

LAST MAN STANDING

Clint Eastwood

Ahead of the Cannes Film Festival, actor and director Clint Eastwood commemorates his Palme d'Or with his renowned humility

Gun hoisted beneath his chin, he famously stares down at the target with his steely eyed look of menace. At a statuesque 6ft 2in, his defined torso belies the 78 years of experience it has accrued. Clint Eastwood is 100 per cent testosterone. The last remaining real man's man.

His powerful presence on and behind the silver screen is so legendary he recently became the second person to receive a lifetime achievement Palme d'Or from the organisers of the Cannes film festival. The award came ahead of the actual festival, which runs from May 13 to 24.

Cannes president Gilles Jacob paid tribute to Eastwood's work: "It'd be impossible to choose just one of your works for this supreme honour. It's the right time to give the Palme d'Or to Clint Eastwood." Turning to Eastwood, he added: "And forget about your legendary modesty."

Of course modesty is something Eastwood is famous for, that and his forthright attitude. Clint holds no punches, a trait evident when discussing his latest movie *Gran Torino* in which he both stars in and directs.

"People have lost their sense of humour," he insists when talking about the movie in which he plays Walt Kowalski, a prejudiced ex-soldier and automobile employee living in a community dominated by Hmong immigrants.

"In former times we constantly made jokes about different races," continues the veteran actor who believes our modern culture of political correctness has effectively outlawed jokes about people's nationality or ethnicity. "You can only tell the jokes today with one hand over your mouth, otherwise you'll be insulted as a racist. I find it ridiculous. In those earlier days every friendly clique had a 'Sam the Jew' or 'Jose the Mexican' - but we didn't think anything of it or have a racist thought."

Eastwood's outburst is a tribute to his old-fashioned upbringing. He is one of the few remaining Neanderthals; back to basics and a far simpler life where good triumphed evil and communities worked together through difficult times. Eastwood is from a time where people are pragmatic, strong and sensible.

"My father had a couple of kids at the beginning of the Depression. There was not much employment. Not much

welfare. People barely got by. People were tougher then," he proudly laments before criticising today's population. "We live in a pussy cat generation where everybody's become used to saying, 'well how do we handle it psychologically?' In those days you just punched the bully and fought."

Eastwood's foray into acting was typically motivated by his red-blooded penchant for a pretty lady. "I was going to college in 1950," he begins, "A guy I knew was going to an acting class. He started telling me about all the good-looking chicks and said 'Why don't you come with me?' So I had some motivation beyond thoughts of being an actor."

The actor rapidly rose to fame with his rugged roles of action heroes and good-looking cowboys. With each character, whether the vigilante cop, crooning red-neck or orangutan side-kick, he was confident and undeniably masculine. As British journalist Jonathan Ross said in *Esquire*: "He was this cool-looking man who could somehow wear a blanket and get away with it." However, he was also more than that. Even through his acting Eastwood portrayed integrity. As Ross explains: "You never doubt the honesty that Clint brings to his work. Even if you don't like it, it's clear that he believes in what he is doing and in what his films are saying."

Sadly for Ross, and all Eastwood fans, *Gran Torino* might be his last outing in front of the cameras. "There aren't many good film roles for guys my age," admits Eastwood who was ready to quit the big screen after *Million Dollar Baby*. "I thought, that's enough now and I didn't want to act again. But Kowalski was a role that was my age. And the timing was right for me."

