



Sean Penn says US has to accept 'level of shame' for not arming Ukraine faster

Description

Sean Penn said the US has to accept “a level of shame” for not helping Ukraine with weapons supplies quicker at the premiere of his documentary about president Voldoymyr Zelenskiy and the war.

Speaking after the screening in Berlin on Friday night, the Hollywood A-lister said he believed the war in Ukraine was one that the west cannot ultimately afford to see Kyiv lose, an argument that underpins the new film, Superpower.

“If you imagine what it is if Russia wins, we are all fucked. Just dead fucked,” Penn said. “We are already as Americans, I can say, we are having to take on board a level of shame for not having scaled up sooner with the weapons.

“I think that it’s very clear that, whatever it is going to take to keep US troops out of there [Ukraine], ultimately we will do. And so why not now?”

Penn’s film represents a serious attempt to tell the story of Ukraine and its charismatic leader, including an extraordinary interview with a clearly exhausted Zelenskiy in a tiny side room at some point on the first day of the Russian invasion.

“He wants us to be dead,” Zelenskiy said in the encounter, referring to Russian leader Vladimir Putin, and it is not clear if the Ukrainian leader is referring to himself and his team – or the entire country. “Sanctions are not enough,” the leader added, the first of many pleas for western help to save his embattled nation.

A day later Penn and his crew flee a suddenly deserted capital, driving across country in a desperate effort to escape that eventually sees them abandon a car near the Polish border, wondering if they will see Zelenskiy alive again.

By that point, Penn had been filming in the country for several weeks, in a project that dramatically morphed from an attempt to tell the story of the comic actor turned president, into a wider argument about Ukraine, portraying its people as defenders of freedoms the west takes for granted.

“We fell in love with the country, we fell in love with the people. We also fell in love with this idealism,” said co-producer Aaron Kaufman. “After the last four or five years of American politics, we had lost touch with something which they were in touch with.”

Penn largely plays the role of inquisitive journalist in the Vice Studios film, interviewing figures from across Ukraine’s government and civil society, as well as experts, soldiers, ordinary citizens and victims of war, building up a picture of national mobilisation in the face of the bloody invasion.

The actor visits a bombed out apartment block in Kyiv, its owner saying to him ironically: “Welcome to my apartment, I won’t offer you tea,” and Ukrainian soldiers in a trench near the eastern frontlines in the Donbas, as artillery is fired off in the distance.

But he also acts as an advocate for Ukraine, choosing to argue in support of the country on the right wing Fox News channel, and makes no secret of his fan adulation of Zelenskiy, interviewing the president on three occasions. Penn describes him as a man with “a tangible sense of the human need for freedom”.

It is a shift in tone from the early, prewar part of the documentary, in which Penn finds few ordinary Ukrainians willing to express much enthusiasm for Zelenskiy, while one military veteran complains about the president’s supposed lack of cojones. By the end of the movie, the former soldier is entirely converted.

Although the film was made with Zelenskiy’s cooperation, Penn said the president was otherwise uninvolved with the film. “Aside from the time we spent with the president and his people, they saw nothing, until five days ago,” when a special screening was held in Kyiv.

A final interview with Zelenskiy takes place in a secluded garden, in which the president says even his nine-year-old son has been forced to grow up dramatically. “Our children do not speak like children,” the leader says, describing also a country that has been forced to redefine itself on the world stage.

But it also contains a last pitch for western help. “Don’t give me one wing,” Zelenskiy says, amid an argument that if Ukraine does not win the war now, then the US and the west could be embroiled in a long and expensive fight.

by Dan Sabbagh in Berlin

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