMBER 13, 2005 / SECTION 6

Tom Bissell:

What Iraq Documentaries Reveal, and Don't

Susan Dominus:

An Alt-Culture U.S.O.

Charles McGrath:

The Narnia Conflicts

Simon Norfolk:

Scenes From an Iraq-War Back Lot

Matt Bai:

Beverly Hills Liberals and Their Bush

Peter de Jonge:

Coaching an Actor to Kill

Lynn Hirschberg:

Peter Sarsgaard Gets His Gun

A.O. Scott:

George Clooney, *Engagé* for Our Time



Hollywood Goes to War!

PLUS: MANOHLA DARGIS ON EUROPE AND US, ROB WALKER ON CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSE FLICKS AND AMY ADAMS DRESSES FOR EVERY SORT OF WARTIME ROLE.

The Empathist

How did Peter Sarsgaard learn to play the role of a Marine sharpshooter? The way he learns every role: by deftly inhabiting the mind-set of the unfamiliar.

By Lynn Hirschberg

PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLLIER SCHORR



Illustration by Marc Alary



Fatigues

Sarsgaard on the set of "Jarhead" in April, after five months of filming, much of it in the desert without "haircuts, clothes, cars, girlfriends, lives."

PERHAPS it's because he is an only child or maybe it's because he is Catholic or it could just be that he allows the complications of his mind to flourish, but Peter Sarsgaard always looks as if he has a secret. There's something in his almond-shaped eyes — a mix of withheld information, curiosity and latent volatility. When he first appears on-screen in "Jarhead," the new movie about the 1991 Gulf War, he seems, as he usually does in his films, more complex and intriguing than his surroundings. In the movie, he portrays a Marine sharpshooter with a shadowy past, and though the audience is not told up front about his character's history, you immediately sense something dark and conflicted about him. There's a charged stillness about Sarsgaard's presence; even before he speaks, he communicates a kind of subterranean emotional range that commands interest.

"It's his eyes," explains Sam Mendes, the director of "Jarhead," who cast Sarsgaard after seeing him in "Kinsey," in which he played a bisexual assistant to the sex researcher Alfred Kinsey. "Peter is anything but simple, but he also has that immediate accessibility. When I sent him the script for 'Jarhead,' it was an idea of a part rather than a real part. Peter created the character from signposts, and I'm sure he's done that in movie after movie. As an actor, he understands his power very well — he knows how to scintillate with mystery."

"Jarhead," which is based on the best-selling memoir by the former marine Anthony Swofford, was an exhausting movie to make. Much of the film was shot in the Mexican desert, 90 minutes south of Mexicali, where temperatures sometimes reached 105 degrees. The entire shoot lasted five months. "Everyone's sick of everyone," Sarsgaard told me on a Sunday afternoon in April, during the final week of filming. We had met at the King's Road Cafe in Hollywood, where we sat outside, although the weather was surprisingly chilly. "It's nice not to be hot," he went on as he smoked an American Spirit cigarette. His head was shaved, covered in regulation fuzz, and he was wearing old jeans and an untucked work shirt. A temporary tattoo that he had chosen for his character — it depicted the angel Gabriel holding Satan in a headlock — had faded, and Sarsgaard looked worn out.

"I've injured my knee," he explained. "And my ribs. This movie is an endurance test. It's hard to complain because I'm an actor and not an actual soldier. I want to be very careful and respect the fact that there's really a war going on. Unlike most of the actors in the film, I know this world. I was born on an Air Force base in Illinois, my uncle was killed in Vietnam and I have a cousin in a covert branch of the military who told me that he's using the same weapon, an M-203, that I'm using in 'Jarhead.'" Sarsgaard took a sip of coffee. "It's a strange mind-set to find yourself in," he continued. "In the film, I play a sniper. And I kept thinking about the phrase 'Shoot through to the back of the head.' When you're in that job, that act of violence becomes a form of art rather than something as brutal as killing. You can exist in that land and then you don't think, 'Oh, my God, I'm killing someone.'" He took another sip of coffee. "The fantasy of who a marine thinks he is is what I am interested in," he said. "Most of us present ourselves as who we wish we were. And the conflict between that idea and reality is always fascinating."

