



# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: MICHAEL SHANNON

*A candid conversation with the star of screen and stage whose bone-deep empathy leads to indelible, Oscar-worthy performances but stops at the gates of the White House*

You're not likely to find a better example of the real Michael Shannon than the story of how he spent this year's Academy Awards night. Although he wasn't nominated, *The Shape of Water*—the interspecies romance in which he co-stars as a sadistic government agent—was up for several categories, including best picture. When it took the top prize, Shannon didn't join his director and castmates onstage; instead, he watched it all from the Old Town Ale House, a Chicago fixture where the jukebox never gets turned off and a painting of a naked Sarah Palin with a machine gun hangs on a wall. Shannon was sitting alone at the bar in a puffy jacket, nursing a beer beneath the tiny TV. If any other A-list actor had done this, it would have felt like a bad PR stunt. But when Shannon skips the red carpet to slum it at a dive bar, it feels exactly right—the perfect expression of his mercurial spirit.

If Shannon has a master plan for his career, it's difficult to pinpoint; then again, the same could be said of his entire life. From an early age, he was a natural vagabond: Born in Lexington, Kentucky, he bounced between living with his mother, a social worker in Lexington, and his father, an accounting professor in Chicago. After dropping out of high school, he co-founded A Red Orchid Theatre in Chicago, then broke into movies, first as a bit player in *Groundhog Day*, before deciding he wanted to do theater instead. He fled back to Chicago to do plays including Tracy Letts's *Bug* and *Killer Joe*, both of which went on to critical acclaim in New York and London, which led to bigger roles in such blockbusters as *Pearl Harbor* and *Bad Boys II*, which led to filmmaker Werner Herzog, who has cast Shannon three times to date, calling him “arguably the most important [actor] of his generation.”

Shannon manages to appear in at least one prestigious art-house movie every year, two of which—*Nocturnal Animals* and *Revolutionary Road*—have earned him Oscar nominations. But beyond that, his choices are all over the map. He has played a lot of bad guys, from an abusive boyfriend in *8 Mile* to a contract killer in *The Iceman* to a corrupt Prohibition agent in the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, but he bristles at any suggestion of typecasting. Whether it's a book-burning zealot in *Fahrenheit 451* or a pissed-off sorority girl in a Funny or Die video, he can be simultaneously ferocious and achingly vulnerable.

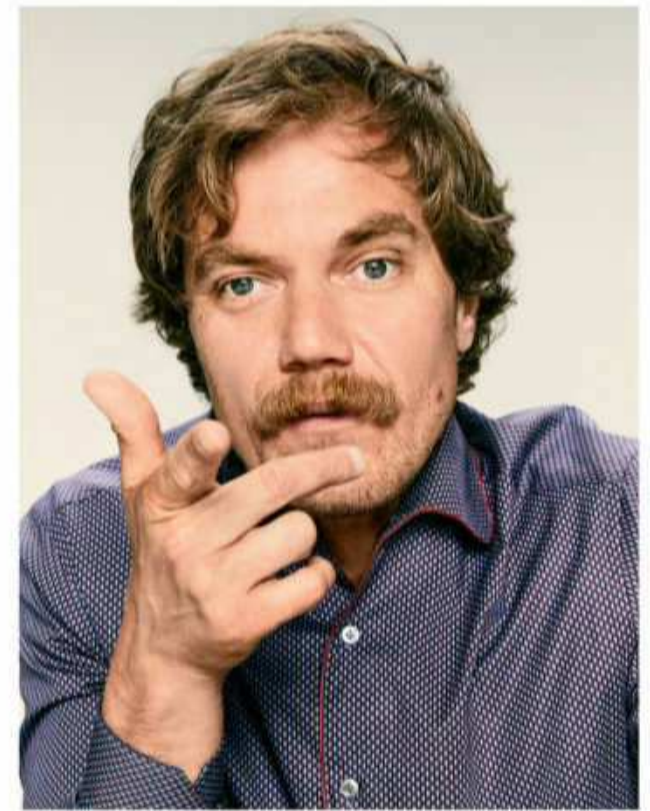
In his new movie, *What They Had*, about a woman with Alzheimer's and the family struggling to protect her, Shannon ventures into new territory as the funniest character in an otherwise heart-wrenching drama. When he



*“The people I play—whatever reductive term you want to use, villains or whatever—they're all in their own private shit box. They're all suffering as much as any other human being on earth.”*



*“Harvey Weinstein grabbed my arm and said, ‘I've got my eye on you. You're getting there.’ I didn't know what to say, so I was like, ‘Thanks, Dad.’ He just made me feel gross.”*



*“You don't have to know the answer to every question. That's not how life works. We don't necessarily know what the fuck we're doing. We're just winging it. And that's how life is.”*

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tells his sister, played by Hilary Swank, how their confused mother tried to seduce him, it's a welcome moment of comedic relief. "I just kept calling her Mom," he explains. "Thanks, Mom. It's nice to see you too, Mom. I'm really glad you birthed me, *Mom*." His character calls his sister "Dingleberry," makes jokes about pants-shitting and responds to news that their grandmother drank the holy water in church with "At least she's hydrated."

Playing the laugh lines may seem to be a stretch for the 44-year-old Shannon—who lives in Brooklyn with his wife, actress Kate Arrington, and their two daughters, Sylvie and Marion—but it's business as usual for an actor accustomed to defying expectations. In just the past five years, his roles have ranged from Elvis Presley to Superman's archnemesis.

We sent Contributing Editor **Eric Spitznagel** to meet with Shannon in New York City. He reports: "I've known Shannon since the early 1990s, when he was still a teenager. He acted in a few plays that I co-wrote and directed in Chicago, at a theater in a crime-ridden neighborhood where an audience of three was considered a packed house. For this interview, we huddled in the corner of a restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel and drank several glasses of wine. Later, we went to the *Late Night With Seth Meyers* studio, where he was a guest, and after the show we drank another bottle of wine in his dressing room while talking jazz and theater with Common. Shannon is an imposing presence, six-three with gangly limbs, a bushy mustache (he grew it for a role, his first authentic facial hair in a movie) and a hardboiled detective's jawline. Regardless of what he's saying, there's an intensity to him—he orders food like he's trying to get a confession out of the waitress—and he has a super-dry sense of humor that's easy to miss if you're not paying attention. But if Shannon has a tendency to stare at you until you think his retinas are going to burn into your brain, it's only because, unlike a lot of actors, he seems more interested in listening than hearing the sound of his own voice.

