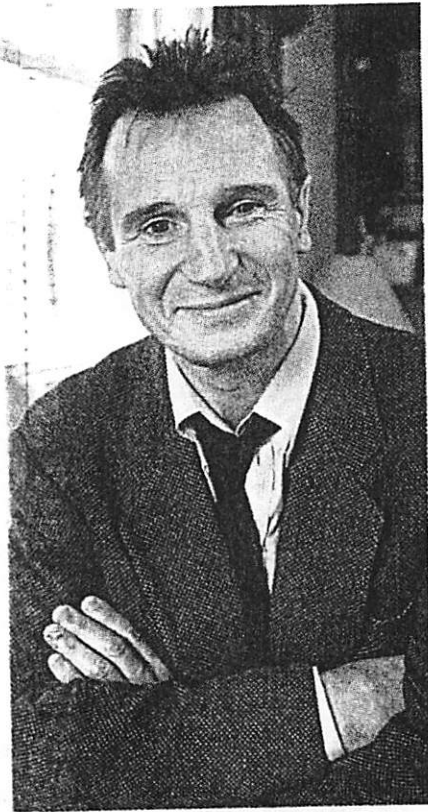


Liam Neeson as Kinsey Loses His Private Self

By DINITIA SMITH

Liam Neeson as Alfred C. Kinsey? Just about as likely as Woody Allen as Sir Edmund Hillary. So it seemed strange indeed when the director Bill Condon tapped Mr. Neeson to play the title character in his new film "Kinsey," about the sex researcher of the 1940's and 50's, opening on Friday.

Mr. Neeson is 6 feet 4 inches tall, fit and heroic-looking, with a face that can express a kind of beatific innocence, as it sometimes does in his role as Kinsey. Mr. Neeson is also, at 52, still something of a heartthrob, usually playing characters with a decided zero score on Kinsey's famed



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Liam Neeson plays Alfred Kinsey and sees the man's subtleties.

TABOOS THAT LINGER

Much has changed since Alfred C. Kinsey's time, but one thing has remained constant: Americans' ambivalence about the scientific study of sexuality. Science Times.

heterosexual-to-homosexual rating scale.

He was Oskar Schindler, the womanizing savior of European Jews during the Holocaust. And who can forget his sizzling performance as the seaman, Mat Burke, opposite his future wife, Natasha Richardson, in the Roundabout Theater Company's production of "Anna Christie"? (The New Yorker critic John Lahr called Mr. Neeson "a sequoia of sex.")

Kinsey, however, by the time he reached middle age, was a stooped, worn figure who was decidedly bisexual. Born in 1894, he may have been a pioneer in lifting the secrecy that shrouded human sexuality, but he was also obsessive and controlling, and some of his personal practices were masochistic. His biographer, James H. Jones, wrote that he would insert a toothbrush into his penis. A few years before he died he circumcised himself with a pocketknife (without anesthesia). After recording the sex history of a pedophile who boasted of sexually molesting boys as young as two months, Kinsey wrote to the man, "I rejoice at everything you send, for I am then assured that that much more of your material is saved for scientific publication."

But when Mr. Neeson was offered the chance to play Kinsey, "I didn't have any hesitation," he said in a recent interview. In the film, Mr. Neeson and Mr. Condon portray Kinsey as something of a hero. "He saw a gap in our human knowledge that he wanted to fill," Mr. Neeson said. "He was driven to investigate it. I admire that extraordinary work ethic." Kin-

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THE Arts

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To Play Kinsey, Liam Neeson Loses Some of His Private Self

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sey became a household name as a result of two huge studies known as the Kinsey Reports — "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" in 1948 and "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" in 1953 — which became best sellers but angered some conservative and religious groups.

"He was a task master, uncomfortable with people, but I don't find him nasty," Mr. Neeson said at his apartment-office on the Upper West Side. He lives in the building with Ms. Richardson and their two sons, 10 and 9.