SARSGAARD'S GIFT for empathy, even with unsavory characters, has defined his career. His breakthrough role, in 1999, was as a sexy deadbeat who rapes and murders Teena Brandon in "Boys Don't Cry," and he remains attracted to parts and scenes that most actors would insist on tempering. In "Kinsey," Sarsgaard, while naked, passionately kissed Liam Neeson; in "Garden State," he played a perpetually stoned gravedigger; and in the just-released "The Dying Gaul," he portrays a vengeful screenwriter who enters into a poison-

ous relationship with the wife of his bisexual lover. "Peter is brave, but not in a look-at-me way," says Craig Lucas, the director of "The Dying Gaul." "He doesn't look for the audience to validate him. And those kind of actors — those kind of people — are few and far between."

"Jarhead" presented its own challenges, because it offers a relatively untroubled view of war. The film deals with a monthlong military operation — very different from the current one in Iraq — in which the battles were mostly fought from the air and relatively few American soldiers were killed. As a result, the movie feels distinctly pro-military and soft on the idea of actual fighting. We all know the ending, and everyone survives. For a war, it's happy. What remains is a meditation on why men want to fight — why going to war seems to promise them a kind of salvation. "When you talk about war and movies," Mendes says, "the cliché is that the politics are specific and the soldiers are universal. That was our goal here."

The movie follows the soldier Swofford, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, as he makes his way through training in the United States and then, in Iraq, awaits a battle that never happens. The action is minimal; there are no combat scenes. The author of the screenplay, William Broyles Jr., a former marine who fought in Vietnam, once wrote an essay for Esquire titled "Why Men Love War," and the movie reinforces his thesis: in an increasingly murky world, the idea of victory is clear and comforting. Mendes carefully steers his characters away from the politics of the war and toward the personal. "When the place that the soldiers are fighting is nowhere, in the middle of the desert, and the battle never really materializes," Mendes explains, "then the space encourages you to divorce yourself from everything you know. That's an interesting world for a movie. In that environment, men become undiluted versions of themselves. You've sent a group of men to war and then you take away the war. That creates a kind of madness."

The actors in "Jarhead" were asked to be on the set at all times, and as a result they began to see themselves as marines. "There's a kind of person who is drawn to the selfless service of the military," Sarsgaard told me, "and it is the opposite sort of person who becomes an actor. In the desert, we were stripped of our haircuts, clothes, cars, girlfriends, lives. For months. If you put any man, no matter how sophisticated, in that environment, he will become more overtly macho. It's a way to create some individuality. Which means, there was a lot of tension." Sarsgaard said he "went crazy in the desert," but added that "that seemed right for the film. Our movie is filled with a lot of unconscious truths about war. If you want to see the actual war, it's on CNN every night. This movie, wisely, is not that. 'Jarhead' is about the dream war that exists in the minds of the soldiers."

Before filming began, Sarsgaard, who is 34, decided to live with Jake Gyllenhaal. Gyllenhaal, who is 10 years younger than Sarsgaard, is the brother of Sarsgaard's longtime girlfriend, the actress Maggie Gyllenhaal. On one of their dates, she showed Sarsgaard "Secretary," a film in which she played a young woman who has a sadomasochistic relationship with her boss. In turn, Sarsgaard screened for her "The Center of the World," in which he plays a man who has graphically depicted sex with a prostitute in Las Vegas. They've been together ever since.

"I figured that if I couldn't be around my girlfriend, I would settle for her brother," Sarsgaard said, and smiled. "So, for the first part of the shoot, Jake and I lived together, we shared a car to work every day. Then, when the production moved to Mexico, I was going to stay in the room next door to him at the hotel, but enough was enough. The idea was to simulate the military experience: what happens if you're forced to be with someone every minute of the day and night. And we fought. We'd have a fight and then we'd still have to be together. For a while, I would just wear headphones. All the time. That lasted for 10 days."

Eventually, order was restored — Jake Gyllenhaal and Sarsgaard are now

Lynn Hirschberg, editor at large for the magazine, writes frequently about the movies.

Acting, Sarsgaard says, is all games and details.

