

# Behind the chameleon

The values are constant behind agile actor and shape-shifter Jake Gyllenhaal, writes Harold von Hoff

Despite his boyish appearance and polite manner, Jake Gyllenhaal is a highly driven man who thrives on testing his limits. For *Nightcrawler* (2014), he lost 30lbs and ran 10 miles every day from his hotel to the set to create the gaunt appearance of his sociopathic crime scene videographer. Barely a year later, he trained six hours a day and bulked up to 180lbs to play a boxer in *Southpaw*, a level of commitment that the film's director, Antoine Fuqua, described as "dangerous" and an example of how Jake "goes right to the edge."

Beyond his skill at physical shape-shifting, the 42-year-old Gyllenhaal has demonstrated a no-less chameleonic ability to throw himself into a wide spectrum of film genres and characters that are both heroic (*Zodiac*, *Stronger*, *Prisoners*) and demonic (*Demolition*, *Nocturnal Animals*, *Velvet Buzzsaw*).

For his new film, Gyllenhaal transformed his naturally lean physique into that of a skilled MMA-fighter-turned-bouncer in *Road House*, a remake of the 1989 Patrick Swayze original. And once again Jake thrived on the chance to display some of the more menacing traits that he has honed over the years and which run counter to his choir boy exterior. "I love the physicality of roles, it's great and so much fun to learn new skills and to enter

a world that you would never normally find yourself in," explains Gyllenhaal.

"It's the best part of the whole job, when you have some of the best MMA fighters and people in the UFC and literally the best fighters in the world showing you how to move and how to fight and teaching you their skills. That's profoundly humbling and you work as hard as you can to learn from them and to represent their capabilities."

*Road House* follows on the heels of Gyllenhaal's appearance in British director Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant*, released earlier this year, that saw Gyllenhaal play a US Army Sergeant fighting encroaching Taliban forces in Afghanistan. "The story kind of reminded me what it is to be an American and our obligations to other humans," Gyllenhaal says.

"The idea of heroism has been perpetuated as something that doesn't come with a deep reluctance sometimes and that isn't sentimental. Sometimes doing good is just going against even an instinct you may think you have. And it's a simple action. And that's what this movie is... Yes, it's an action movie, but it's an action movie in a different form, in that it's literally about just an act — one act one way and the same act the other way taken by two people who don't even really like each other that much to begin

with — and may that be a lesson to us all. And that's why I was moved by it, and that's why I wanted to be a part of it."

Apart from a fondness for action films (he previously played a soldier in *Jarhead* and an LA police officer in *End of Watch* — *ED*), Gyllenhaal had a much different motivation to be part of *The Covenant*.

"One of my closest friends is a Marine who fought in Fallujah (Iraq) and is now the head of emergency services in New York City. He was responsible for bringing back his Iraqi interpreter and his two daughters to New York, giving them new lives, getting them visas, and setting them up. My friend was actually the real inspiration for me to do [*The Covenant*] and why this story means so much to me."

These remarks illustrate Gyllenhaal's earnest nature and ingrained sense of integrity, some of the underlying qualities that have long endeared him to audiences. The default setting for our expectations is that Jake

wants to do the right thing — there's a trenchant Everyman quality to him.

He's also shown a predilection for choosing complex and controversial projects — notably the gay cowboy romance *Brokeback Mountain* — and having switched from big studio movies to indie fare following his disappointing experience on the lamentable sword-and-sandals saga, *The Prince of Persia* (2010).

"I like characters who are as messy and complicated because that's who we are as humans," said Gyllenhaal.

"It's much more interesting for me to explore those states of being than playing characters who don't find themselves under stress or need to face up to serious problems. We're all struggling in our own particular ways and we all live in different states of joy, hope, fear, and anxiety. That's what makes us interesting and those are the kinds of characters I enjoy portraying. "That's why I'm very hard on myself. I'm very passionate about what I do and I can't take the easy way out. I just can't... Acting offers you an opportunity to find catharsis through the way you express the emotions of your characters and by behaving in ways that you wouldn't dare to in our own life. It takes a toll sometimes... but it brings out the best in you and you feel good about pushing ►

**"MY PARENTS TAUGHT ME NOT TO THINK SO MUCH IN TERMS OF ALWAYS TRYING TO BE THE BEST OR FEELING THIS CONSTANT PRESSURE TO SUCCEED"**

**JAKE GYLLENHAAL**





yourself as far as you can go. I love pushing myself to the limit. It's something I enjoy. No matter how hard things get... I kind of want to go harder."

Gyllenhaal credits his parents with instilling in him a sense of pride and purpose when it comes to doing meaningful work. He was raised alongside his older sister Maggie (who would also grow up to become a distinguished actor) in the Hancock Park neighbourhood of Los Angeles by their father Stephen Gyllenhaal, best known for directing made-for-TV movies, and their screenwriter mother, Naomi Foner (Oscar nominated for the 1989 film *Running on Empty*). Jake was an intensely curious child who grew up in a heady milieu of directors (Steven Soderbergh once rented a room above the family garage) actors (Paul Newman was not only his godfather but also taught him to drive!) and writers

(Michael Ondaatje was a frequent dinner guest).

