Sam Neill, a key figure in Australian and New Zealand new wave cinema, dies aged 78

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31 July 2026

Last month's sudden death from pneumonia of popular New Zealand film and television actor Sam Neill has seen an outpouring of tributes from local and international filmmakers and actors. Neill's passing followed a successful three-year battle with stage 3 angioimmunoblastic T-cell lymphoma.

Neill, who is best known internationally as Dr. Alan Grant—the paleontologist in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and some of its sequels *Jurassic Park III* (2001) and *Jurassic World Dominion* (2022) by other directors—appeared in about 150 films and television miniseries during his more than five-decade career.

While Neill had no formal drama training, his range was extraordinary. This included Hollywood blockbusters, psychological thrillers, historical dramas, science fiction works, contemporary crime stories, so-called "arthouse" and independent low-budget productions and comedies, as well as his involvement in the narration, writing and production of several serious television documentaries.

Born Nigel John Dermot Neill in Northern Ireland in 1947 to an English mother and a New Zealand father—an officer in the Royal Irish Fusiliers—he moved with his family to New Zealand in 1954. A shy boy, he developed a stammer and renamed himself Sam at the age of eleven. "Nigel," he later explained, felt "a little effete" for the rough-and-tumble of a New Zealand playground.

Neill studied law at university but was increasingly drawn towards the theatre, appearing as Theseus in Dame Ngaio Marsh's 1969 production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, followed by the title role in *Macbeth*.

In 1971, he joined the Amamus theatre troupe, starring as New Zealand Prime Minister Sid Holland in a play about the 1951 waterside workers' lockout. Holland's National Party government mobilised the military as strike breakers, imposed press censorship and made it illegal to give money or food to either strikers or their families. Similar themes would be reprised in a slightly different form in *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), his first full-length feature.

In 1972, Neill joined the New Zealand Players Drama Quartet and spent that year performing Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw and other classics at intermediate and high schools across the country.

"The worst audiences we had were private schools," he recounts in his 2023 memoir, *Did I Ever Tell You This?* "They were too good for us, it seems. The best audiences we had were in remote M?ori communities. The kids there thought we were great and believed every second of what we did on stage. I loved them. They particularly loved Shakespeare."

Neill's development as a film and television actor occurred amidst the artistic rebirth of local filmmaking—first in Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then in New Zealand. Young Australian filmmakers, animated by broad oppositional sentiments generated by a global upsurge of the international working class and mass opposition to the US invasion of Vietnam, started making realistic and socially critical films.

Collectively known as the Australian New Wave, directors such as Peter Weir, Gillian Armstrong, Bruce Beresford, Fred Schepisi, Phillip Noyce, Paul Cox and others, along with a cluster of writers, producers and actors, began producing dramas exploring Australian history and social life. Similar developments, albeit on a smaller scale, followed in New Zealand.

Sleeping Dogs and the revival of New Zealand filmmaking

Neill, who secured a job writing and directing documentaries at the New Zealand National Film Unit, never considered an acting career in local film and television. This changed, however, when Roger Donaldson offered him the lead role in *Sleeping Dogs*. Based on a C. K. Stead novel, it was the first 35mm colour feature produced entirely in New Zealand and the first-ever New Zealand feature to open in US cinemas.

Neill plays a man named Smith who is reluctantly drawn into an armed resistance movement against an imagined fascist New Zealand government. Confronted by escalating industrial action, the right-wing regime initiates a terrorist attack to justify dictatorial measures and then invites American troops into the country to brutally crush the local resistance. The mild-mannered Smith and others in the resistance are eventually gunned down by state forces.

The Australian-born Donaldson's decision to film Stead's novel was no accident. Stead had supported waterside workers in 1951 and was a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. Similarly, Donaldson had moved to New Zealand in 1965 to escape conscription into the Australian Army for the Vietnam War.