But then, especially with this movie, there's another psychological level: what do live rounds do to your head?

friends again. During the filming, Mendes knew about the growing hostility between the two actors but decided not to intervene because it suited the dynamic of the film. "You can see the tension between Jake and Peter in the movie," he says. "There's a subtext in their interactions that is never explained, but it adds weight."

Sarsgaard, over coffee with me, agreed. "Another secret revealed," he joked, as he lighted another cigarette. "To a point, acting is all games and details: what it means to carry yourself a certain way, whether I keep my dog tags in my boots or I have them tattooed on my ribs. But then, especially with this movie, there's another psychological level: what do live rounds do to your head? We ask soldiers to go out and perform the impossible and then get upset when they mess it up. That's why you come out of 'Jarhead' empathizing with the Marines. I believe we should never have gone to Iraq, but we have to support these guys."

As a kid, Sarsgaard did not aspire to be an actor. "I wanted to play soccer," he said recently at a coffee shop near his apartment in the West Village. It was late October and Sarsgaard had grown a thick beard. ("The beard makes it more difficult for others to read your thoughts," he explained. "You can hide a little.") The weather outside was stormy, and Sarsgaard ordered tea. "My father was an engineer in the Air Force," he continued, "and then he worked for Monsanto and I.B.M. and we lived in 12 different places over the course of my childhood. When we lived in St. Louis, they had German soccer on TV all the time, and I started playing." When Sarsgaard was 7, he started taking ballet lessons after he heard that some football players studied ballet to help their game. The dance studio, which included dancers of all ages and proclivities, exposed Sarsgaard, at an early age, to a more bohemian style of life. "That was the first time I smelled pot," he remembered. "I felt like I was part of the adult world. When you're an only child, you are encouraged to grow up quickly. And those ballet classes also started me daydreaming about women."

Sarsgaard attended an all-boy Jesuit high school in Connecticut, where he became interested in movies. "The priests would screen films after school," he recalled. "Some really racy Italian cinema like Fellini, actually. I think that was their only excitement." Sarsgaard, who was brought up a Catholic, still has faith. "I like the death-cult aspect of Catholicism," he said, half-jokingly. "Every religion is interested in death, but Catholicism takes it to a particularly high level. I mean, you can't miss Easter Sunday. Everybody's born, but rising from the dead — nobody else did that." He laughed. "Seriously, in Catholicism," he went on, "you're supposed to love your enemy. That really impressed me as a kid, and it has helped me as an actor. I don't believe there are bad people. Just people who do bad things. The way that I view the characters I play is part of my religious upbringing. To abandon curiosity in all personalities, good or bad, is to give up hope in humanity. Like somebody who is mumbling on the street — I'm always curious if his words make any sense. I'm interested in lost souls. They possess another sort of secret." Sarsgaard paused, then added: "And sex is better being Catholic. A little conflict makes everything more interesting."

After suffering several bad concussions while playing soccer, Sarsgaard

decided to become a writer and later became interested in theater. At Bard College, where he went for two years before transferring to Washington University in St. Louis in 1991, he met a fellow student named Malerie Marder, who became a close friend. "Peter did not have the typical profile of an actor," Marder, who is now a photographer, said when I phoned her at her home in Los Angeles. "Neither of us were hip. But as strong as his personality is, he could be like sand and fill different shapes. There was a part of him that was shy, but also a part that was out there. It was cathartic for Peter to act."

While at Washington University, Sarsgaard began performing in plays in a satellite offshoot of New York's Actors Studio that was located in St. Louis. "I got a lot of adulation in college," he told me, "and without that I probably would not have become an actor. The fear factor would have been too large." In 1993, after graduation, he moved to New York, and he and Marder became a couple. He acted in some plays and a movie, but his career was stalled, and when Marder decided to attend graduate school in photography at Yale, Sarsgaard moved with her to New Haven in 1996. He became part of her work. "I photographed my mother and Peter both naked," Marder told me. "There were three separate photos. Of course, it was a little weird to have them be naked together, but that was the object. Peter and I always liked things that created tension. He was attracted to the idea of turning up the volume on anything."

Sarsgaard is nonchalant about the nude photos. "The camera made it seem like something sexual, but it wasn't," he said. "I really knew her mother well — she was like a mother to me." Sarsgaard halted, perhaps realizing that this explanation made Marder's photos seem only more peculiar. "When you're the subject of a photograph, you are disempowered," he said. "In a movie, we're all equal. I create what is being shot. But those photos taught me something — I got very comfortable being naked."

