Interviews: Gerard Butler, Sam Childers on ‘Machine Gun Preacher’

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CHICAGO – Gerard Butler is movie star good looking, that is very apparent when meeting him. What wasn’t expected was his keen insight, passion and perspective on taking on a challenge and playing a true-life Pennsylvania preacher, who ends up helping children in the most corrupted areas of the Southern Sudan in Africa, in “Machine Gun Preacher.”

Butler is portraying Sam Childers, an ex-con and blue collar hell raiser who found his purpose in preaching and outreach, almost in a he-was-meant-to-be-there way, to the children of war torn Southern Sudan. The story of the “Machine Gun Preacher” is one of making a life transition, with salvation and sacrifice.

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to talk not only to Gerard Butler, but also his real-life counterpart Sam Childers. Their insights to this unusual life journey add to the flavor of the “Machine Gun” preacher’s life.

Gerard Butler, as Sam Childers in “Machine Gun Preacher”

Gerard Butler was breaking into films in the late 1990s, but his big step forward came in the mid-2000s, when he starred in the film version of “Phantom of the Opera” (2004). His star power exploded in the historical action film “300” and has done notable work in “Nim’s Island” (2008), “The Ugly Truth” (2009) and did voice work in “How to Train Your Dragon” (2010). He is also the Executive Producer of “Machine Gun Preacher.”

Preach Softly: Gerard Butler as Sam Childers in ‘Machine Gun Preacher’
Photo Credit: Ilze Kitschoff for © 2011 MGP Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: Sam Childers as a character that at times was even unlikable. How did you approach this type of character, and why was it important for you?

Gerard Butler: I wouldn't compare Sam to other characters I've played, the ones that are considered 'larger than life.' So many of these other characters were stylistically big, like the Phantom of the Opera, Beowulf and Leonidas, I was playing on their exceptional power. Sam is a charismatic man, but he is still just a man.

What I connected with was that he had all that going on – incredible courage, determination and endurance, but at the same time was full of shame, anger and violence that simmered underneath the surface. And that to me was how to make this character more fascinating and more gripping, to get all of those parts. He is a hero, but we really wanted to show the downside and fallout you get when you come across a man like this – not everyone agrees with what he is doing and their was a cost for his family. To me. that is what brought him down from being over the top. I wanted to play the determination and the ferocious part of him, but showing him just as a man, and scared.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the things that fascinated me in the film is when you were testifying as a preacher. How did that immersion effect your own relationship with spirituality, both outside and inside the confines of religion?

Butler: In truth I'm an actor. I get into a role, I'm impacted by a role, but I can't say that every scene I play in a movie changes my life. The preaching was one of my favorite-ever days of filming, because I did get so involved. I did all my preaching scenes in one day. I did eight pages of dialogue, but I also improvised a lot of that dialogue. I stole some stuff from here and there, I watched preachers on YouTube. What was interesting about all that was this belief that they had in the power of God and how protected they are in every way when they have that belief.

It was played in an impure way, because a lot of Sam's preaching comes from a place of fanaticism, not in the realm of a healthy sermon from a sane preacher, for at times he was losing his mind.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you worked with actual events in the film that were violent, did it change the way you looked at violence, as in a difficult unity between the faked violence of a movie and real violence?

Butler: If you're doing an action movie, as I did with 'Tomb Raider,' 'Reign of Fire' or even the '300,' because they are pretty much fiction and stylized, you can detached yourself from that. In this movie, the violence felt very real and was based on actual violence. That's was helped drive me through the story and the emotion. I was very involved in all the action, because the action completely comes out of character, rather than a movie where I have a couple of dramatic scenes, and then the action is thrown in. All the action in this film is based on real-life incidences.

One of the things that was constantly effecting me is that I had a book, which was full of photographs of the horrors of this war – villages that had come under attack, bodies that are bled out. limbs cut off – and this is what I used as my source material to get into these scenes. Therefore, I was never looking at it as violence as fake, It felt real because I knew it was real.

HollywoodChicago.com: You seem very passionate about this role. How long did it take to get off the ground as a production?

Butler: It took a long time to get off the ground and for a long time I thought it wasn't going to happen. It is sad to see the stories that ultimately weigh more, and are dramatic, interesting and stimulating are the most difficult to be made. I'm not saying anything new when I say that, but it definitely was a lot of work. I was executive producer on this one, and to make any money you have to help force the movie through. It took awhile, and there was a sense of disbelief when it was finally happening.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you spend time with Sam Childers in Africa? How did that impact you and the role?

Butler: I mostly spent time with Sam here. I watched him preach, I watched a lot of his interviews and had him always playing in the background as I worked a scene. He's really a fascinating guy, and to get a sense of him I had to build with him. I listened to how he talked, one minute with a toothpick in his mouth, cool and calm, and the next moment with tears in his eyes as he talks about holding a child that has just been blown in half. Or the shame that he feels about his own life and the damage he did in that. Reading his book, I also got more of a sense regarding that damage.

HollywoodChicago.com: You worked closely with children in this film. What did you learn from the them while you were in production?

Butler: That would be my favorite thing about working on this movie. You are constantly hear about problems with kids and the family unit, yet when I made this film with these kids, it gave me so much faith and pride in the future of the world, and who we have that is making up our society. For instance, the kids who played Sam's daughters at different ages were phenomenal little girls, humble and smart, cool and funny.

