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review



**Martin Sheen
& Emilio Estevez**
The fight to keep our
family together

cover story

‘My father was a terrible drunk. It scared all of us’

Martin Sheen and his son, Emilio Estevez, have written a joint memoir revealing how alcoholism almost destroyed the family. They tell **Tim Teeman about brawling in Vietnam, rediscovering religion and watching Charlie’s meltdown**

Not every father and son have Marlon Brando on hand to break up their fights. But when Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez came to blows, on location in the Philippines, where Sheen was filming *Apocalypse Now* in 1976, it was Brando who knocked on the door of the room where father and son were “kicking and rolling around, giving it everything we’ve got”, as they write in their dual memoir, *Along The Way*.

Estevez, then 14, was desperate to return to school in California: the atmosphere on the film set was toxic — his father was drinking heavily and others were doing drugs, “an exhilarating form of darkness” pervading all. But Sheen wouldn’t let him go home. “What’s going on? Is everything

all right?” Brando asked. “I was trying not to hurt Emilio and trying to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. Thank God Marlon arrived when he did,” Sheen says today.

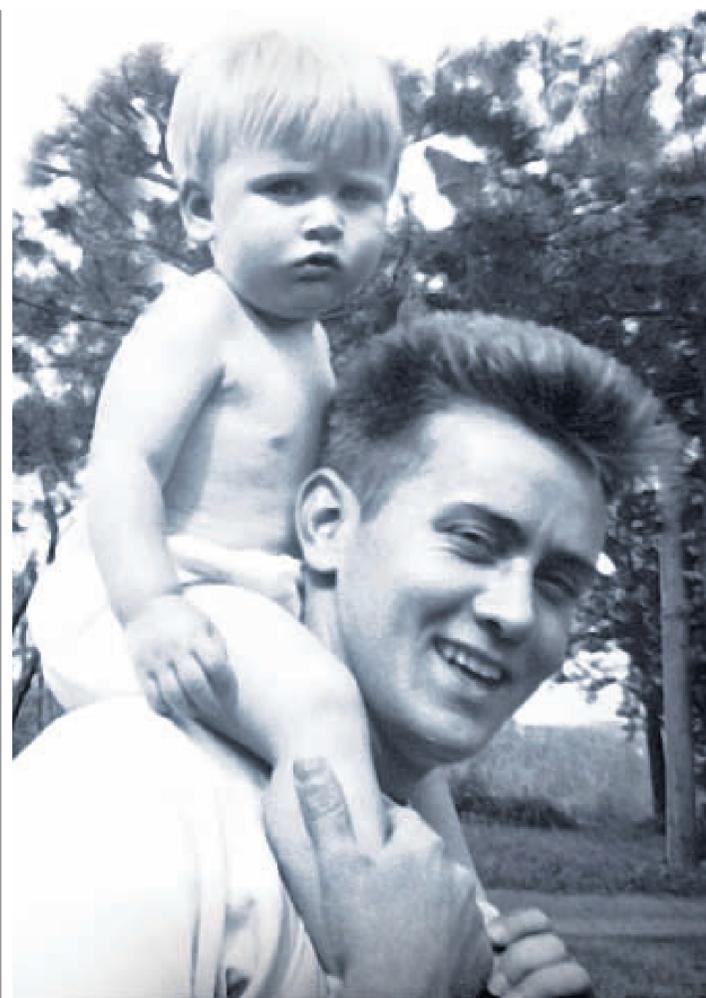
In their book, Estevez, 50, writes that the fight was one of the “lowest points” of his and his father’s relationship; Estevez recently directed Sheen, 71, in a gentle if plodding film, *The Way*, about a father who walks his dead son’s odyssey along the pilgrims’ route to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, northwest Spain. Sheen’s character is a conservative, gruff stoic mired in grief, and at odd points Estevez appears as his dead son. Today, in the lobby bar of New York’s Ritz-Carlton hotel, Sheen is warm and eloquent, very close to his role as the affable President Bartlet in *The West Wing*; Estevez, meanwhile, is intense, introverted and unsmiling — a far cry from his Brat Pack incarnation in movies such as *St Elmo’s Fire* and *The Breakfast Club*.