"Just moments after we found our table, Shannon glanced at the menu and noticed a dish called Charred Suckling Pig Hearts. 'Are you kidding me?' he said. 'I want that. I want that *so* much.' It was not how I envisioned our interview beginning, but it also seemed weirdly perfect—like, if I randomly walked into a bar

and sat down next to Shannon, this is exactly how it would go."

**PLAYBOY:** Eat a lot of hearts, do you?

**SHANNON:** Not really. I mean, I don't eat them regularly. I might if they were offered to me. This reminds me, when I was in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, back in 1997 I think it was, there was a scene where I'd carve my sister's heart out of her chest. We needed a heart, so I went down to the meatpacking district in Chicago. I got this cow heart and brought it to the theater, and we covered it in fake blood and used it in the show.

**PLAYBOY:** Just one cow heart?

**SHANNON:** We could make a heart last for a



few weeks. You don't want to keep it too long because then you're playing with fire. In this play, I was kissing the thing.

**PLAYBOY:** You kissed the heart?

**SHANNON:** Yeah. [*pauses*] With lots of tongue.

**PLAYBOY:** Here's the thing that almost never gets mentioned about you in the media: You're a funny guy.

**SHANNON:** I guess so. I think I have the capacity to make some people laugh.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you approach comedy and drama differently?

**SHANNON:** I approach everything differently. I don't have a system. I have my consciousness, my attention and I guess whatever muscle memory I've worked up over the years. I find

categorization mundane. Who cares whether something is a drama or a comedy? Laughter leads to tears anyway, and tears lead to laughter. Everything in life is a circle.

**PLAYBOY:** When was the last time you had an uncontrollable giggle fit?

**SHANNON:** If I'm onstage and someone is really struggling with their lines, that makes me giggle. I have to bite my lip. Usually when things go wrong or fall apart, I find that funny.

**PLAYBOY:** You like the chaos?

**SHANNON:** I do, yeah. I'm incredibly amused by that movie *The Room*. An old friend of mine said that when I watched it for the first time,

it was the hardest he's ever seen me laugh. I like watching things not work.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you want to do more comedy?

**SHANNON:** Sure. I don't know what that is. What would you classify as "more comedy"?

**PLAYBOY:** Comedy films.

**SHANNON:** Where the point is to make people laugh?

**PLAYBOY:** Yeah.

**SHANNON:** Your question is more organized than how I think about my career—or anything in my life, really. I don't know what I'll do in the future. I don't know what's going to happen. It's not interesting to say, "Yes, I will do more comedy." What's interesting is to say, "I have no fucking idea what's going to happen next."

**PLAYBOY:** That takes bravery.

**SHANNON:** It does?

**PLAYBOY:** Sure it does. Most people want to know where they're heading. They want to prepare for their future, feel like they're in control.

**SHANNON:** I wish I could claim I felt courageous, but at this point it's the only way I'm capable of existing.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you ever feel scared when you show up on a movie set?

**SHANNON:** All the time, particularly on the first day. It's like the first day of school times a hundred.

**PLAYBOY:** Even though you've probably done it all before?

**SHANNON:** That doesn't make it easier.

**PLAYBOY:** What about shooting a sex scene? Does that get less terrifying the more you do it?

**SHANNON:** You never get used to sex scenes. Sex scenes are absurd, but in some ways they're just like real sex. They have all the fear, anxiety, sadness and loneliness—but with none of the pleasure.

**PLAYBOY:** Your first sex scene was with Kim Basinger in *8 Mile*, right?



**SHANNON:** That was like skydiving. It was jumping out of a plane. But she was very nice to me, very kind.

**PLAYBOY:** How so?

**SHANNON:** She just had this look in her eyes. Everything about her was calm and reassuring. She was like, “It’s going to be okay. It’s fine. Don’t worry about anything.”

**PLAYBOY:** Was she picking up on your anxiety?

**SHANNON:** I don’t know. Maybe. I was a child back then. Well, no, I don’t want to make it sound like pedophilia or something.

**PLAYBOY:** You were 28 when that movie came out.

**SHANNON:** But in terms of life experience, I was out of my depth.

**PLAYBOY:** You did a sex scene with James Franco in 2011’s *The Broken Tower*, and according to Franco it made you “uncomfortable.”

**SHANNON:** Is that what he said? I was only uncomfortable because right before we shot it, James was eating a giant slice of pizza. He had tomato sauce all over his face, and his breath smelled like garlic. He was explaining how the sex scene was going to go, and I was like, “Could you not be eating pizza right now? Could you put that down, please?”

**PLAYBOY:** That’s not sexy.

**SHANNON:** That’s not sexy at all. We were shooting it over a pizzeria, so I understood. I’m sure he was hungry. I get it. But my main discomfort in that moment wasn’t the sex; it was the tomato sauce on his face.

**PLAYBOY:** You did another film with Franco, and he asked you to fuck a corpse.

**SHANNON:** That was our first film together. It was a short called *Herbert White*. I only agreed to do that because—well, it’s kind of a surreal story. I was in Boston, doing press for a movie and visiting my sister, and when I was waiting at the station for a train back to New York, I noticed this really weird-looking cat in a trench coat looking at me. He’s in a ball cap and big sunglasses and he’s got a big, bushy beard. From a distance he looked like a homeless person. He started walking toward me, and I’m thinking, Who the fuck is this guy? Then he gets right up in front of me and is like, “Hi, Mike. I’m James Franco.” In my head, I’m like, What’s happening right now? He says to me, “I’ve written a screenplay based on one of my favorite poems. It’s a short film, and I’d like you to star in it. It’s really dark and twisted. Would you consider doing that?”