And then more than anything, with the kids in Africa, I was surrounded by hundreds of them everyday. Getting to know them was truly profound, because then you connect with who these people are, and realize these were the same kids who were being hacked to death, going through those unspeakable horrors and feeling the fear emotionally from that. I am guilty of feeling that doing a movie can be a bit of a chore, but it is true that the favorite part of this movie was getting to know these kids.

In Country: Souleymane Sy Savane and Gerard Butler in the Sudan in ‘Machine Gun Preacher’
Photo Credit: Ilze Kitschoff for © 2011 MGP Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: When you do a role like this, do you have any residual effect that changes a lighter or comedic role?

Butler: Despite going through that experience, I take each project on an individual basis. It doesn’t mean after doing something do heavy and dramatic, that I’m going to do something like ‘The Ugly Truth’ and feel guilty about it. [laughs] I’m going to try and focus on the fun. It’s time to have fun and it’s time to do something different.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let’s talk a bit about the business end of making movies. When your star began to rise after hitting it big with the ‘300,’ what decisions about roles or life did you have to make during that period to make sure you were doing what you felt was right for your career?

Butler: It was fascinating, because when ‘300’ came out and hit, that was actually a tough time for me. I guess it was because I should have felt high as a kite. And I was high, because the movie was doing great, 20 million, 60 million, up and up. The downer was about feeling ‘what is about to happen?’ Everything had changed, and there was no turning back.

I realized also that this was the time, okay, that I want to make a killing. I could be Bruce Willis, Schwarzenegger or Jason Statham, I could go down that line and carry on making those movies. Or I could take a gamble, and have people say, ‘really, the guy from 300 is doing Nim’s Island and P.S., I Love You?’ It was time to say that I had the action, now let’s go and do the comedy, or animated film, or drama for my own satisfaction. To be honest, that is what has excited me about being an actor. Sometimes I read a project and I’ll love it, but I’ll be sh*t scared of it. But then I think, that’s it, I’m going to do it. That’s where I derive my strange sense of fun.

HollywoodChicago.com: Would you have done Sam Childers ten years ago or do you think you’ve grown into the marriage of doing the action film and the dramatic potential of other roles right now?

Butler: I would have done this ten years ago, I don’t know if I would have done it as well, but maybe I would have done it better. [laughs] I think this is a role that wherever I am in my life I would see as a big challenge. When I read this story, I realized it was a story that takes you to places more than other stories do, and it’s a true story. It was a fascinating, outrageous and complex character, and I think whenever I would have read it, I would have wanted to do it.

Sam Childers, the Real-Life “Machine Gun Preacher”

The journey of Sam Childers was a natural for the movies. As a biker and trouble maker, he set a course for his own self destruction. He was saved through Assembly of God church in his native Pennsylvania, became a preacher and made his first missionary pilgrimage to Africa in 1998. It was there he eventually founded the Children’s Village in Southern Sudan, which houses and educates up to 300 orphans, children of the victims of the genocide in that region. Unassuming yet blunt, Sam Childers is always pitching for the kids, despite Gerard Butler playing him in a film.

Reel and Real: Gerard Butler and Sam Childers on the Set of 'Machine Gun Preacher'
Photo Credit: Phil Bray for © 2011 MGP Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your story, about seeing a need and working to fulfill it, which a lot of us don't necessarily do in our day-to-day world. Could you talk about what it was that led to your conversion?

Sam Childers: It started for me in Florida, I was living in Orlando, I was out drinking one night, and doing drugs, and I got into a really bad bar fight and almost got killed. I came home that night and I knew I was going to change. I told my wife the next morning that we were moving back to Pennsylvania. I knew I had to get out of the lifestyle I was living. When I got back there, my wife started going to church with my Mom, and I started running with the wild guys again. It all started up again, but it took two years to complete that change.

It was exactly the way it was shown in the film. I went to church with my wife, she wanted me to go. Sitting there in the church God started moving on me. I never had a problem with dying, I had a problem with what I was going to die for. The lifestyle I had in Florida was a death for no reason.

HollywoodChicago.com: When did the transformation take place in your role as crusader for these children?

Childers: It was back in 1999, I was making my first mission trip to Africa, and I came upon a small child that had run into a land mine. That's not exactly how it happened, but that is what moved me. As I came upon the body of a small child that stepped on a land mine, when I stood over the body, missing from the waist down, I told God I would do whatever I need to do to help these children.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of truth do you want an audience member to come away with once they see your story on film?

Childers: This may weird for you to understand this, but my thing is I don't want people to think this movie is about Sam Childers, or the children of Africa. I want this movie to be about you. It's a movie about one man taking a stand in what they believe, and saving children around the world. It's not just about Africa and South Sudan. I work with children around the world, and I want people to do the same.

HollywoodChicago.com: This question was asked of Gerard Butler in his experience making the film, and regarding your real-life experiences doing what you do, what have the children taught you? And how has that changed your commitment to them?

Childers: It gave me an opportunity to make up for bad things, and that's how they changed my life. Once when I was there, I sent a man in to check out an area that had been raided, looking for children who were living by themselves. I thought we would find maybe five or ten, I brought two trucks, but when we arrived, there were over 40 children. I had to leave half of those children behind. The hardest thing for me was realizing that I left them behind. Two or three days later that area was raided again. Many of those children were killed based on my decision. I blamed myself, but I also realized the blame was on everyone. Now I have the commitment that I will never walk away from another child again.

"Machine Gun Preacher" continues its limited release in Chicago on September 30th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Gerard Butler as Sam Childers, Michelle Monaghan, Michael Shannon, Souleymane Sy Savane and Kathy Baker. Screenplay by Jason Keller, directed by Marc Forster. Rated "R"

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