In general, Sarsgaard seems at ease with his sexuality. "The press still asks me what it's like to kiss a man," he said, referring to his embrace with Liam Neeson in "Kinsey." "Most actors are afraid of kissing a man because they're afraid they will become excited. Kissing is kissing — it's always intimate. But during 'Kinsey,' I liked to talk about kissing Liam because I knew that the press was entertained. I knew the most prurient parts would get audiences in to see the film."

In 1995, Sarsgaard appeared in his first feature, "Dead Man Walking," a movie about a nun who befriends a convicted murderer, played by Sean Penn. "In my first scene in any movie ever," Sarsgaard said, "Sean Penn dragged me out to a swamp, threw me down in the mud, raped and killed me and my girlfriend. We did the scene, we took a shower, put on new clothes and did the scene again. All night long. And that was my big break." Penn had taken Sarsgaard and the actress who played his girlfriend out the night before. "It was a sort of I'm-going-to-rape-you-and-we-should-get-to-know-one-another meal," Sarsgaard remembered. "I thought that was nice, and I've tried to extend the same courtesy to my co-stars, especially if I'm going to kill or rape them."

After Marder graduated from Yale, Sarsgaard moved with her to Los Angeles, but when they broke up, a year later, he moved back to New York. "I wasn't interested in getting stuck in any one thing, like a TV series," he said. "I never went out for commercials or long-running plays. I always knew what I didn't want and I kept my costs down. I sublet, I sold outdoor equipment, I took care of cats." Sarsgaard lingered on that

for a moment. Then he said: "I've had success, but nothing really changed. I still don't want the house in Malibu. It's important to not have too big a lifestyle because it compromises your decisions."

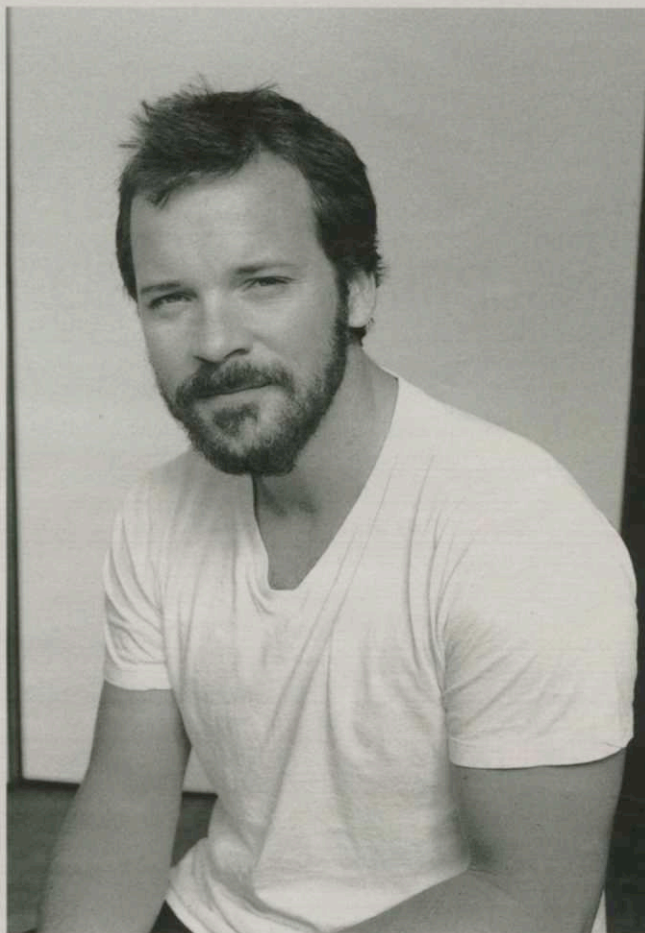
A FEW weeks ago, Sarsgaard, just back from the Toronto International Film Festival, where he was promoting "Flightplan," a big-budget thriller in which he stars with Jodie Foster, invited me for a ride around Manhattan, just for the pleasure of driving. "They kept asking me about why I've deserted independent film in Toronto," Sarsgaard said as he got behind the wheel of his green 1992 Saab convertible. But the truth, he explained to me, was that "I just wanted to do something completely different." He pushed a Jimi Hendrix CD into the stereo and drove out of a parking garage, heading uptown. "All I can say is that the parts in 'Jarhead' and 'Flightplan' interested me," he added, "and it is nice to make films that my family in Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas can actually see."