**PLAYBOY:** Why was he so disheveled?

**SHANNON:** He was in Boston to get the Hasty Pudding award at Harvard or something. He was incognito. If I were him, I’d probably be incognito too. I think it was a real beard. [pauses] I think. I didn’t tug at it or anything.

**PLAYBOY:** You’re very loyal to directors. You’ve repeatedly appeared in films by Werner Herzog, Jeff Nichols and Franco. Why do you

keep coming back to them? Do they just have the best scripts?

**SHANNON:** It’s not just the story. For me, it always come down to, Do I want to work with this person? I mean, if the script is absolute garbage, I won’t do it. But if I like the director and think they’re smart and have something interesting to say, that’s more likely to convince me than anything else.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel the same directors are less likely to typecast you? Can they be counted on to challenge you rather than pigeonhole you in predictable villain roles?

**SHANNON:** I never thought of it that way. The whole typecasting thing has been imposed on my psyche, but it’s never been a concern of mine. I’m aware of it only because other people bring it up. To me, it reeks of laziness, people not paying attention to what I’m doing. I think if you’re really paying attention, you’ll see

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what I’m talking about. Most people barely pay attention to anything. As an actor, you have to grab them by the lapels to make them sit up and notice you. And people who are good at doing that tend to get rewarded for it, unfortunately. I’m not going to play it that way.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you have a lot of interaction with fans? Do they walk up to you and say hello?

**SHANNON:** Sometimes. The one question I get a lot, which I find bewildering, is “You’re the actor, right? You’re the actor!” Yes, I am *the* actor. I do it all. Everything you watch, that’s me.

**PLAYBOY:** Do they have strong opinions about your characters—who they like, who they don’t?

**SHANNON:** I used to get that a lot during *Boardwalk Empire*. People would come over and say, “You’re so great as Van Alden. I hate him so much!”

**PLAYBOY:** Did that bother you?

**SHANNON:** It irritated me a little. I feel if you hate Van Alden, you aren’t getting the whole picture. Van Alden wasn’t a bad person, and nobody suffered more than he did. He tried,

man; he tried. He was kind of like Job. Life kept throwing him curveballs. He couldn’t handle it.

**PLAYBOY:** When you spend enough time in a character’s skin, do you start to empathize with him?

**SHANNON:** Oh yeah, all the time. When I played Captain Beatty in *Fahrenheit 451*, about halfway through shooting I was like, “Maybe he’s right. Maybe people do know too much. Maybe people are better off not knowing anything.” I certainly see a lot of evidence of that in the empirical world. People are so overwhelmed and burdened with “knowledge” that they have absolutely no idea what to do with or about it. So maybe he’s got a point. Maybe ignorance is bliss.

**PLAYBOY:** But Beatty doesn’t seem that happy.

**SHANNON:** Sure. He’s in his own private hell. That’s the thing about all these people. The people I play—whatever reductive term you want to use, villains or whatever—they’re all in their own private shit box. They’re all suffering as much as any other human being on earth. Beatty is in agony. The only way he can function is to hold on to his worldview with white knuckles. It’s the only thing he has. He has no home, no family, nothing except his job and the voices in his head.

**PLAYBOY:** Does playing all these bad men and learning to see the world through their eyes make you more empathetic with bad men in the real world?

**SHANNON:** I was talking to somebody today, and Harvey fucking Weinstein came up. I said something that, I don’t know, I’m starting to regret.

**PLAYBOY:** You weren’t defending him?

**SHANNON:** No! I think Harvey Weinstein is a terrible human being. I could never stand the guy. When I got in close proximity to him, I just didn’t feel good.

He did not inspire good feelings in other people. I remember the first time I met him, at Chateau Marmont. I was there having dinner, and as I walked past his table, he grabbed my arm and said, “I’ve got my eye on you.”

**PLAYBOY:** Yikes.

**SHANNON:** And then he said, “You’re getting there.” I didn’t know what to say, so I was like, “Thanks, Dad.” He just made me feel gross.

**PLAYBOY:** Didn’t you make a movie for Weinstein that’s stuck in limbo now?

**SHANNON:** *The Current War*. He produced it, and we’re trying to sell it to somebody else, have another studio put it out. But the Weinstein Company won’t let go of it, and now it’s all tangled up in this legal bullshit. Probably nobody is ever going to fucking see the damn thing, and that makes me really sad. It’s a beautiful, relevant story, and I want people to see it. On one hand, I’m angry that this movie I love is probably going to disappear because of what this monster did. But on the other hand, after everything that happened...I feel sorry for him.

**PLAYBOY:** You feel sorry for Harvey Weinstein?



**SHANNON:** Listen, I know he's terrible. He did a bunch of terrible shit. But the guy's life is fucking over, man. He's probably shattered, you know? Now I'm just waiting for the headline: MIKE SHANNON IS A HARVEY WEINSTEIN SYMPATHIZER.

**PLAYBOY:** No, I get it. You're not saying he's innocent, or even a good person. You're just saying, as a human being, he must feel empty and alone.

**SHANNON:** I don't know how he gets out of bed in the morning. Why does he bother? If I was him, I would just walk in front of a bus and end it. What's he got to look forward to?

**PLAYBOY:** I'm sure they all feel that way. Kevin Spacey must be feeling pretty miserable right now.

**SHANNON:** I didn't know Kevin very well. Some people think we're friends, but we worked together for only five days on *Elvis & Nixon*. I'm sure he's suffering, and I'm not sure if anyone's reaching out to him. Those guys, Kevin and Harvey and all the rest of them who've been accused, they're like untouchables now. They may deserve it; they may not deserve it. I don't know. But I wonder what's going on in their heads.

**PLAYBOY:** It's not all that different from how you approach your characters.

**SHANNON:** Yeah. I can't help it. A lot of what I do is empathy. That's what I do. I have empathy for other people. That's how I make a living. I try to see things from other people's points of view.