Directing his father “was merely an extension of how we live”, Estevez says. Sheen’s father came from Galicia (Estevez is his real surname; all his children kept it, apart from Charlie, who took his father’s stage name) before settling in Ohio, and fathers and sons emerge as the chief dynamic in the memoir. Sheen writes: “When Emilio was born I felt I had always known him.” However, Estevez credits his mother, Janet, as “the glue that holds us together”.

Despite the memoir showing Sheen at his ugliest as a raging alcoholic, Estevez says that he was a dedicated father to his children: himself, Ramon, Renée and Carlos. The latter, of course is better known as Charlie, famed for his battles with drug and alcohol addiction, and who had a very public meltdown last year after being fired from the sitcom *Two and a Half Men* for “dangerously self-destructive conduct”.

Estevez feels like his parents’ “protector and gatekeeper”, though he accepts that his father “gets himself into dangerous situations which he gets out of”. “Maybe not knowing it’s a dangerous situation saves you,” he says to Sheen, who is also a longstanding left-wing activist, campaigning against policies such as Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” programme. “He’s famous for picking up hitchhikers and driving them across town or even the state. What’s the longest? A hundred miles?” Estevez asks playfully.

The memoir portrays Sheen taking his brood all over the world to film sets, less for their benefit than his, he confesses — he hates being alone. “Most actors aren’t famous. They’re hard-working. Most of my career was about making a living,” Sheen says. “My father and mother understood that if the family was going to stay together it had to physically stay together,” Estevez says. Did Estevez feel that he could save Sheen from drinking? “No, you hear of families of alcoholics hiding booze. There wasn’t any of that.” (“That wasn’t you?” Sheen says drily. “He was a terrible drunk,” Estevez says. “Some people are pleasant drunks. He would get sentimental and angry. It scared all of us.”



“It scared me, too,” says Sheen. “You haven’t had a drink...” begins Estevez, “... since 1989,” muses Sheen. “I didn’t consciously say, ‘This is it.’ I just said, ‘I’m not doing it for now.’ Gradually I realised it was months later and I was fine.”

The drinking was rooted in professional frustration: Sheen’s career built slowly, first in theatre, then small-scale film and television before the star-making *Badlands* and *Apocalypse Now*. “All actors

‘I thought drinking would help me to be a better actor’

are self-absorbed,” he says. (Estevez agrees: “After my son, Taylor, was born, I was more interested in being a movie star than a father. Balance comes as you get older.”) “I knew I was sentimental, morose and resentful,” Sheen says. “It’s an immature emotional spiral.”

Sheen’s drinking came close to destroying the family. Janet and he split once, “because she was so furious”. “I never felt

you were going to take off,” Estevez interjects. Sheen looks surprised. “Really?” “No, never,” Estevez answers. “I always knew how important the family was to you, and that was never in danger. You and mum would stick it out.” Sheen says quietly: “I had a sense of that, but I wouldn’t have blamed her if she’d thrown me out or left.”

A friend suggested that he join Alcoholics Anonymous, but Sheen didn’t feel he had a problem. “My drinking was a macho thing. Alcoholics think of drinking as an addition to their personality: for me it was, “This will help me to be a better actor.”

Estevez may have been scared, but he was “never terrified” of his drunken father. “I grew up having a healthy fear and respect of my elders. Now parents are terrified of their children.”

Did he ever get into drinking? “I never had a predisposition for it. In 1991 I quit for a year to see if I had a genetic code I needed to worry about. But I didn’t.” Indeed, he owns a vineyard and runs a micro-farm in Malibu, where he and his father are neighbours. “I wish I could say it was a good wine, but I’ve never drunk it,” Sheen laughs.

Sheen’s “moment of clarity” came when



‘I felt myself floating away. To die was easy compared with living, so I willed myself to live’

he was caught driving under the influence: “We want everyone to think well of us and I was exposed.” He also had a heart attack at the family’s isolated cabin during the filming of *Apocalypse Now*. “I thought I was going to die,” he says. “I wasn’t frightened until afterwards, when I realised how close I had come to dying. My arms froze, I went blind, lost my hearing and balance. I felt myself floating away. I wasn’t frightened. I remember thinking, ‘Oh, this is what

it’s like to die, what’s the big deal?’ Then I realised that this was the problem. To die was easy compared with living, and there were too many people dependent on me who I loved, so I willed myself to live. I crawled. While I waited for help I chewed grass. ‘Don’t faint, stay conscious,’ I told myself. I knew it was my only hope.”