Donaldson, who helped establish the New Zealand Film Commission in 1978, went on to direct several US-based productions, including *The Bounty* (1984), *Thirteen Days* (2000)—a dramatic account of the Cuban Missile Crisis—and *The World's Fastest Indian* (2005).

As Neill later recalled: "The Vietnam War was still on and we'd march sometimes. We were angry"—an anger that deepened with the election of the Muldoon National Party government in 1975 and its reinstitution of dawn raids and deportations of Pacific Islanders, which were first initiated by the preceding Labor government.

As Neill writes in his memoir: "These were crimes committed by the police against our Pasifika people, many of whom are still in trauma." He goes on to denounce the Muldoon government's violent police attacks on protesters opposing the national tour of South Africa's Springbok rugby football team in 1981.

In *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey by Sam Neill*, a 1995 documentary commissioned by the British Film Institute, Neill noted that New Zealand films during those years and into the 1990s "rarely, if ever" portrayed the government and the police "as forces for good."

Sleeping Dogs screened at Australian film festivals, where it caught the

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eye of director Gillian Armstrong, who cast Neill as Harry Beecham, opposite Judy Davis as Sybylla Melvyn, in *My Brilliant Career* (1979)—a period drama about a young woman's refusal to surrender her independence to marriage.

Armstrong's film, which is based on Miles Franklin's classic 1901 novel of the same name, was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes and won six Australian Film Institute (AFI) awards, including Best Film and Best Screenplay. It launched the international careers of Armstrong, Neill and Davis, who also won the BAFTA Best Actress prize.

Neill's performance in *My Brilliant Career* also attracted the attention of James Mason, who sent him an airline ticket to Switzerland (where the English actor lived) for discussions and support.

The highly respected Mason—having starred in Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), Max Ophuls' *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment* (both in 1949), Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) and Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962)—put Neill in touch with his agent in Britain, opening the way for the young actor to establish himself there.

In 1981, Neill starred in *Omen III: The Final Conflict*, a supernatural horror film, and was then cast alongside Isabelle Adjani in Andrzej ?u?awski's *Possession* (1981), a film about a violent marriage breakup. Two years later, he was chosen to play the lead in the popular British television series *Reilly, Ace of Spies*.

Neill worked continuously for the rest of that decade and into the 1990s, starring in *Dead Calm*, *La Révolution française*, *The Hunt for Red October*, *Until the End of the World*, *The Piano* and *In the Mouth of Madness*, to name just a few, as well as numerous television period dramas.

Neill cemented his place as an international leading man capable of tackling almost any role, but not all his work was artistically satisfying. At a time when the film industry was being swallowed up by giant entertainment corporations that had little interest in intelligent and challenging work, it was a difficult era for serious actors and filmmakers.

Reflecting on this, Neill admits in his memoir that he made the "odd rubbish film" but was "hopelessly addicted to work, which in large part explains why there are a number of jobs on my CV that should be put out of their misery, shot with a silencer behind a woolshed somewhere. Fat chance. They sit brooding and unloved in the dark corners of the interweb…

"People talk about actors' choice. The raw truth is that very few actors, maybe half a dozen in the world, get to choose whatever they want, whenever they want. The rest of us have careers that are simply about an offer for something, and you happen to be free," he said.

Neill, however, always went out of his way to make time to support independent filmmakers and productions in Australia and New Zealand.

Evil Angels: A political condemnation

Neill's talents were put to good use in Fred Schepisi's *Evil Angels* (1988)—released as *A Cry in the Dark* in the United States and the United Kingdom—in which he played Michael Chamberlain, the husband of Lindy Chamberlain (Meryl Streep).

The film was a political indictment of the Australian media, police and judiciary in the frame-up of the Chamberlains, a deeply religious Seventh-day Adventist couple, after their baby daughter Azaria went missing at Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Central Australia in 1980. Lindy Chamberlain was falsely convicted of murder and served more than three years in prison. Her husband, Michael, was convicted of being an accessory after the fact.

