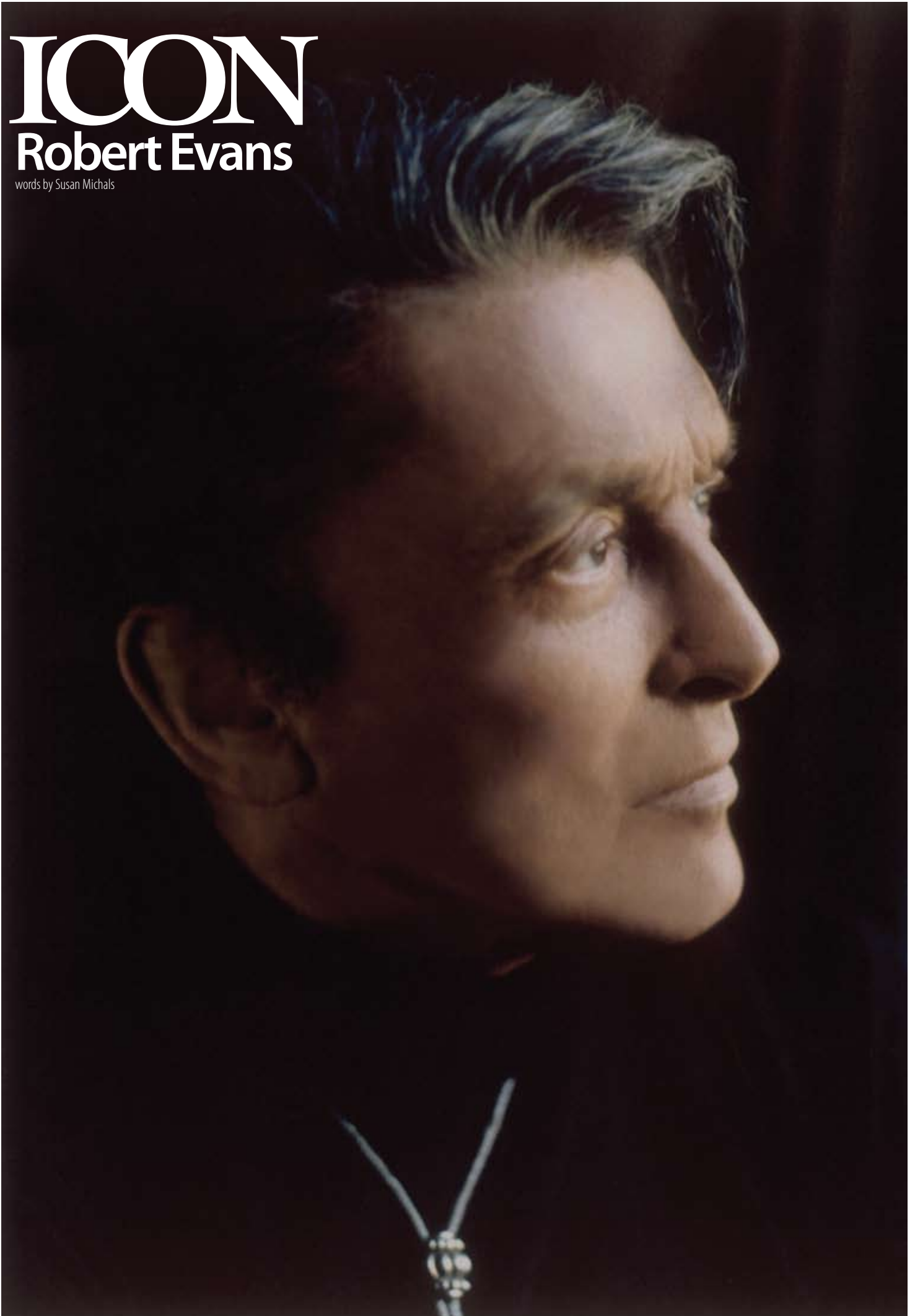


ICON

Robert Evans

words by Susan Michals



Everyone in this town wants to be first. They want the front page, the top of the marquee, #1 at the box office. They want to take credit for discovering the latest starlet and starting trends that everyone will soon be following. To achieve this premiere presence requires – among other things – three very important traits: rapturous instinct, unflinching tenacity, and balls (even if you're a woman, this remains an absolute requirement).

Robert Evans has been blessed with this all-important Hollywood trifecta since day one.

Today at age 77, despite having a multiple stroke ten years ago, he is ebullient, healthy, and is still producing movies. This year marks the 40th anniversary of his seminal film, *Rosemary's Baby* – his first production for Paramount. Last month, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honored Evans with both a screening of the film as well as tributes from friends and colleagues, including Slash, Peter Bart, Brett Ratner, and Sumner Redstone. Ratner, who became ensconced in the Evans fold a number of years back, spoke of the wisdom he has gained under the watchful eye of his friend (albeit beneath those famous omnipresent sunglasses). "I'm not picking his brain, I'm eating his brain."

