

Interviews: Dennis Farina, Gary Cole Perform ‘The Last Rites of Joe May’

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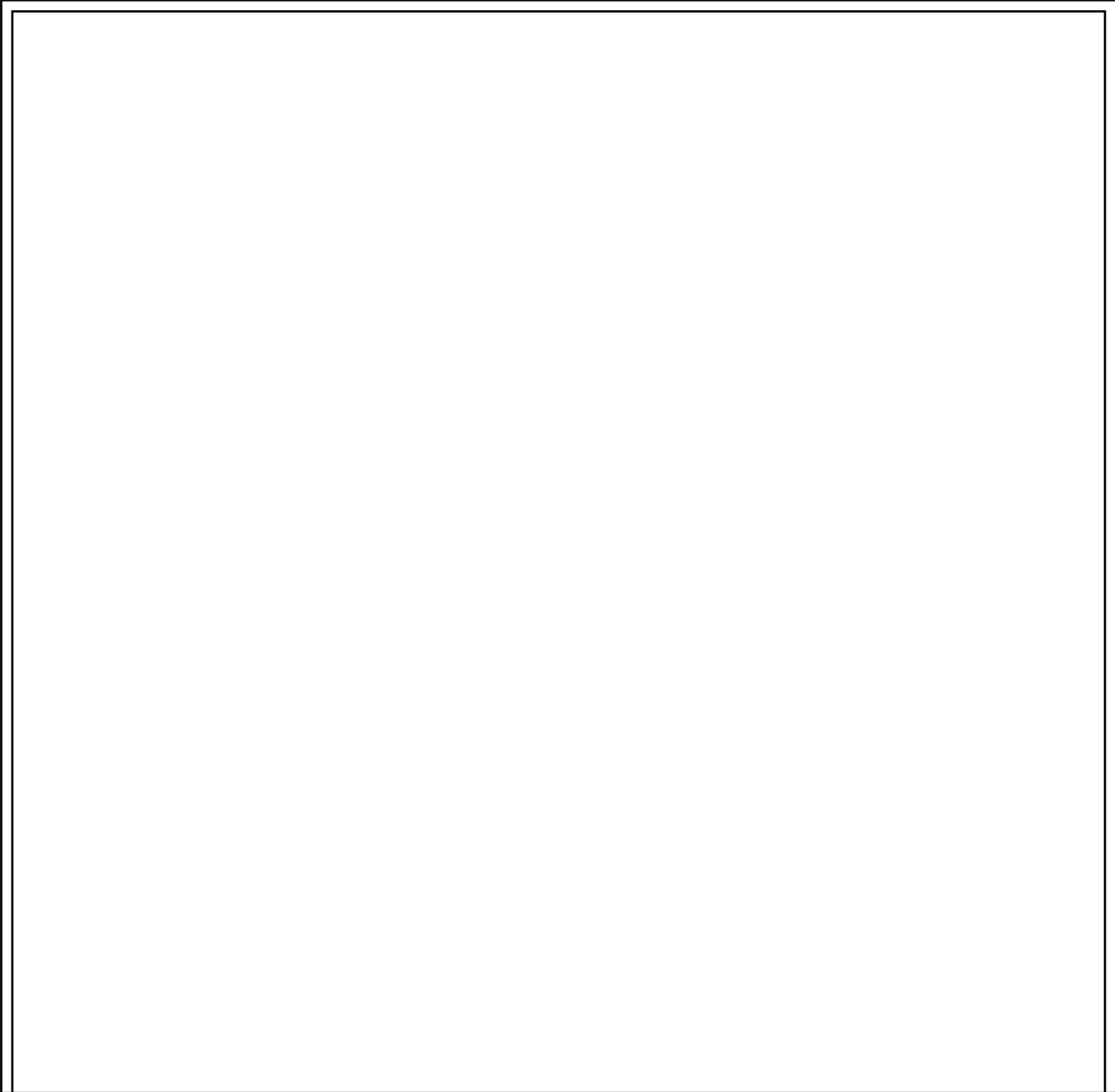
CHICAGO – Dennis Farina is Chicago. Born and raised in the Windy City, his persona and manner is everything Chicago – bold, classy and the true urban Midwest. His latest film is “The Last Rites of Joe May,” which features another actor who got his start in Chicago theater, Gary Cole.