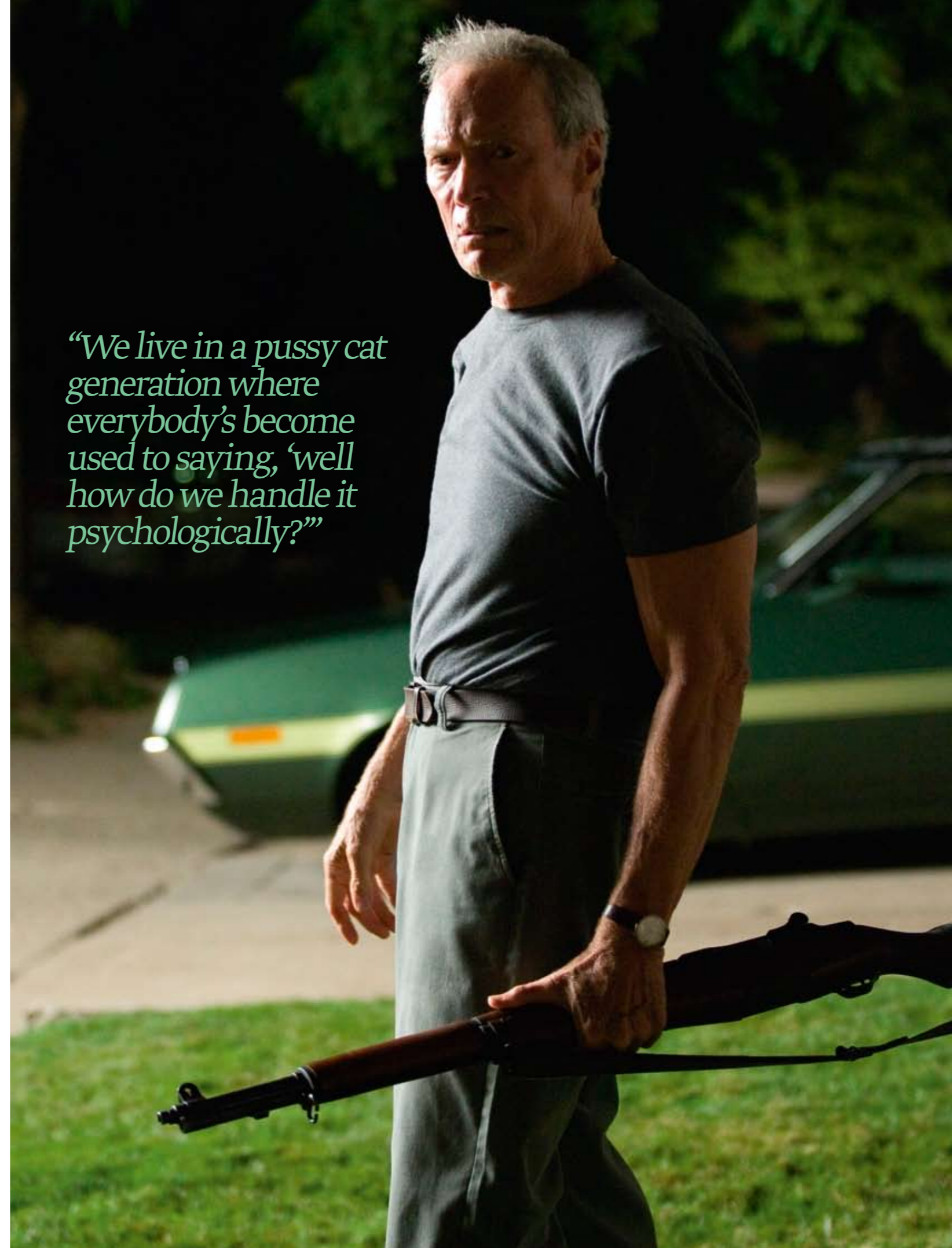
Despite four years passing since his last role, Eastwood had no trepidations. "I've been doing it for 45 years," he softly growls in his husky Californian accent. "It's like anything," he says preferring not to over analyse his projects. His school of thought is a simple one. "You get the character in your mind, and then you're there doing it."

His no-nonsense approach in both his acting and directing adds inimitable fluidity and substance to his films. "Clint is pretty unique," says Rob Lorenz, his long time producer and partner in Malpaso, Eastwood's production company. "He recognises the value of the old ways of doing things, because he has been around long enough to see them work. At the same time, he embraces new technology and wants to keep learning, moving forward and progressing." ▶

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Below Clint onset with Bee Vang (left) and John Carroll Lynch (centre)



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The entrepreneur’s quiet authority and passion instantly inspires admiration and respect from crewmembers. “You have to live with what you have,” muses Eastwood, who is ready to take the blame should he ever fail, providing fail is a word in his vocabulary. “Whatever you committed on film, you are committed to. You have to put it together. If it doesn’t work, it’s your fault. If it works, it’s partly your fault.”

As the first major movie to focus on Asian ethnic communities, *Gran Torino* was a challenge for Eastwood who had to become more aware of his sensibilities, but it was a quest he relished. “I didn’t know too much about them,” he admits. “They’re from Laos and were brought here as refugees after the end of the Vietnam War because they helped the Americans during the conflict.”

Ensuring maximum authenticity, the production team decided to exclusively hire a Hmong cast. As a result the majority of the performers had never acted before, yet Eastwood was never intrusive with his novice cast. “I gave them a lot of freedom,” he says. “I told them that they didn’t have to stick to the words literally. I just tried to get them into the mood, to make them think of what their motivation is. Let it come up out of instinct.”