**PLAYBOY:** Does it make you more aware or sensitive to human suffering? Can you look across a crowded restaurant and say, "Oh yeah, that person over there, they're in pain"?

**SHANNON:** I don't know if I'm super clairvoyant that way. [*scans the room*] All these people seem so much happier than I am. Why is that?

**PLAYBOY:** That might change if they suddenly noticed a creepy guy with a mustache staring at them from across the room.

**SHANNON:** As he eats charred pig hearts. [*pops another heart into his mouth*]

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think the world's in trouble?

**SHANNON:** There are a lot of things happening right now that I find deeply unsettling and upsetting. I'm primarily worried about what's happening with the EPA. I think the environmental issues are paramount. If you can't breathe, who gives a shit about anything else? And then the thing that kills me is they get philanthropic with the money. They make all this money destroying shit, and then they give it away. The Koch ballet theater at Lincoln Center in New York is named after one of the Koch brothers.

**PLAYBOY:** Didn't you meet a Koch brother once?

**SHANNON:** Yeah. It was at the *Great Gatsby* premiere in New York. I think it was the more docile of the two. Someone introduced us, and he kind of looked frightened, actually. He looked like a deer in headlights. He was surrounded

by artists. I didn't know enough at the time to punch him in his face, but I knew enough to be slightly horrified that we had shaken hands.

**PLAYBOY:** If you could go back and do it again, would you say something to him or actually punch him in the face?

**SHANNON:** What could I say? The thing is, he knows how terrible he is. If I said, "You know, what you're doing is not very nice," it's not like he would say, "Really? I didn't know that! This is such a surprise. If somebody would've told me, I would've stopped." He knows. They all know what they're doing.

**PLAYBOY:** You predicted that Trump was going to win long before it happened.

**SHANNON:** I did?

**PLAYBOY:** In an interview for the *Chicago Tribune* in September 2015, you said, "He's going to win the election."

**SHANNON:** Well, sure. It had to happen. And here's the thing: I think it would've been a

## ***How is Trump suffering? He's having a blast! Are you fucking kidding me?***

disaster either way. If Hillary had won, the shit would've hit the fan in a totally different way. There might have been a civil war or something crazy.

**PLAYBOY:** You really think that?

**SHANNON:** Well, they've got all the guns, apparently. For some of these people, the feeling about Hillary was kind of "Over my dead body." Well, now they've got their dream president, and they can see how that's worked out for us. A lot of them are still sticking to their guns, saying he's doing a good job. It's mystifying to me.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think their minds can be changed?

**SHANNON:** Somebody who thinks Trump is doing a good job, there's no conversation to have with that person. I know they say you should reach across the aisle and all that crap, but to me it feels like putting your hand into a fan.

**PLAYBOY:** If or when they make a movie about the Trump presidency, who would you want to play?

**SHANNON:** Obviously I would be John Bolton, because of my mustache. No, I don't know. I honestly don't think I'd want to be in a movie about this administration. I wouldn't want anyone to make a movie about it. My preference would be that it just fade into nonexistence. I wouldn't want to memorialize it or celebrate it in any way.

**PLAYBOY:** Even if the film were critical?

**SHANNON:** It wouldn't matter. People feel the way they feel about Trump and his co-conspirators. It's like what I said about the Koch brothers: People know what's happening, and they feel one way or the other about it, and nothing you do is going to change that.

**PLAYBOY:** There's no part of you that would want to play Donald Trump?

**SHANNON:** No.

**PLAYBOY:** Just to get inside his head? You talked about being fascinated with bad men who are suffering.

**SHANNON:** How do you mean? How is he suffering?

**PLAYBOY:** You don't think Trump struggles with demons?

**SHANNON:** He's having a blast! Are you fucking kidding me? That guy is having so much fun.

**PLAYBOY:** And there's no self-doubt or fear?

**SHANNON:** He's having the time of his fucking life. He doesn't even have to work. All the hard work that most people have to do to get to be president of the United States, he just skipped all that. The fucking guy doesn't even know what's in the Constitution. He doesn't have any grasp of history or politics or law or anything. He's just blindfolded, throwing darts at the side of a bus.

