

Back to *The Matrix*

There's always been an otherworldly aura to **Keanu Reeves**, writes Harold von Kursk. When he first emerged as one of the film industry's rising young stars with the release of *Speed* and *Point Break*, audiences were drawn to his ethereal features, as much as his quixotic persona

For much of his 20s and 30s, Keanu Reeves preferred to live in L.A.'s exclusive Chateau Marmont Hotel rather than buy a place of his own. He was noted for being a loner, often spotted reading books in isolated cafés or riding his motorcycle at breakneck speeds along Sunset Boulevard. And even after *The Matrix* film trilogy turned him into one of Hollywood's biggest stars, Reeves remained a supremely enigmatic figure.

Over the past decade, he has taken his melancholy image to the next level with the success of the *John Wick* film franchise. His laconic, brooding portrayal of Wick, a retired assassin struggling to find meaning in an indifferent universe, has marked the beginning of a remarkable career renaissance. The Canadian actor also believes that he has found a soulmate in his implacable screen alter ego. "I love this character," Reeves says.

"John gets beaten up, thrown through windows, run over — but nothing stops him. He keeps getting back up every time he's knocked down and I love his will and how he's able to recover and keep on going which is a metaphor, even if it's exaggerated, of how we are all faced with daily challenges but we find ways to overcome them —

We can all appreciate his passion, his grief, and his struggle with his suffering. They're basic elements of the human condition."

When the first *John Wick* movie was released to modest commercial success in 2014, Reeves was considered box-office poison following the disastrous performance of his martial arts sagas, *47 Ronin* and *Man of Tai Chi*. Today, with three *Wick* films under his belt and two more scheduled to be filmed back-to-back this Autumn, Reeves has found a way to reconnect with a new generation of fans.

Perhaps it's only fitting that Reeves is about to return as Neo, arguably one of the most iconic characters in movie history, with the release of *Matrix 4* this December. Shot in Berlin and San Francisco last year on an estimated budget of \$100m, the film is one of the most highly anticipated projects of the post-pandemic era. The first three *Matrix* movies earned a combined \$1.7bn and the added bankability that Reeves has gained with his *Wick* films is a factor Warner Bros. is counting on to reboot the franchise.

Reeves sees several interesting parallels between Wick and Neo, and identifies with their similar sets of philosophical preoccupations.

"They occupy different worlds, obviously, but they share a sense of destiny and mission. I also identify with the kind of state of mind of being they're seeking. One of my favourite moments in *The Matrix* comes when the head of the Machines, the Deus Ex Machina, asks Neo what he is really seeking, and Neo answers, "Peace".

"That's a very beautiful moment and John Wick is also, in his own way, trying to restore the sense of peace he had before that got taken away from him. I believe in that kind of search — that concept that we can achieve peace in some form. I love films that speculate on meaning and I love being able to step into that kind of questioning, troubled outlook on the world."

Although films such as *Point Break*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Gift*, and *A Scanner Darkly* will always rank amongst his best work, nothing can compare to the impact of the *Matrix* trilogy on the

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Right: Keanu Reeves and Neo will return to cinemas in the much-anticipated *Matrix 4*

popular imagination. The epic foray into sci-fi metaphysics was propelled by Reeves' mesmerising presence as Neo, a transcendental warrior doing battle in a universe that has frightening parallels to simulation theory as opposed to the mindless pablum of superhero-driven action films.

Reeves, still youthful-looking at 56 albeit a bit weathered at the edges, was excited by the prospect of reviving a character that still resonates deeply within him. "When you get to revisit a story you're bringing in the past and the other work you've done," he explains.

"So returning to *The Matrix* is revisiting the interior emotional state of your character and when you put on that character's costume [that brings] the exterior and then you just feel it."

Interestingly, Neo's familiar black cloak has influenced Reeves's own personal fashion tastes. When promoting his films in public, he always wears a black suit and tie that could well have been taken from John Wick's wardrobe. The actor lets out a small chuckle when asked about his minimalist attire.

"Black is very stylish. It doesn't ►



draw attention and when I'm wearing black suits it definitely influences how I behave. But in movies like *The Matrix* – which kind of set a trend I guess – and *John Wick*, there's this mournful quality. There's also something priestly to black. I don't know..."

The primary thread linking the two franchises however is the predominance of elaborate martial arts sequences. It's not a coincidence that the *John Wick* franchise was developed by David Leitch and Chad Stahelski, stunt coordinators who had previously worked with Reeves on *The Matrix* films. Keanu Reeves was intrigued by the prospect of

Above: Keanu Reeves in the 2009 Toyota Pro/Celebrity Race
Below: Reeves with Sandra Bullock at the 2006 Oscars



extending the tradition of the stylised fight sequences that were pioneered by Asian action movies and principally those directed by John Woo and starring Jet Li. Reeves confesses to being "very

fortunate" to have had three *John Wick* films under his belt prior to having been called back to action in *Matrix 4* last year.