Sheen says that the stress of the shoot, combined with his alcoholism, “trying to stay in shape and smoking three packs of

FAMILY HISTORY
Clockwise from far left: father and son in the 1960s; Martin with Ifugao tribespeople on the set of *Apocalypse Now*, 1976; brothers Emilio and Charlie in Ohio, 1968; Martin and Emilio together in Central Park this week



cigarettes a day”, led to the heart attack. “I felt so much anxiety afterwards over how close to death I had been. I realised I was fragmented. I was an actor, a father, an activist. I had to get whole.”

He had grown up a Catholic, a liberal one, then lapsed. In 1981 he reconverted. “It was my return to Catholicism that brought me sobriety long before I went into AA. It didn’t make sense to have spirituality and be swacked on booze, so I began to drink a lot less, then nothing.”

Three of the 12 steps in AA are rooted in Catholicism, Sheen says: the “fearless moral inventory” or examination of one’s conscience; admitting to faults in AA, or going to confession; and making amends. He goes to AA meetings “occasionally, but I find my sobriety in my faith”.

Estevez, an agnostic, is “more grounded in tangibles”, adding: “The Amish say when your hands are in soil, that’s when you’re closest to God, and my hands are in soil every day.” He tried therapy “but it didn’t take”. His father has had it periodically and also has a Catholic confessor. “The difference between therapy and confession is that confession is much cheaper,” Sheen laughs.

When Estevez became famous in the 1980s, Sheen admits to feeling “not competition but a measure of jealousy”, as well as “joy and happiness”. He knew that his son “had incredible talent” but felt “cautious”, knowing the vicissitudes of the business. “If somebody is only charming and handsome, they’re in showbusiness. I was never part of that,” Sheen says. “If you want to realise yourself and live an honest life, then you’re an artist.”

In the memoir, I say, you seem frustrated about not being famous. “You realise you’re never going to get total satisfaction from that,” Sheen says. Still, the global success of *The West Wing* must have been sweet. “Yes, it was a great source of nurturing and recognition.” Sheen says. “We were all liberal Democrats and we had an agenda — not to

bash Republicans but to show what was possible if you have an honest approach to public service.” Does President Bartlet hope for an Obama victory? “Very much. Don’t get me started on the Republicans,” Sheen growls. “They’re going to jump on all the things he didn’t do, but I think he’ll beat the hell out of them, frankly. When you put him and Romney together you’ll

see the difference between a man living an honest life and a hustling politician.”

Estevez says that, at 50, he is just hitting his stride. “I make things: wine, screen-plays, books, films.” He sees himself as “a storyteller” who will be in front of the camera in his two next films, one about horse-racing. “I want to jump back and forth between acting and directing like Clint Eastwood,” he explains. His father is celebrating 50-plus years of marriage. “I’m only responsible for half of it,” he laughs. “The important thing in any relationship is that each person helps the other become themselves,” he says, adding that his “honest, tough and extraordinarily compassionate” wife has helped him to do that. Sheen, “a happy man”, will carry on acting (seen next in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, alongside Andrew



Garfield) as long as the phone keeps ringing.

He will also be seen in Charlie’s forthcoming sitcom, *Anger Management*. “Charlie’s great; very funny, very disciplined. I had a great time with him. He films two shows a week — a tough grind. I don’t know how he does it.”

Is Sheen happy that Charlie seems to be over the craziness of last year? “Of course

I am.” Was it difficult to watch his meltdown? “For sure. I’m very grateful for his part in our life. I can’t imagine what it would be like without him.” Did he try to advise him? “We all did, but you can’t make anybody see themselves: that’s their challenge and journey. They have to come to themselves in what AA calls ‘a moment of clarity’, honestly accepting who they are. It’s about wanting to live the best life, and it’s not confined to people with addictions.” He doesn’t know if Charlie has done that: “Only he can answer that.”

Emilio says that they shouldn’t say anything further “to fuel the fire” and asks me, suddenly not the chilled man of the soil, to “keep a lid” on any more questions about Charlie. The latter, preparing to return to TV, recently said that he was looking forward to “just being a dad” with his children this summer. The Sheens appear to be closing ranks to rehabilitate the family brand. As Sheen notes, laughing: “My kids are great, they seem to be the only ones who will employ me.”

Along The Way: The Journey of a Father and Son is published by Simon and Schuster at £18.99

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