**PLAYBOY:** So Trump is where your capacity for empathy ends?

**SHANNON:** What is there to be empathetic toward?

**PLAYBOY:** What do you think is going through his head at four A.M. as he's lying in bed and staring at the ceiling?

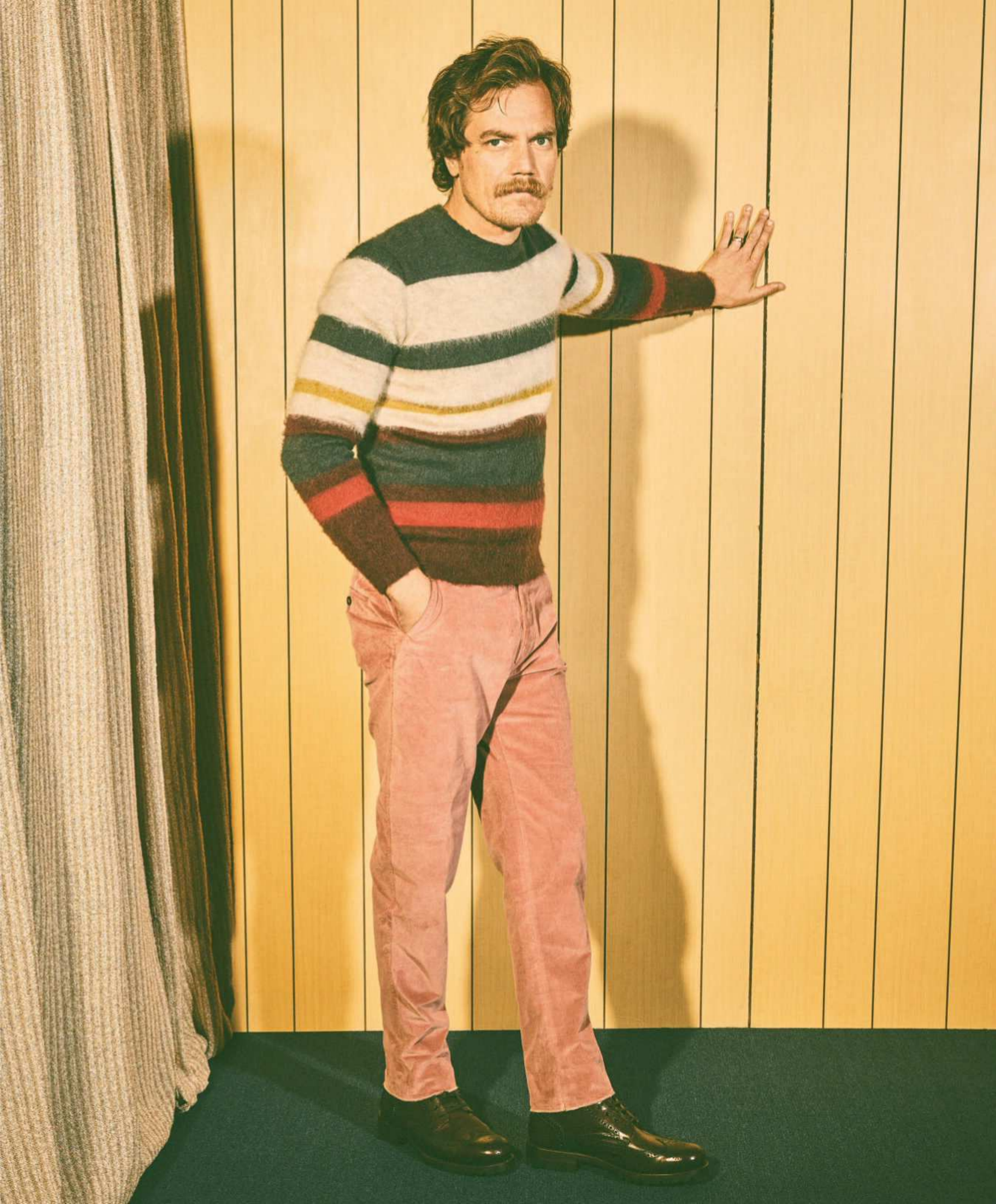
**SHANNON:** He's probably thinking, I want some fucking pussy. I don't know. I'm not going to remotely contemplate the notion that Trump is capable of deep reflection.

**PLAYBOY:** In any form?

**SHANNON:** In any form! It doesn't happen. Fuck that guy. When he's alone with his thoughts, he's not capable of anything more complex than "I want some pussy and a cheeseburger. Maybe my wife will blow me if I tell her she's pretty."

**PLAYBOY:** You really don't think if you made a movie about Trump, as you perceive him to be, that it would make any difference?

**SHANNON:** Probably not, no. People believe what they believe. I do believe in the arts' capacity to make people think. I believe that happens. Not all the time but most of the time.





**PLAYBOY:** What was the last movie that changed you or made you think about something in unexpected ways?

**SHANNON:** For an actor this is going to sound terrible, but a lot of times it's documentaries that do that to me.

**PLAYBOY:** Why is that?

**SHANNON:** The truth is much more interesting than fiction. When I'm in a movie about actual events, there's a terrible process where people take something that's intrinsically interesting and don't have enough faith in it to just leave it alone. So they mess with it, thinking they're making it more compelling, which inevitably doesn't happen. But in documentaries that's never going to happen. You have the real story, and you either care or you don't.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you go back and watch any of your movies, studying your plays like a quarterback?

**SHANNON:** No. I approach it the way I think Bob Dylan does. The past is the past, you know? He doesn't sit around listening to *Blonde on Blonde*. He could listen to it and think, Man, I did this; that thin, wild mercury sound is just so cool. But he doesn't. The tricky thing about acting is that the longer you do it, the more difficult it gets.

**PLAYBOY:** And yet you've spawned your own verb: *Shannoning*.

**SHANNON:** That has absolutely nothing to do with me. I did not originate that term. I don't even necessarily agree with it.

**PLAYBOY:** It came from Octavia Spencer, who acted with you in *The Shape of Water*. According to her, you had a reputation for nailing a scene in one take.

**SHANNON:** I don't know if that's true.

**PLAYBOY:** It was true enough for her that she created the word *Shannoning* to describe getting something so right the first time that you don't need to do it again.

**SHANNON:** But I never want to do just one take. I always want to do more. I guess sometimes what I do on the first take is plenty sufficient.

**PLAYBOY:** It seems like you tend to avoid over-analyzing or over-rehearsing a scene. You just want to do it and see what happens.

**SHANNON:** That is true. I do have a loathing for that kind of navel-gazing. I think a lot of times people are stalling when they do that. They're trying to make it less scary or something. But to me, it kills the moment. You don't have to know the answer to every question. That's not how life works. You and me sitting here, we're talking, and we don't necessarily know what the fuck we're doing. We're just winging it. And that's how life is.

**PLAYBOY:** And it's how you want acting to be?

**SHANNON:** Everyone wants it to be "This line means this and this moment means this." I'm comfortable not knowing what things mean. I don't feel that's my job, to know what things mean.

**PLAYBOY:** In terms of the story or the character you're playing?

**SHANNON:** All of it. Certainly the story. People always ask me, "What do you hope audiences will take away from this?" I don't mean to be rude, but are you really asking me that question? If I answer that, why would they need to watch the thing in the first place? They could just get my answer. For me, it's more experiential. It's about having an experience and realizing you have limited control over what that experience becomes.

**PLAYBOY:** You want that in your career and your life?

**SHANNON:** It's certainly the way I've lived my life. If I had some sort of plan, I wouldn't be here right now.

**PLAYBOY:** When you were 15, did you have any thoughts about your future?

**SHANNON:** At 15 I was living moment to

## ***I do believe in the arts' capacity to make people think, most of the time.***

moment. I wouldn't even have been interested in discussing my future. I knew I loved acting. When I started acting in Chicago, I loved it so much. You know; you were there. I would do anything. Anything, anywhere.