His parents were both intellectuals whose left-leaning political and social views left a deep impression. But he believes that their greatest influence on him was the intellectual and creative freedom that set the tone for the household. "I had wonderful parents and they were always encouraging me and my sister (Maggie) to express ourselves," recalled Jake.

"My parents also taught me not to think so much in terms of always trying to be the best or feeling this constant pressure to succeed. They taught me that you have to accept that you won't always succeed but that you have to measure yourself in terms of

**Above: Cannes 2015 jury members (l to r) Rokia Traore, Xavier Dolan, Jake Gyllenhaal, Sophie Marceau**

your capacities and ambitions and desires."

His mother and father's social conscience also steered him and his sister towards serious fare as opposed to taking easy paychecks on popcorn movies.

"They taught me and Maggie to work on a project only when we are deeply convinced that it is part of something bigger than us, not limited to our personal interests. Something universal, in which everyone can identify."

Growing up, Gyllenhaal loved playing sports, especially baseball, but he suffered from such poor eyesight that he was unable to

**"IT'S A FILM THAT CHANGED MY LIFE AND MY CAREER, AND IT'S BEEN UNREAL TO WATCH THIS STORY FIND AFTERLIVES..."**

**JAKE GYLLENHAAL**

judge distances properly much less field a hard hit ball. He spent much of his childhood constantly changing his glasses to upgrade to a stronger prescription until he switched to contact lenses once he turned towards acting at age 16.

From the very outset of his career, Jake's father Stephen taught him an appreciation for the changing landscape that comes with every new role and story.

"My dad, when I was a kid, was a great sandcastle-builder," Gyllenhaal recalls.

"He won prizes for his sandcastles. One of the things that messed me up, that made me into an actor, was that he taught me the love for the impermanence of things. Whenever I would go to the beach with my dad, he was like, 'At the end of the day, this [sandcastle] goes away. The ocean takes it away and that's it.'" ►



Jake's career took off with the coming of age drama *October Sky* (1999) which was followed up by his bravura turn in *Donnie Darko* (2001), the indie cult classic that served as Gyllenhaal's screen breakthrough.

"It's a film that changed my life and my career, and it's been unreal to watch this story find afterlives with new audiences and new generations," he observed.

"What Donnie said to [Patience Cleveland's character] Roberta Sparrow is still true: 'There is so much to look forward to.'"

That set the stage for *Brokeback Mountain*, the groundbreaking 2005 revisionist western about two ranch hands who engage in a secret, decades-long affair with a ranch-hand despite them both having wives at home, portrayed by Anne Hathaway and Michelle Williams. The film earned Jake his first Oscar nomination.

"The relationship between me and Heath while we were making this movie was something that was based on a profound love for a lot of people that we knew and were raised by in our lives, a deep respect for their love and their relationship," Gyllenhaal said.

**Above: Jake with Amy Adams at the premiere of *Nocturnal Animals* Right: Taking a selfie with fans at Toronto Festival**

The two men became close friends during the shoot and Jake would become godfather to Ledger and Michelle Williams's daughter Mathilda. Ledger's subsequent 2007 death from an accidental drug overdose was deeply felt by Gyllenhaal. "Heath's death taught me how life is precious and that you have to value every moment of your friendships with people. His consummate devotion to how serious and important the relationship between these two characters was – it showed me how devoted he was as an actor and how devoted we both were to the story and the movie."

Dedication and discipline are important keys in Gyllenhaal's work. In *Zodiac*, he plays San Francisco Chronicle cartoonist Robert Graysmith who becomes obsessed with tracking down the identity of the serial killer known as "the Zodiac." Despite delivering one of the most complex and underrated performances of his career, Jake found Fincher's propensity for shooting up to 100 takes per scene both distracting and pointless. "You get a take, five takes, ten takes. Some places, 90 takes. But there is a stopping point. There's a point at which you go, 'That's what we have to work with.' But we would reshoot things. So there came a point where I would say, well, what do I do? Where's the risk?..."

"I was very pleased though to meet the real Robert Graysmith and I understood his compulsion to unravel the mystery long after the police had stopped pursuing the case... The film took me down this very dark road that Graysmith went on – I don't think I could ever go that far in real life, acting is as close I can get to that."

In the meantime, Gyllenhaal, who moved to New York City to be close to his sister Maggie and her two children with actor husband (and Jake's close friend) Peter Sarsgaard, has just completed work on the first TV series of his career, *Presumed Innocent*. This highly anticipated Apple TV+ series is based on the Scott Turow legal

thriller that was first adapted into the 1990 film starring Harrison Ford. It's the kind of role that marks a turning point in Jake's career, one that sees him finally enter the kind of All-American leading man territory that Ford and Tom Hanks have long inhabited. For an actor so skilled at playing extreme characters, this may be the moment he discovers the greater truth in playing the ordinary man facing extraordinary circumstances.

"The thing that I realise about art in particular is that hopefully what it does is inspire people somewhere to see themselves, to see other people in a different way. I think that's all that you can hope for when you tell a story." ■

