

# the conversation

## Alec Baldwin

# 'I dread making films'

BARRY J. HOLMES / THE GUARDIAN

Even this week's Emmy nomination won't stop the actor quitting acting for politics – and writing a book on marriage, he tells  
*Tim Teeman*

# W

hat's this? Alec Baldwin at peace? If you've read his rap sheet, you'll know how strange that may sound. He's better known, or seen, as the arch-manipulative TV executive Jack Donaghy in *30 Rock* or the eldest in the Baldwin acting brotherhood (after him comes Daniel, William/"Billy", then Stephen). Most notoriously, he left an angry rant on his then 11-year-old daughter Ireland's phone in 2007, calling her "a rude, thoughtless little pig" for not picking it up for a court-ordered conversation. "I made an ass out of myself trying to make this call," he railed at his daughter. "You have insulted me for the last time. You don't have the brains or the decency as a human being." And: "You've made me feel like a fool over and over and over again. I'm gonna straighten your ass out when I see you, do you understand me?"

Today, all is calm. The 52-year-old actor is between the final afternoon and evening performances of a modest production of *Equus* at the Guild Hall, the small theatre in the posh people's playground of East Hampton outside New York, where he has a farmhouse. Baldwin, portly but still handsome, has acquitted himself well as the psychiatrist Dysart: his clipped English accent is grave and dry. He loves this theatre, hails its recent swanky renovation and supports its artistic purpose passionately. It's the first time since 1998 he's done a "serious" play, and while the audience follows the sober shrink's mood shifts respectfully, collectively we become palpably more excited at the merest hint of menacing, unhinged Baldwin. In the stalls with me afterwards, you sense him monitoring himself for inclement pronouncements. Fortunately, he also has an innate instinct for stirring: pretty soon we'll be on to giving up acting, why movies suck, the right way to divorce and the horror of ageing on screen.

After the recent release of the film *Lymelife*, which he co-produced with Martin Scorsese and in which he plays a philanthropic husband, Baldwin starts shooting the fifth season of *30 Rock* next month. "It's a great job," he says, lauding *30 Rock*'s creator, the comedian and Sarah Palin doppelgänger Tina Fey — as well he might, as she rescued his career from the showbiz dumpster, earning him two Emmys, three Golden Globes and four Screen Actors Guild Awards. Some shows in the last season were not so good, he says, "but the writers find fresh ways to be inspired", although, "that kind of comedy is in the same key all the time, it's very much of a style. After seven months of it, every year for four years, doing this play was a nice break."

He's signed to *30 Rock* until 2012; will he give it up after that? Baldwin roars. "It's a great job. Making films is the thing I really dread. Oh, God, it's so tedious. TV is so quick, where movie-making is so long-winded and boring. It's lovely working with people — like Meryl [Streeep] last year on *It's Complicated* — but it's low productivity compared to TV. Everything's got to end. I won't be happy when *30 Rock* does, but I'll figure out what to do. I may be completely out of the acting game by then, so who knows?"

*Lymelife*, then — which is ironically about marital and familial discord and middle-age anxieties — may well be his last movie. What next? "Something I really care about. It won't be to open a FedEx store. Write, maybe, be involved in a charitable organisation, to have a life that isn't about performing. I've been doing this for 30 years. I may come back and do something like this [he indicates the Guild Hall stage] or Broadway for nine months, but I want to give it up. The acting world isn't the same as when I started, when you had a career for a lifetime. To sustain your career you need a lot of good parts and there are not a lot of good parts out there. I got lucky with a sitcom. TV is where the good parts are now. But film..." he sighs and scowls, "... I look at films and think, 'If I never do another film, what would I be missing?' Right now they are kind of unmemorable. There are very good films that get made, but there's such competition to get those scripts, and most of them are written for people far younger than me. I don't see myself making a film ever again. No, no, no."

Maybe vanity is also a factor. He doesn't like ageing at all: "The pictures of you



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constantly thrust in your face... the images of you from the past on film... A famous actor friend of mine who I can't name said they couldn't see themselves making many more movies because they couldn't stand to see themselves ageing on film. That's a wonderfully honest thing to say. The same wise person also said, when you turn 50, which I did a couple of years ago, you have 'plenty of time and none to waste'."