**PLAYBOY:** Nobody was more committed than you.

**SHANNON:** But I wasn't thinking that maybe one day this will lead to something. I was fortunate; I got some help from my dad when I really needed it. I had a safety net, which gave me the opportunity to have that attitude.

**PLAYBOY:** He gave you financial help?

**SHANNON:** There were times when, if I was really crashing and burning, he would bail me out. Which he could do, because he was a professor and they do all right.

**PLAYBOY:** There were rumors that when you started out you were sleeping in the park.

**SHANNON:** That paints a picture I'm not entirely comfortable with. I know Tracy Letts gets mad when I say that, because he's the one who put it out there. If and when that happened,

it was very sporadic. I was not someone who needed to be worried about.

**PLAYBOY:** Did a part of you know it would all work out?

**SHANNON:** I didn't know anything. I was ambitious but only to an extent. I didn't move out to L.A. and put my head shot on everyone's windshield. I had no interest in leaving Chicago. People would move to L.A. or New York, and I thought they were crazy. I was having so much fun in Chicago. I knew if you moved to New York or L.A., scary things happened, like nobody hired you or you had to work some terrible day job.

**PLAYBOY:** That doesn't happen in Chicago?

**SHANNON:** Well, okay, people had to work terrible day jobs in Chicago, but at least on the weekends you could go act in a play and tell a story and feel like you were exercising that part of yourself. I'll never forget when I went to L.A. once and saw these four actors I had tremendous respect for in Chicago, and they were all delivering pizzas. They were all in a parking lot, playing hacky sack and waiting for pizza delivery orders. I thought, This just isn't right.

**PLAYBOY:** You got into acting because you didn't want to play sports, right?

**SHANNON:** I was not an athlete, and I wanted something to do after school. I was living with my mom, down in Kentucky. They had a bulletin board at school with various activities, and one of them was speech team. That's how the whole thing started.

**PLAYBOY:** You did a monologue about boogers.

**SHANNON:** It's called "Booger Days," from *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you know right away, "This is what I should be doing with my life"?

**SHANNON:** No. It wasn't like some woozy fever dream. It was just, This is kind of interesting. Some people know as soon as they're old enough to be conscious of themselves that they want to be actors. I had other thoughts about what I might end up doing.

**PLAYBOY:** Like what?

**SHANNON:** I thought architecture was interesting. And I always loved music. I played bass in the orchestra.

**PLAYBOY:** You still play in a band, right? Corporal.

**SHANNON:** Yeah, but it's hard to make a living from music. There are people who have devoted their whole lives to making music who don't make any money.

**PLAYBOY:** You skipped the Golden Globes ceremony earlier this year to sing Iggy Pop songs for a David Bowie tribute in Chicago. That sure sounds like a guy who'd rather be rocking than hanging out with actors.

**SHANNON:** I did five songs as my feeble



version of Iggy Pop, and when I came off the stage I felt like I was going to die. The real Iggy Pop does this for two hours a night on tour.

**PLAYBOY:** And he's in his 70s.

**SHANNON:** Right! I can't do that. My friend Matt Walker, who was drumming with us that night, told me a story about Iggy. Matt is Morrissey's drummer and goes on tour with him. Morrissey did a co-headlining thing with Iggy Pop at some sort of music festival, and Matt was watching from the wings. Iggy killed it, as he always does, because he's Iggy fucking Pop. After the show, these two guys had Iggy's arms around their shoulders and were dragging him back to the green room. Iggy was just depleted. He had nothing left.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you ever felt like that, utterly depleted, after an acting performance?

**SHANNON:** When I do theater. Doing eight shows a week is an adjustment. In Chicago we were lucky to get two shows a week. But when I came to New York and started doing *Killer Joe* and *Bug*, that was eight shows a week, two on Saturday and two on Sunday. Between the Sunday matinee and the night show, I was usually like, "Please Lord, I can't do this anymore. I can't." I'd be on the floor in the fetal position, listening to Radiohead, losing my mind.

**PLAYBOY:** Doing a film isn't as exhausting?

**SHANNON:** People have a tendency to overreact in this business. They act like coming to a set and sitting around a trailer all day is hard work. It can be tedious sometimes, but it's not torture. Compared to, like, a Syrian refugee, our life is not that brutal. Actors can be babies.

**PLAYBOY:** Your parents sent you to therapy as a kid.

**SHANNON:** My dad did, yeah. But that was unrelated to acting in any way, shape or form.

**PLAYBOY:** What was it related to?

**SHANNON:** I had been jostled about a fair amount in my childhood, back and forth. I was feeling a little discombobulated. It wasn't like I was hearing voices or anything.

**PLAYBOY:** But you did apparently trash your therapist's office once.

**SHANNON:** Well, yeah, but I don't think that's the makings of any thrilling saga. There are children doing that as we speak. There are children being unruly and unwieldy and expressing themselves in outlandish ways all over the city of New York at this exact moment.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you ever tapped into that adolescent anger in one of your roles?