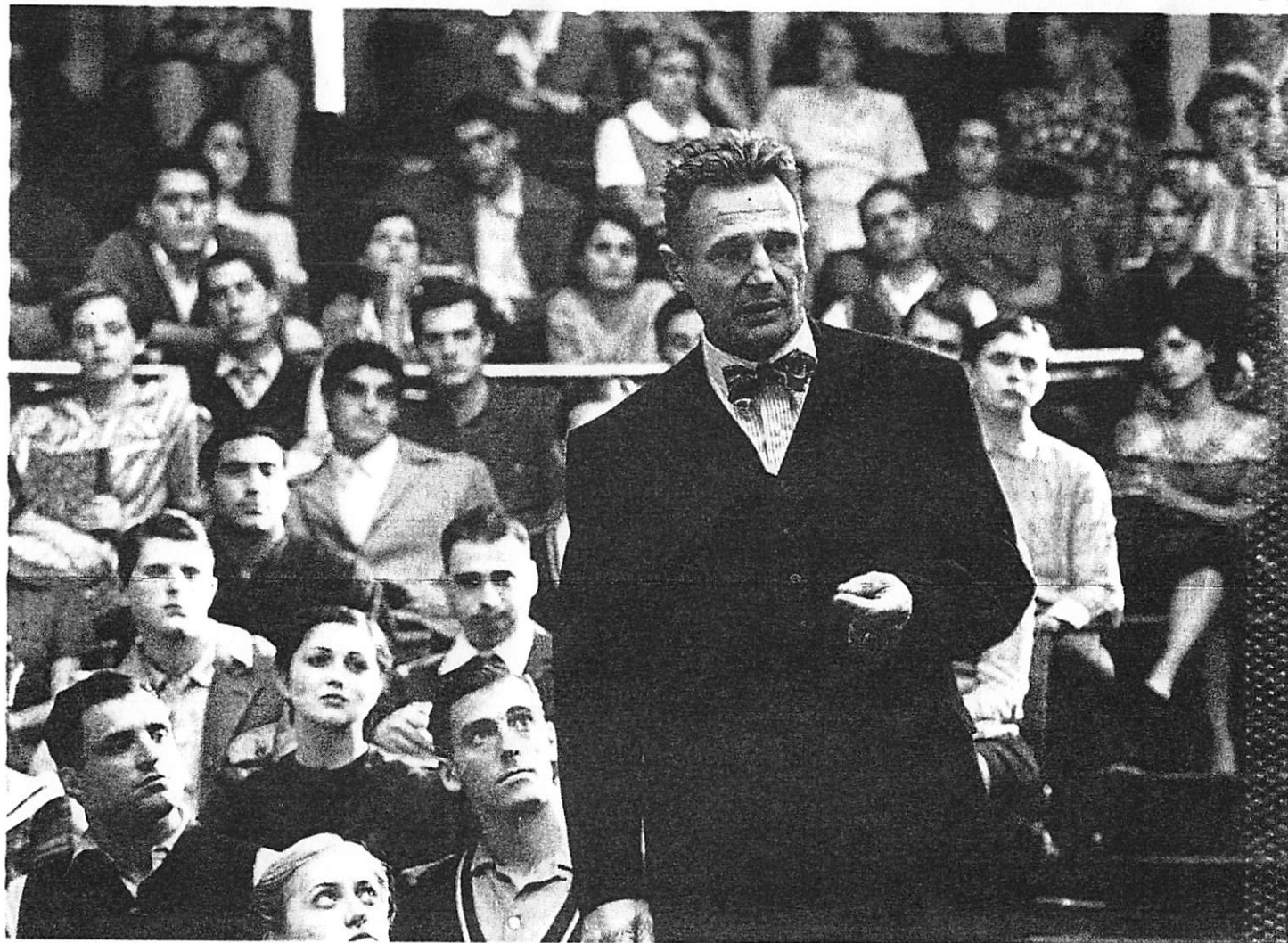
In a telephone interview from California, Mr. Condon said he chose Mr. Neeson because he has "a power essential to Kinsey." Describing the sex researcher as a tough character to portray, Mr. Condon added, "He's not your typical person at the center of a movie." In most American movies, Mr. Condon said, the central character is usually "the smartest person in the room."

"Even Hannibal Lecter in 'The Silence of the Lambs' is still the smartest person in the room. Kinsey is just the opposite. He's brilliant, but he's missing things. He's clueless, certainly socially. When he was writing, he could really lose patience with people."

Still, Mr. Condon said: "When you see his sensitivity and compassion, the ways he'd been wounded by his father, you see the child in him. I couldn't imagine anyone else bringing all those qualities to the part, and also his great intelligence."

Does the film make Kinsey, who died in 1956, seem too heroic, Mr. Neeson was asked? At the end, for example, Kinsey is shown in a forest with his wife, looking up at the trees in wonder as sonorous music plays. "Kinsey was inspired by nature all his life," Mr. Neeson said. "Did that scene happen? Probably not. But did he and his wife go hiking, observing nature with their kids? Nature did replenish him."

For the film (released by Fox Searchlight), Mr. Neeson, with the help of Michael Laudati, a special effects makeup artist, aged from his 20's to his 60's. And he gamely stopped working out for several months so he could suggest Kinsey's



Ken Regan/Associated Press

Liam Neeson as Kinsey during a lecture that resulted from his research on human sexuality at Indiana University, in the film "Kinsey."

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slack body and paunch. When Mr. Condon filmed a scene in which Kinsey and his wife, Mac, played by Laura Linney, sit at a picnic table, talking about sex, he recalled, he had to remind them, "O.K., everybody, bellies out!"

To perform the role, Mr. Neeson undertook the usual actor's research, reading biographies of Kinsey, including those of James H. Jones and Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy. He went to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he read some of the Kinsey archives, and he met John Bancroft, the former head of the institute. To get Kinsey's Midwestern accent right, the Irish-born actor listened to a rare tape of Kinsey's voice delivering one of his last lectures in

California. He also learned to pronounce "gynecological" the way Kinsey did, with "gyn" pronounced like the second syllable of "begin."

When it came time to kiss the actor Peter Sarsgaard, who plays the Kinsey researcher Clyde Martin, Mr. Neeson did the job with the appearance of shy passion.

As for Kinsey's masochistic sexual practices, some of which Mr. Neeson performs, discreetly, in the film, Mr. Neeson said: "When you hear about stuff like that, you have a knee-jerk

reaction. You want to immediately cross your legs. He did go beyond the pale. He experimented with that realm between pain and pleasure. He used it as a springboard to empathize with these people he was encountering. He so wanted to understand them."

But Mr. Neeson is no Method actor. "I do believe at the end of the night when you're with your family," he said, "the character gets hung up on the door like a coat, and is there to be taken on the next morning."