While he doesn't have a definite career strategy, Sarsgaard says he would like to expand his range of films to connect with a broader audience. "But I actually don't know if my relatives will see 'Jarhead,'" he said. "They will immediately think it's a lefty movie because it doesn't have Mel Gibson in it. 'Jarhead' is supportive of the experience of being a marine, but still, there's no way to show war as a good thing. I hope my relatives will see that." Sarsgaard fell silent. "Jimi Hendrix was pro-soldier," he said, finally. "He served, you know."

Sarsgaard has not worked in seven months and said he wasn't sure what he will do next. "Every part has its challenges, and I don't want to repeat myself," he said. He often speaks about the characters he has played as if they are people he knows — distant friends from another time. "Like the guy in 'Boys Don't Cry,'" he said. "He's the guy that drives 100 miles an hour but everyone lets him drive anyway. I've been in that car with that guy." Or Charles Lane, the New Republic editor whom Sarsgaard played in "Shattered Glass," who helped uncover the fabrications of the journalist Stephen Glass: "Charles Lane felt a little bad about himself, a little ignored, and he was jealous, but knew in his heart that he was better than Stephen Glass," who was played by Hayden Christensen. "I think there was a parallel in my relationship with Hayden: everybody knew who he was, and nobody knew who I was."

Sarsgaard has this ability to pull back and study the landscape from a distance. Unlike most actors who are eager to be leading men, he seems more interested in finding something intimidating. "I am dying to do a straight-out comedy," he said as we sat in crosstown traffic. "But the very good comedies go to people who have proven that they can do very good comedies. I don't want to do a second-tier comedy just to prove that I can do a comedy. To try to make a comedic scene work that is not working is brutal. Sometimes I'll see Vince Vaughn in a movie where I've read the script and I don't know how he's done it. They sent me 'Mr. and Mrs. Smith,' and the part he eventually played in that film was zero on the page and when I saw the movie, he was my favorite thing in the film."

In all likelihood, Sarsgaard's next project, an independent film that does not yet have financing, will be with Craig Lucas, the director of "The Dying Gaul." Sarsgaard and Maggie Gyllenhaal will star as actors who fall in love while rehearsing a play. Sarsgaard's character is foreign. "I am going to Croatia in December to work on the part," he said. "I'm hoping to perfect my Bosnian accent." In "The Dying Gaul," Sarsgaard said, he felt like he was playing a character based on Lucas, the director,



Civvies Sarsgaard's hidden-in-plain-sight look, New York, October. The off-screen anonymity he treasures may be threatened after "Jarhead."

whom Sarsgaard describes as "elitist in a fun way." Because Sarsgaard's character, a screenwriter, is also "elitist," when he sells his soul by compromising his artistic vision, "the conflict seems bigger," Sarsgaard said. "Anyone can sell their soul," he continued. "Even people with integrity. There's always that temptation to guard against. Which is why it's best to keep as much as possible hidden."

You could get a sense that, in some part, Sarsgaard is protecting himself from the career momentum he has gained from the box-office success of "Flightplan," which has grossed more than \$80 million to date, and the high profile prestige of "Jarhead" — movies that may threaten his relative anonymity, which he treasures.

He parked his car near 57th Street and Avenue of the Americas. "I try to live in a bubble," he said. "I try to concentrate on the actual work. And I think I could do any part if I was calm enough." He stared out the window as shoppers on the sidewalk hurried by. "You don't want everyone to know that you're terrified. It's always been scary for me. Some people are natural performers. Not me. I used to have certain rituals that got me through. I would have to drink chamomile tea. I tapped for a while, knocking a certain number of times before I could play a scene. I had pet doves that I brought to the set. On 'Boys Don't Cry,' I would swear loudly before each take." He laughed. "Now I'm more confident, and I'm looking for that feeling of insecurity. A part has to be important enough to be worried again. When I care, I get nervous. And I like being nervous." ■