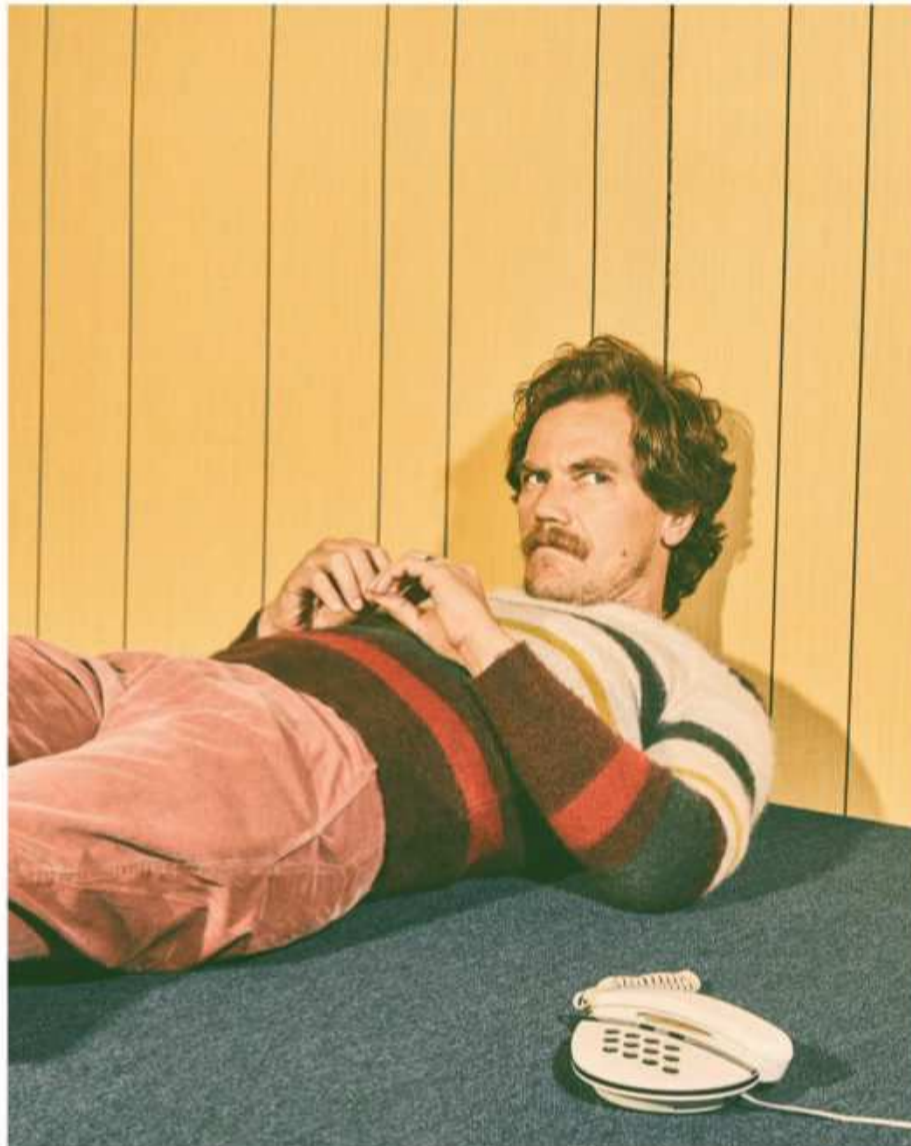
**SHANNON:** Not really, no. It was such a long

time ago. I'm nothing like that anymore. I'm a totally different person.

**PLAYBOY:** I don't mean for you. I mean if you're playing a character with a lot of anger, do you draw on memories of your own anger as a teen?

**SHANNON:** Never. I rely on my consciousness, and my consciousness is composed of all my life experiences. I'm sure something akin to what you're describing takes place, but do I sit down and say, "Oh, this scene in *What They Had* is like the time I got fired from Homer's Ice Cream for throwing a pickle at a customer"? No, I don't do that.

**PLAYBOY:** So when it's over, you just clock



out like it's any other job?

**SHANNON:** It's not about emotions for me—at least not anymore. Maybe in the beginning, when I was a kid, it was more of that. "I'm going to express my emotions all over the place! All over you!" It's really not about that anymore for me. Now it's just about asking, What's the story? What is this about? What does it mean? What could it mean potentially?

**PLAYBOY:** That sounds so cold and analytical.

**SHANNON:** It's much more analytical. I don't think acting is ultimately a good way to deal with your own emotions.

**PLAYBOY:** There's a scene in *What They Had* where your character is crying over the death of his father.

**SHANNON:** Well, okay, okay.

**PLAYBOY:** Your own dad passed away, so I thought maybe—

**SHANNON:** Fine, yes, that's one rare instance when I do bring myself into it. Of course you want to think about the people you love who you've lost if you're portraying that on camera. But when it's over, when the director says "Cut," I get up and go get a cup of coffee. I don't stay there on the sidewalk, wailing and rolling around on my back. I think about it enough to tell that particular beat, to accomplish that scene, and then when it's over I get up and walk away.

**PLAYBOY:** Is acting satisfying to you?

**SHANNON:** Most days it can be. And some days when you're working it's just, "I want to go home. I want to get the fuck out of here." But that's like anybody. [pauses] I remember one time I was doing a play at the Public Theater in New York, *The Little Flower of East Orange*, and Philip Seymour Hoffman was directing. The main prop in the play was a hospital bed, because my character's mother, who was played by Ellen Burstyn, was in the hospital. We had this bed in the rehearsal room. One day we took a lunch break and everybody split, but I didn't typically go anywhere for lunch; I'd just look at my script out in the hallway. So I'm out there, and I walk back into the rehearsal hall, and Phil is there all by himself. He's just lying on the hospital bed in the middle of the room, staring at the ceiling. I walk up to him and I'm like, "Are you okay?" He just kind of blinks. And finally he says, "You know, Shannon, one day you're going to know what I'm feeling right now."

**PLAYBOY:** What did you say?

**SHANNON:** I didn't know what to say, but in my head I was like, Shit. Then he says to me, "Sometimes I wish I could change my name and just drive away and go work in a gas station somewhere, where nobody knows who I am. Just disappear."

**PLAYBOY:** Why do you think he needed that?

**SHANNON:** You get to a certain point, like he did, and everybody wants something from you. People loved Phil. Everyone was like, "Phil, Phil, Phil, we need Phil!" I think he just felt overwhelmed. When he told me about wanting to disappear, I imagine he'd probably just gotten off the phone with his agent and there were like 10 offers pending. "Have you read this script? What do you think about that? I really think you should do this." Meanwhile



he's trying to direct this play his friend wrote. You can't even have the experience you're having right now because somebody is constantly asking what you want to do a month from now.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel the same way?