Acting wasn't his first choice of career. His brother Billy has called theirs "a rowdy Irish-Catholic family" upbringing. Alec was in awe of his disciplinarian father, also called Alec, a high school teacher. As kids, his brothers would volunteer Alec to settle their scores with enemies. He flirted with the idea of entering law and going into politics (this has now returned to the fore) but lost a student election and began to study acting. After appearing as a mad preacher in the primetime soap *Knots Landing*, his chequered film career began with *Forever, Lulu* (1987). His most successful film, *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), grossed \$200 million and his relationship with Kim Basinger began a year later when they starred together in the forgettable *The Marrying Man*.

"Making a truly great film is the most difficult thing in this business," Baldwin says.

"Film-making has always been about working with people who I admired: Tony Hopkins [*The Edge*, 1997], Pacino [*Glengarry Glen Ross*, 1992], De Niro [*The Good Shepherd*, 2006]." Is he proud of any of his roles? "Ahhh," he says, looking like he's trodden in gum. "I'm proud of some. It's like a dia-

mond: there's a little bit up top you like; the body of it is mediocre; and the very bottom of it is absolutely appalling. I like what people seemed to like me in, so *The Hunt for Red October* and *Glengarry, It's Complicated*: that kind of well-made fluffy thing sold a lot of tickets. If it was just me, I liked doing *State and Main* [2000] with [director David Mamet, I loved doing *The Aviator* [2004] with Marty [Scorsese], who I worship. That was an honour. But there's a lot of stuff in the middle."

Baldwin and Basinger married in 1993; Ireland was born two years later. He has said that he loved Basinger "on the deepest level" but once wondered if by only half-committing himself to their marriage, as he had only half-committed to his acting, both had suffered as a consequence. The marriage fell apart in 2000, Basinger seemingly wanting a quiet life on Long Island, Baldwin a more active, public one. A protracted, messy, very public custody battle began. It was agreed that Baldwin could see Ireland for certain weeks at a time and have four scheduled telephone calls with her a week. The case made him consider committing suicide and earlier this year he was briefly in hospital after threatening to take pills during a phone argument with Ireland. His representatives said that the incident was a "misunderstanding".

"My daughter doesn't need to read any more comments by me saying what the divorce was like, but I will say none of it was made better by the system," Baldwin says quietly. Did it put him off marrying again? "No, and I tell my friends not to be put off, either. I'm all for marriage, and I'm all for taking lawyers, judges and court-appointed therapists out of divorce. Marriage isn't the problem; the way we divorce is the problem." He is happy New York is enshrining no-fault divorces in statute: the old system, he says, put an onus on finding fault with one's former loved one, leading to an ex-aggeration of some hurts and the total invention of others. "Sometimes you just grow apart," he says. "Sometimes you may

## “small talk”

**On love**  
I have a female friend who is dating this guy and I tell her, 'Don't wait too long, don't second-guess the second guess'. You can take a chance on something and it turns out you were wrong, but even worse is when you don't take a chance on something and it turns out you missed a great opportunity.

**On 30 Rock**  
We're lucky — the writers are better in their worst days than other shows' writers on their best days. They're funny, scathing people who are working on network TV and under great pressure to keep it clean.

**On greatness**  
A great film career is one where someone has done about six roles, each of which has been

integral to the success of a particular film. Then there are superstar careers like [Jack] Nicholson's, who've had 10 or 12 such films.

**On loyalty**  
One of the things I like to do is to encourage all those people with what I call '212 chequebooks' — all those rich people from Manhattan — to support things in East Hampton and not just give to the big charities and institutions in the city.



decide you just don't like each other."

Is he in love now? Baldwin laughs nervously. "What on earth makes you think I'd answer that question?" Well, he was seeing a lawyer a couple of years ago. "Yes, we don't see each other any more. You know, one of my great dreams would be, yes, to be married again and have another child and have that child turn to me ten years from now and say, 'My teacher told me you were in the movie business', that they wouldn't even know me that way. I crave a completely private life. I've had the other, with my daughter, and everything cast in a light that doesn't do anyone any good."

Ah, the phone message. Was that mortifying? "Yes," Baldwin says tightly. "It was a terrible, horrible experience." But he still made the call, said what he said in the way he said it. Are he and Ireland reconciled now? "Oh yes, it was a long time ago." How did he recover from it?

"First of all I never dreamt it would be played on the internet; my lawyers said in court it was made on the presumption of privacy.

We live in a world where who you are on your worst day becomes who you are in the eyes of the media. That's a terrible thing to have to live with."