The frame-up, Neill said in his memoir, was "a grotesque miscarriage of justice; the unfortunate Chamberlains were crucified by the media, framed by incompetent police, and loathed by the public at large… The most horrible thing happened to a family who were so ordinary, so every day, it should at the least give us all pause. Anything, anything could happen to you."

The convictions were quashed in 1988, but it took until 2012 for a coroner to declare that the child had been taken by a dingo. Neill won the AFI's Best Actor award for the role, but the work's lasting significance lay in its stance against the witch-hunt mentality of the press and courts.

Other noteworthy independent films Neill appeared in include Paul Cox's *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien* (1999), a biographical drama about a Belgian priest working with lepers in Hawaii; Rowan Woods' *Little Fish* (2005), a drama about a poor working-class family in Sydney trying to deal with drug addiction and crime; and Warwick Thornton's *Sweet Country* (2017), set in 1929 in Central Australia about the persecution of an Aboriginal stockman who shoots a cruel white station owner in self-defence to protect his family.

Neill's range extended naturally into comedy with some of his best performances in quirky, low-budget Australian and New Zealand productions.

In John Ruane's black comedy *Death in Brunswick* (1990), he plays a hapless young cook with a drinking problem who clashes with local gangsters. The film co-starred Neill's close friend and political satirist John Clarke (*The Games* [1998], *Clarke & Dawe* [1989–2017]) as Dave, a Melbourne gravedigger.

In *The Dish* (2000), Neill is the pipe-smoking chief scientist at the Parkes radio telescope in the far west of New South Wales—a man quietly carrying the recent death of his wife, but responsible for transmitting the live television pictures of the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing.

In 2008, Neill played the lead in *Dean Spanley*, a whimsical story about reincarnation set in Edwardian England and starring Peter O'Toole, Jeremy Northam and Brian Brown.

Eight years later, he starred as Uncle Hec, a grumpy, poverty-stricken farmer, in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, a New Zealand comedy directed by Taika Waititi. Hec (Neill) and his wife decide to become foster parents to 13-year-old Ricky Baker (Julian Dennison), a rebellious hip-hop music fan from the city. After Hec's wife dies suddenly, Hec and Ricky become targets of a national manhunt after getting lost in the New Zealand bush.

Neill's concerns about the environment grew in the last years of his life. In 2025, he publicly opposed an open-cast gold mine proposed by Santana Minerals near Cromwell in Central Otago, describing the mine as "ruinous for the region."

The response from New Zealand's right-wing coalition government was vicious. Resources Minister Shane Jones denounced the veteran actor's concerns as "wrong and anti-Kiwi." What followed was a campaign of online abuse and hostility that, according to Neill's friend and first director Roger Donaldson, "took its toll" on the actor.

While Neill's career flourished under conditions that were far from conducive to groundbreaking and artistically probing work, he never lost touch with the healthy instincts that underpinned the revival of Australian and New Zealand filmmaking in the 1970s: genuine concern for the plight of workers and the oppressed, contempt for racialist politics and distrust of celebrity.

As he writes in his memoir: "I despise nationalism in all its forms. If I am asked my nationality, I am proud to say I am a New Zealander [although] I loathe the idea of 'race.' Culture is one thing and is everything. But race to me is just a notion, and a pretty crap notion at that… My own beloved family includes Japanese, West Indian, Celtic, African American, Anglo-Saxon, and M?ori! That's just my grandchildren! We are all the richer for it."

Neill's indifference to celebrity was not a pose. In one of his later interviews, he said: "Fame is a curious companion. It changes the way the

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world approaches you. It doesn't necessarily change the person who wakes up in the morning. Fame belongs to other people. They decide when to give it to you. They decide when to take it away. The work is the only part that ever truly belongs to you."

Sam Neill is survived by his brother, Michael—an Emeritus Professor of English and Drama at the University of Auckland and an internationally recognised authority on Shakespeare—his sister, Juliet, four children and eight grandchildren.

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