Robert Evans wasn't even into the Hollywood thing in the beginning. He was into Evan-Picone, his brother-in-law's Manhattan clothing line.

But on a business sojourn out West, he was discovered by chance, much like Lana Turner – though this time it wasn't at Schwab's, it was poolside at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Out of the gate he was starring opposite Jimmy Cagney in *Man of a Thousand Faces*, being touted as the next Rudolph Valentino. Overnight, he was the latest Hollywood sensation. "I was a half-assed actor," he says. Maybe acting wasn't his forté, but while filming Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, he witnessed firsthand the power of the producer. Hemingway – along with co-stars Ava Gardner, Eddie Albert, and Tyrone Power, wanted Evans out of the movie and let their producer know by telegram. Darryl F. Zanuck, who was running the show, resolutely replied, "The kid stays in the picture." This same line would be immortalized almost forty years later as the title of his autobiography. He realized the world of producing was where he truly belonged.

"When you own property, you're king. Without it, you're a pee-on," he says in the documentary based on his book. The first property he acquired was a book called *The Detective*, which he eventually made into a movie starring Frank Sinatra. He was already getting a reputation – young, handsome, and aggressive in his production style. Peter Bart, then a writer for the *New York Times*, wrote an article about him that caught the eye of Gulf & Western executive Charlie Bludhorn, who hired the young up and comer to run Paramount. At that time, the studio was at the bottom of the heap, #9 in town. Evans was inexperienced, but he came equipped with a voracious appetite to succeed and a visionary's manifesto that said nothing comes easy. Soon

he had his first project: *Rosemary's Baby*. He chose the young European director Roman Polanski to helm the film, and like Evans, Polanski was relatively green in the ways of Hollywood. Yet this was a match made in celluloid heaven. They were innovators in the midst of a filmic revolution – the old stodgies at the studios still wanted the Rock Hudson/Doris Day goody-goody films like *Paint Your Wagon*. This was 1968 and that type of fare was rebuked by the masses. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the Vietnam War was erupting, and the Summer of Love had gone way beyond June, July, and August. *Rosemary's Baby* became a box office smash, made Mia Farrow a star, and won Ruth Gordon an Oscar.

Eli Wallach once said, "Having the critics praise you is like having the hangman say you've got a pretty neck." And for Evans, his was now on the line. The heads of Gulf and Western weren't happy. Even though *Rosemary* was a hit, they wanted to shut down Paramount, which was hemorrhaging money. Evans pulled out his trump card – a little film called *Love Story*, starring his soon to be wife, Ali McGraw. Despite facing a roomful of out-of-touch, conservative old money grubbers, Evans won them over, and convinced them to move forward with *Love Story* and another little project he was working on, entitled *The Godfather*.

By now, he had become incredibly savvy when it came to recognizing talent -- he was one of the pioneers of cultivating writers from the early stages. For example, *The Godfather* started out as nothing more than a 30-page treatment from Mario Puzo. Yet under the tutelage of Evans, that treatment became the film that made Francis Ford Coppola and won three Oscars.

Yet despite these achievements, Evans was still dissatisfied. His marriage to McGraw was over. He wanted more money. And he wanted to produce – not just run the studio. He struck an unprecedented deal with Paramount to work independently to produce films under his own banner as well as maintain his senior management position. His first film out of the gate was *Chinatown*, which garnered numerous Oscar nominations and kicked the envy of others around the lot into high gear. This eventually proved problematic and he stepped down as the head of the studio and produced films on his own, including *Marathon Man*, *Urban Cowboy*, and *Popeye*.

Of course, there were the bad years for Evans in the 1980's. He hit rock bottom – too much coke, bad press, and a link to an investor who would become solely known as a murder victim. Then top that off with the aforementioned triple stroke. Five years ago in *Esquire Magazine's* now mainstay column, "What I've Learned", Evans spouted, "Rejection breeds obsession." He is the reincarnation of the Phoenix; despite the obstacles thrown in his path, he doesn't see these as problems but rather challenges. There is always an opportunity to rise up and start anew; there is no end, no finality in sight. For Robert Evans, there is just another opportunity to be first again. ■



A ROBERT EVANS SAMPLER FILMS HE PRODUCED/DEVELOPED DURING HIS TENURE AT PARAMOUNT

Rosemary's Baby

Love Story

The Godfather

Marathon Man

Chinatown

Urban Cowboy

Harold And Maude

Serpico

Barefoot In The Park