**SHANNON:** People ask me, "Don't you ever say no?" Yeah, I say no all the fucking time. If I wanted, every minute of my life could be accounted for. My next three years could be totally booked up. And then you're just crossing shit off a list. It sounds obnoxious to complain about that, because isn't it the dream? But some days you just want to have a cup of coffee and go for a walk. You don't want to go to the set and do the scene where the thing blows up or your dad dies or whatever. You just want to hang out. [*pauses and stares out window*] It's certainly not the way it used to be. I've had a lot of really good, worthwhile experiences. But you get tired. I don't know how long I can keep doing it.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you do when you get tired?

**SHANNON:** I try to take breaks. There were a couple of years when it kind of got out of control. I was going from one thing to the next. But it's not so bad now. The work is demanding, but the part where you're not working is demanding too. The part where you're just a dad and you're taking the kids to school and doing the dishes and washing the laundry and cleaning the litter box and taking out the garbage. They're both demanding. They're demanding in different ways, but they're both demanding. I still get rejuvenated by being at home.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you ever quit acting?

**SHANNON:** I don't know. It scares me because it's my job, and I have responsibilities. If I quit, I'm not exactly sure how I would make a living. Sometimes I think we should just stop making movies altogether. Not only me, the whole industry.

**PLAYBOY:** Stop making movies entirely?

**SHANNON:** I think we'd all be better off. It's distracting us from stuff we really need to be dealing with. No matter what kind of movie you make, it's ultimately an escape. That's what movies are: an escape.

**PLAYBOY:** People would still be staring at their phones.

**SHANNON:** Yeah, that's true. I don't know what to do about that.

**PLAYBOY:** You're not on Twitter, Facebook, any of it.

**SHANNON:** I don't do social media. I wish I could say it's hard for me to restrain myself, but it's not. I don't understand people's fascination with it. I wish I could claim it was some sort of heroic gesture on my part, but I'm simply not interested. Who fucking cares?

**PLAYBOY:** I notice you've upgraded from your usual flip phone.

**SHANNON:** I literally couldn't get a flip phone.

My provider wouldn't give me one, so I had to get this. [*picks his iPhone up off the table like it's a turd*] But honestly, it doesn't fucking matter. I use it the same way I use the flip phone. If I need to make a call or text somebody, I do that. But I don't get internet on this. I don't have wi-fi. I can't get e-mails. I don't have games. Until I met Kate, I didn't have a cell phone. It used to be if you wanted to get hold of me, you had to call Red Orchid. When my girlfriend before Kate and I broke up, she left this nasty message on the answering machine at Red Orchid about my stinky feet. That was a little embarrassing.

**PLAYBOY:** Were your feet the reason the relationship didn't work?

**SHANNON:** No, she was just mad at me. I'd broken up with her. It was fated to end, let's put it that way. Ultimately she was angry and had to get in one more dig at me. My point is, when Kate and I started seeing each other, she asked me if I would

## ***Sometimes I think we should just stop making movies altogether.***

get a cell phone, and I did. And that was that.

**PLAYBOY:** You've been with Kate since 2006.

**SHANNON:** It's the longest relationship I've had in my life.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you think you'd make it this long?

**SHANNON:** It's not anything I'd ever envisioned for myself, but here it is.

**PLAYBOY:** You didn't grow up with good marriage role models. Both of your parents got married five times.

**SHANNON:** I don't think there's any guarantee, just because your folks stayed married for 70 years, that you're going to know what the fuck to do with another human being. You're not them, and they're not you. You don't have to be like your parents. It's such an arbitrary thing, how and why relationships work. You could get all the lessons you want, but that doesn't mean you won't fuck it up somehow. I guess I learned a little of what not to do. My mom married people and tried to fix them. That's never a good idea. My dad figured it out on his last go-around. He was with his last wife

until he passed away, and she's still very much a part of my life. She's a sweet woman. She's coming to New York this weekend to watch the kids.

**PLAYBOY:** Other than getting a cell phone, did you change at all for Kate?

**SHANNON:** I've had to change a little bit here and there. [*pauses*] I bought a house. That was a big change for me.

**PLAYBOY:** You didn't want to own property?

**SHANNON:** We have a place in Chicago, but buying in Red Hook was something we just avoided. It was mostly on me.

**PLAYBOY:** What made you change your mind?

**SHANNON:** We would look at houses from time to time because my wife really wanted to get a house. We'd go on these spurts of looking at 10 or 15 different houses, and I'd be like, "I don't want to get any of these." They would go away, a year would go by, and then she'd get obsessed again. I'd be like, "Nope, I don't like any of these." I just thought I could keep her at bay indefinitely.

**PLAYBOY:** What didn't you like about the houses?

**SHANNON:** I don't know. It was just a feeling. When I walked into them, I was always like, "This isn't my house. Someone else lives here."

**PLAYBOY:** You know the other people move out when you buy it, right?

**SHANNON:** It just feels weird. It gives me the heebie-jeebies.

**PLAYBOY:** What made you feel okay with the house you eventually bought?

**SHANNON:** I don't know. I walked in and just immediately felt, Oh, okay, I could live here.

**PLAYBOY:** How did you become a parent?

**SHANNON:** Are you honestly asking me that question? Come on, we all know how it works. This is **PLAYBOY**, for

Christ's sake.

**PLAYBOY:** I don't mean the fun part. How did you make the decision? Was it like getting a house? You avoid and avoid and avoid, and one day it inexplicably feels okay to make that leap.

**SHANNON:** It was not... How do I talk about this? We weren't... It just... We rolled with the punches, let's put it like that.

**PLAYBOY:** Ah. There were no "Are we ready?" conversations?

**SHANNON:** No.

**PLAYBOY:** So you Shannoned it?

**SHANNON:** [*Laughs*] I guess I did.

**PLAYBOY:** If there's a common thread running through your life and career, it sounds like your philosophy is "Let's not plan for anything; we'll just figure it out as we go."

**SHANNON:** That's it, man. You hit the nail on the head. People ask me what my five-year plan is, what projects I want to do. I don't think that way. It's how I've always been. It's the way I'm capable of coping with existence—with the fact that I'm alive. ■