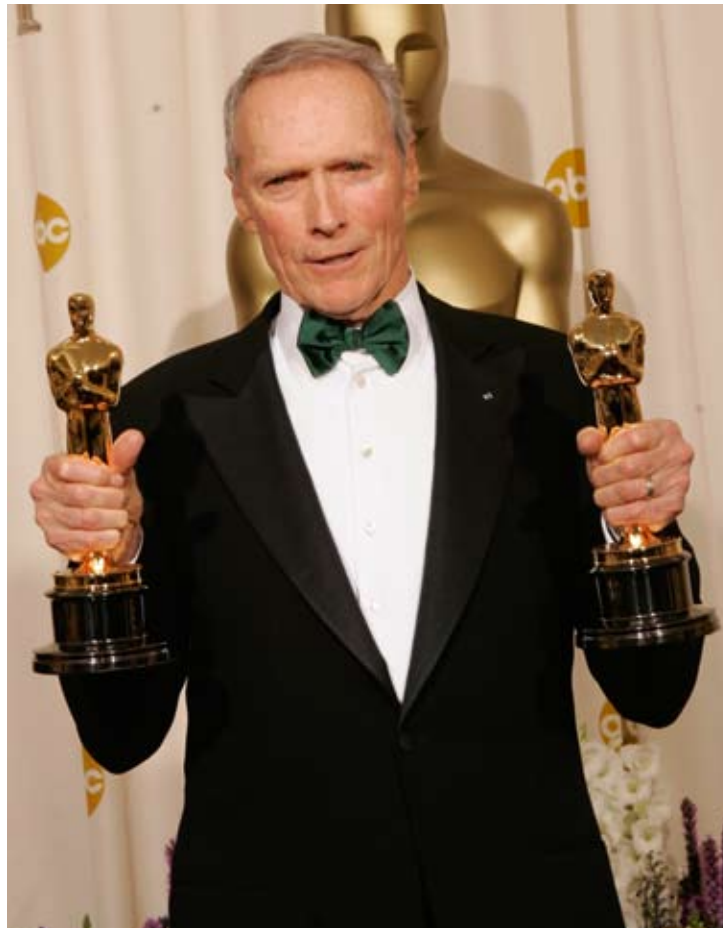
Eastwood began directing in 1970, a time when it was almost unheard of for actors to do so. But that perfectly sums him up. He can and will do what he wants. He wanted to be in films so he not only became one of the world’s greatest actors, he also became a director and producer and even writes film scores. He believed in politics, so he openly supported Richard Nixon’s presidential campaigns and then made a successful foray into politics, by becoming the Mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. He gets what he wants, especially his women (He could make a directory from the names of his former beaus.) He divorced Maggie Johnson in 1984 and is still married to Dina Eastwood, whom he married in 1996.

Yet, with time ticking retirement seems inevitable. “It’s been a long road,” he reminisces. “One day you wake up and you’re 78 years old. I said to my wife the other day, talking about *Changeling* and *Gran Torino*, ‘What am I doing? I’m doing two pictures in a row and I’m writing music. What the hell am I doing it for?’ Then I start laughing – because I like it, that’s why. At certain points if your life, you like doing more. I’m not sure what causes it or for what reasons; you just do it.”

Eastwood’s resilience means the legend is yet to quit. Despite collecting his Palme d’Or award he won’t be attending Cannes. The defiant workhorse will be in South Africa filming his latest project, a biopic of Nelson Mandela.

“It will be a political drama,” he beams. “A rather unique story in the way Nelson Mandela went about spreading pride in the country. I just have to make sure I’m casting well, that’s the secret. The film has a lot of games and elements to it. It’s too early to know if it’s going to be any good, but I’ll just do the best I can...” Which, of course, is what Eastwood does best, tackling his dramas and his life like a real man – a real life hero. ■

Below Clasp his two Oscars for *Million Dollar Baby* at the 2005 Academy Awards



CLASSICALLY CLINT

The indelible characters of Clint Eastwood have one thing in common: a blunt yet powerful way with words.

“Being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you’ve got to ask yourself one question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well... do ya, punk?”

Harry Callahan
Dirty Harry (1971)

“Somebody left the door open and the wrong dogs came home.”
The Stranger
High Plains Drifter (1973)

“Go ahead, make my day.”
Harry Callahan
Sudden Impact (1983)

“It’s a hell of a thing, killing a man. Take away all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.”
William Munny
Unforgiven (1992)

“Girlie, tough ain’t enough.”
Frankie Dunn
Million Dollar Baby (2004)

“Ever notice how you come across somebody once in a while you shouldn’t have messed with? That’s me.”
Walt Kowalski
Gran Torino (2008)



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