At 6'1", he has been working with elite personal trainer Patrick Murphy ever since he began preparing for the original *John Wick* film that was released in 2014. Keanu has also been obliged to immerse himself in the various martial arts forms that are part of Wick's special set of skills. Despite the physical toll it takes on his body – "I'm not in my 30s anymore" – Reeves has always been willing to put in the kinds of intense, six to eight-hour training days for several months at a time in order to execute the intricately choreographed hand-to-hand combat sequences that lend the *John Wick* films their mystique. "When we set out to do the first film we wanted to achieve that look of creating something visually stunning and unique where we would give audiences these highly choreographed fight sequences. *John Wick* synthesises a lot of influences... it's American muscle cars, it's pistols, it's machine guns, it's judo, it's jiu-jitsu, there's grappling techniques and chokeholds... I can still hack it, though, I don't

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want anyone else doing the fight scenes, and I still do virtually all of (the fighting).

"The only problem is that you're very sore and stiff the next day because you're older and less flexible. I can't jump as high as I used to, but I think my overall technique... is at a much higher level now and I still get a kick out of doing those scenes. I've also had some greater teachers to get me to where I needed to be. It's a lot of fun."

Although the films are steeped in violence, Reeves was much more interested in probing Wick's sense of isolation and existential despair that follows the murder of his wife and gnaws away at him over the course of the series.

Reeves is far more focused and reflective than commonly assumed. The early perception of him as an airhead following his turn in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* could not be further from the truth. His self-absorbed nature is one of the quizzical attributes that inform his various screen personae. He is quick to dispel all the rumours about his supposed love of self-isolation and hermit-like ways: "I've never tried to disappear from the world. I love being able to tell stories and be very active these days. I feel very lucky to be able to have some success again with these films."

Nonetheless, social media's gloomy take on Reeves has been fuelled by several personal tragedies that have impacted his life. His younger sister Kim, with ▶





whom he grew up in his native home of Toronto, Canada, was diagnosed with leukemia in 1991. Reeves devoted himself to helping her get the best possible medical care and has reported donated over \$50m of his personal fortune to the hospitals which treated her and towards research into finding new leukemia treatments. In the end, after a ten-year battle with the illness, Kim was reportedly declared cancer-free and remains very close to her brother.

During this time, Reeves was also deeply affected by the death of his best friend and *My Own Private Idaho* co-star River Phoenix from a drug overdose in October 1993. But the event that cast an even greater pall on Reeves was how he and his then-girlfriend, Jennifer Syme, 29, suffered the loss of their daughter Ava who had been stillborn at eight months in December 1999. After separating shortly after their loss, Syme was killed in a car crash in April 2001. Reeves has chosen to keep largely silent about this chapter in his life although he did offer the following insight in a 2006 interview. “Grief changes shape, but it never ends.

People have a misconception that you can deal with it and say, ‘It’s gone, and I’m better.’ They’re wrong. When the people you love are gone, you’re alone.

“I miss being a part of their lives and them being part of mine. I wonder what the present would be like if they were here – what we might have done together. I miss all the great things that will never be.”

Happily, Reeves has long since overcome those calamitous events. He is currently in a long-term relationship with artist Alexandra Grant with whom he shares a house in Los Angeles. They previously collaborated on two book projects and appear to have formed the kind of partnership that has long-eluded Reeves.

Meanwhile, Reeves is pursuing several passion projects, including continued indulgence in his lifelong obsession with motorcycles. He is co-owner and founder of Arch Motorcycle Co., a California-based manufacturer of custom motorbikes that Reeves himself had a hand in designing to world-class level specifications.

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Motorbiking is what excites Reeves more than anything else in life. The desire to find “the ultimate ride” is what inspired him to collaborate with custom-bike builder Gard Hollinger on the development of the Arch KRG1-1, a bike that most motorcycle experts and enthusiasts consider to be the most elite custom motorcycle on earth.

As a young boy who first aspired to be a hockey goaltender before acting intervened, Reeves also began nurturing a fondness for motorbikes. His stepfather owned a yellow Norton Interceptor and to this very day Keanu’s favourite motorcycle remains his 1973 Norton Commando. But it took a pretty German girl to actually set Reeves on his lifelong motorcycle adventure. “Bikes have been part of my life ever since

I was 22 and working on a movie in Munich, explains Reeves. I met this girl who was riding this incredible Kawasaki Enduro and I asked her if she could teach me to ride. Every break between shooting on the set I would take the bike out for a ride and I’ve loved the sense of speed and freedom it gives you. I haven’t stopped riding since, and the first thing I did after returning to Los Angeles was to go out and buy a Norton Commando. I still have it in my garage! “Wherever I’ve been in the world, shooting a film or whatever, I’ve always looked for a used bike shop to have something very fast I could ride around for a few months and then sell back afterwards. I get very restless if I don’t get to feel the kind of speed and freedom that riding a bike gives me.”

In the end, Reeves has little in common with the darker sides of his screen incarnations. He thrives on the creative and emotional release he gets from every film project and he tends to see his personal journey as an endless road movie. “Working a lot and constantly moving from one film set to another has been important in helping me overcome some of the more painful times in my life. Every film set gives me the feeling that I’m part of a new family and I feel fortunate to be able to have a job that gives me a lot of satisfaction. But I still work at finding more inner strength and wisdom, and look towards the future with greater optimism.”

And being able to ride his Norton Commando along Sunset Boulevard at two in the morning. ■

Above: Keanu Reeves at his hand and foot print ceremony at the TCL Chinese Theatre IMAX in Los Angeles in 2019, after the release of *John Wick 3*