Now, with a post-acting life beckoning, he has considered forging a career in politics on the East Coast. He's one of Hollywood's most vocal Democrats: intelligent, informed and committed. "I've looked around but all the positions are taken or I'm not

### Biography

**Family**  
Born Alexander Rae Baldwin III in 1958 in New York. His father was a teacher and football coach. Baldwin has degrees in political science and in drama. His three younger brothers are all actors. The youngest, Stephen, is now a born-again Christian and provoked controversy this year when he starred in *Celebrity Big Brother*.

**Leading man**  
First noticed starring in the long-running TV soap, *Knots Landing*. Film highlights include *Beetle Juice*, *The Cooler*, *The Hunt for Red October*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *It's Complicated* last year, playing opposite Meryl Streep.

### Funny guy

He has tied with the long-time reigning champion, Steve Martin, for hosting the American TV programme *Saturday Night Live* the most times. Has twice won the Emmy for Best Actor in a Comedy for his role in the Tina Fey-penned comedy *30 Rock*. He was nominated again for the award this year.

### Marriage

From 1993 to 2002 he was married to the actress Kim Basinger. In 2003 a phone message in which he called their daughter "a pig" was made public online. He claimed afterwards that he was at breaking point after being denied access. His book, *A Promise to Ourselves*, charts his divorce and custody battle over his daughter with Basinger.

**'I'm all for marriage, and for taking therapists, lawyers and judges out of divorce'**

qualified for — congressmen, governor, attorney-general — Bloomberg [Michael, Mayor of New York] has changed the limits of the mayoral term to benefit himself, which I find appalling. But political topography can change, so, who knows, four years or six years from now?"

Alongside the likes of Robert Redford, A. S. Byatt and Sir David Hare, Baldwin this week added his name to a public letter published in *The Times* expressing horror and dismay at the threatened execution by stoning of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, an Iranian woman convicted of adultery.

Baldwin reveals that he is angry with President Obama's response to the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. "I thought he was doing well, keeping his cool despite constant baiting. But with the spill, I know taxpayers, already sagging under the weight of this anaemic economic recovery and the complete travesty of the war in Iraq, will be lumbered with the cost of the clean-up. The sickeningly pro-business Supreme Court will somehow exonerate BP. I think Obama should have gone to any lengths to stop the spread of the spill, and he hasn't. That is disappointing."

Like Sean Penn in Haiti, Baldwin reveals that he may travel internationally in the service of causes; a priest friend works in Central America building schools, reservoirs, water treatment and sewage systems. After his 2008 book *A Promise to Ourselves: A Journey Through Fatherhood and Divorce*, Baldwin is also planning another book about the subject. "I want to write about why so many marriages fail and how to stop that. I have many friends that stay married because they fear divorce. They have unproductive marriages, they're unhappy. I want to tell the stories of those for whom it does work, how they do it and also show people how hard it is. My friends who have successful marriages have made them a priority."

Baldwin sounds sad suddenly. Does he regret his marriage to Basinger? "You do what you wanted to do at that time. To look back and say that person wasn't right for you, that you made a mistake, isn't right. When you get into the hindsight thing, it's very unhealthy. A marriage that dissolved, the turmoil, the custody proceedings and so forth — a lot of it made me work harder. Work took my mind off it." He laughs. "Now I see myself working less, whatever I do and [and he smiles twinklingly] having some private time."

Ah, so Baldwin does want a relationship. "If that happens it would be great," he laughs. Watch out, Manhattan. "The women of New York don't have their eyes on me. I'm too old for all that," Baldwin says, but he doesn't sound too self-negating, thank goodness. "It's very hard to be in a relationship when you work a lot in this business. But I want to. I want to have something that I haven't had before." This last sentence is said as a very serious whisper.

Baldwin lets out his most hyena-like laugh when I ask if he is fulfilled. "God, I don't know how to answer that," he rasps. "I feel fulfilled right this minute. Everyone liked the play today. I love this place, the Guild Hall, being here. And then, this Thursday, the Emmy nominations will be announced and if we [30 Rock] don't get any, I'll feel — hee hee hee — unfulfilled. I have constant whiplash from going from fulfilled to unfulfilled and back again."

On Thursday *30 Rock* received 15 nominations, including Alec Baldwin for Best Comedy Actor. And so, right now at least, he is fulfilled.

*Lymelife* is out now on general release