



## AFI FEST 2020 FILM REVIEW: Citizen Penn (Don Hardy, 2020)

### Description

Posted and reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the 2020 AFI FEST presented by Audi.

*Citizen Penn*, written and directed by Don Hardy, provides a glimpse into Actor/producer/writer/director/humanitarian Sean Penn. Often characterized and stereotyped by early-career exploits of consistently making news headlines for punching cameramen, his political viewpoints, and marrying the world's most recognizable pop star of the time, Madonna, Penn has diligently changed his image through extensive efforts to aid assistance to his fellow "man" in war-torn, disaster laden, disaffected countries beginning in 2002 with the war in Iraq right up to the current COVID-19-infected United States, Penn's home country. Hardy has amassed numerous photographs, direct interviews, and archival news footage, documenting the devastation and suffering along with footage from one camera operated by a Haitian police officer who accompanied Penn at all times following the country's 2010 earthquake. Penn was adamant about his efforts not being used for overt publicity but allowed the official to have and operate a camera at his own discretion.

In 2002, Penn's efforts in Iraq were viewed disdainfully as just another celebrity seeking attention or the limelight to jumpstart a flailing career. As noted, Penn had some off-screen issues while married to Madonna. Yet, in 2001 he received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his portrayal of Sam Dawson in *I Am Sam* and in 2003 Penn took home the Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his portrayal of Jimmy Markum in *Mystic River*. Also, in 2009 Penn took home his second Oscar for his portrayal of Harvey Milk, in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, a dramatic biographical portrayal of California gay rights activist, Harvey Milk, who became the first openly gay elected official. According to IMDb, Penn has received 117 award nominations along with 74 wins from a myriad of film groups and associations.

Nevertheless, when the massive 7.0 earthquake hit the country of Haiti killing 250,000, injuring another 300,000, and displacing nearly 1,500,000 people, and Penn landed on the ground to render assistance, he was met with sideways glances and once again was looked upon as a celebrity seeking attention. And, according to Penn's own words in *Citizen Penn*, he had initially landed to simply distribute 14,000 Chinese water filtration kits and 350,000 doses of ketamine and morphine pain medicines he had gotten from Venezuela's Hugo Chavez after seeing the suffering of the Haitian people on

television news coverage. Penn had seen the poor suffering in Venezuela and supported Chavez's revolutionary efforts to provide relief to the suffering and has been widely criticized by US government officials. Still, when a celebrity lands a helicopter in a war zone or declared disaster area, news cameras seem to follow. Penn was on CNN being questioned what he was doing in Haiti and why he specifically felt he could help the Haitian people?

Penn's medicinal relief needed refrigeration and only one location of Port au Prince could effectively store the needed stockpile. As his group, soon thereafter formally known as J/P HRO, settled into an abandoned, hidden location for the night, Penn was surprised the next morning to discover a tent city of tens of thousands (initially 30,000) of dislocated Haitians on what once was a golf course. Unlike other celebrities who dipped in and out of Haiti, Penn stayed on the ground for several months returning often guiding not only relief efforts but also debris and gravel removal. As his organizational efforts expanded, Penn enticed international aid worker, Ann Lee, to become the group's leader. A once markedly different characteristic of the Haitians, according to Penn, was their willingness and zeal in being a core component of the recovery process.

As Lee accepted the helm, she and Penn altered their mission and started CORE (Community Organized Relief Effort) primarily from their outcomes and experience during the Haiti mission. The basic premise learned from the willingness of the younger Haitians, is to provide experiential training to younger individuals in areas affected and predisposed to being affected by disasters, so their communities are able to respond and recover quickly during states of emergency. Most recently, CORE has responded to COVID in providing 1.3 million tests to low-income communities in the Greater Los Angeles area. As wonderful a humanitarian as Penn and Lee are, the cost of undertaking relief efforts and providing community support is overwhelming. In order to get people in crisis what they need for basic survival, Penn began hosting an annual gala raising several million dollars from a limited guest list. Archival footage of Penn's growing frustration over the years is on full display as archival from successive years is shown.

I've long been a fan of Sean Penn's as an actor beginning with his Mick O'Brien role in the 1983 *Bad Boys* (post-Jeff Spicoli, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*) and I was semi-aware of his Haiti relief efforts in 2010, just not to such an extent. *Citizen Penn* was a great way to catch up. Highly recommended.

## Category

1. television

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