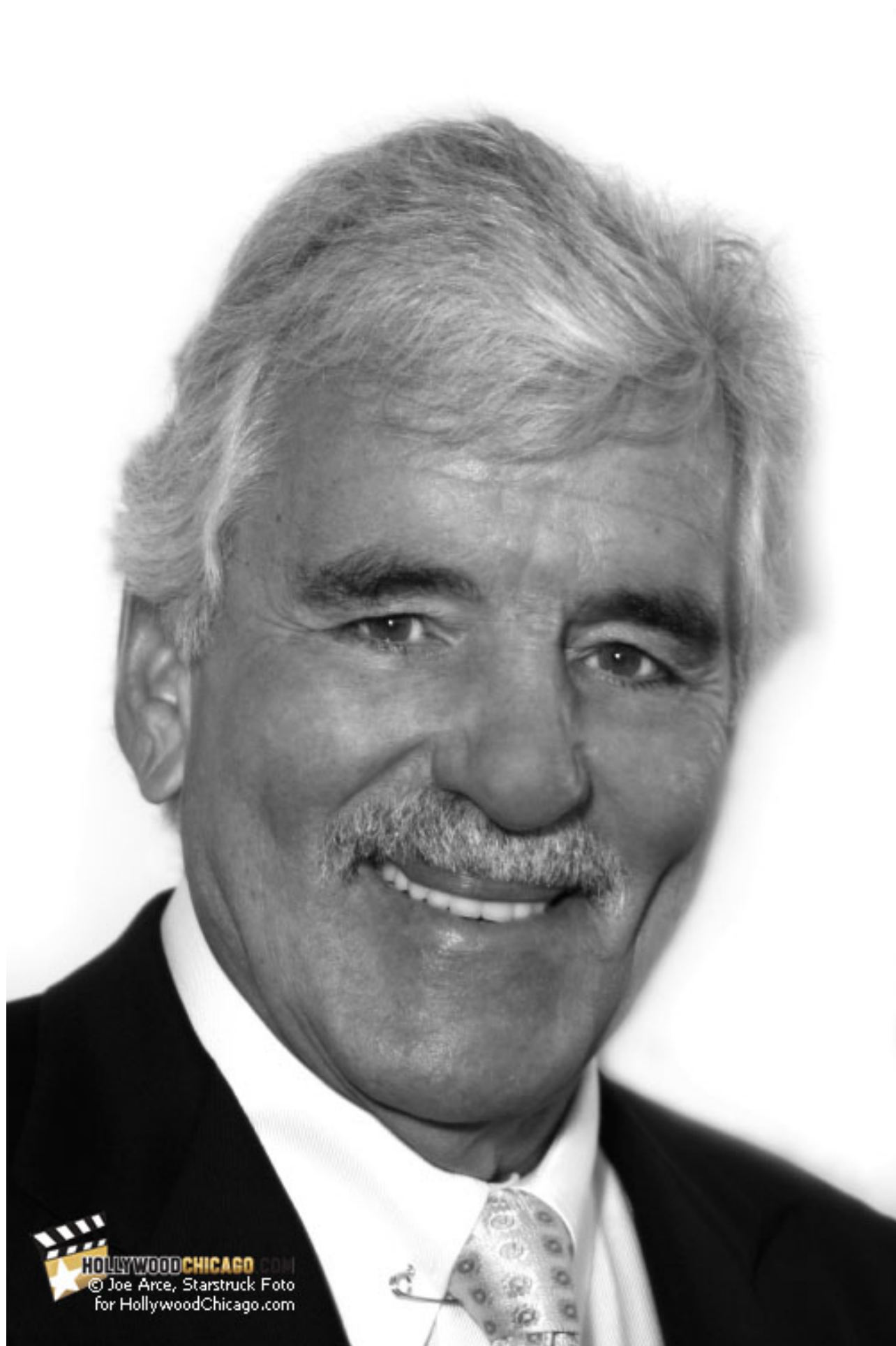
Last month, at the Chicago International Film Festival, both actors did a press day promoting their gritty Chicago-based film, which was directed by Joe Maggio. “The Last Rites of Joe May” stars Farina in the role of a lifetime, permeating the wintry streets of Chicago as an aging small time hustler that everyone assumes is dead after he comes back from an extended hospital stay. Gary Cole has a small but significant role as Lenny, a neighborhood boss.

HollywoodChicago.com sat down and interviewed the two Chicago acting icons regarding their film and careers.

Dennis Farina, Title Character in “The Last Rites of Joe May”

Dennis Farina’s entrance in the world of film acting was a happy accident. He was a Chicago cop, who got the assignment to consult on director Michael Mann’s set-in-Chicago film, “Thief” (1981). From there, he quit the force and went into acting full time, breaking through in a Chuck Norris film, “Code of Silence” (1985). He became a regular on TV on “Miami Vice” (1984) and “Crime Story” (1986), and made his mark in films like “Get Shorty” (1995), “Saving Private Ryan” (1998), “Snatch” (2000) and of course, “The Last Rites of Joe May” (2011). Farina will be featured in the upcoming HBO series, “Luck,” produced by old buddy Michael Mann and starring Dustin Hoffman.





Dennis Farina at the Chicago International Film Festival, October 6th, 2011

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Despite all of his setbacks in the film, what type of dignity did you want to make sure that Joe May had throughout his ordeal?

Dennis Farina: Joe has his own way of doing things, and his own set of values. That's why he won't hug the girl in the movie, because he knows he's in trouble, he knows he is in the fight of his life and he knows the girl is vulnerable, which would set off a whole new set of problems.

It was hard not to do, because Jamie [Allman, his co-star] and the little girl [Meredith Droeger] are huggable. But [writer/director] Joe Maggio kept saying you can't do it, it's not him. Joe May is in trouble, he doesn't need any complications. Another thing that justified not hugging is that if Joe did it, it could lead to something, but Joe May would never sleep with her while the little girl is in the house.

HollywoodChicago.com: Roger Ebert called this "a role of a lifetime" for you. Is it something that has stretched you as an actor the most and is it "a role of a lifetime"?

Farina: It was a very well written role, and I loved the script immediately after only two or three pages into it. After talking to Joe Maggio, who has lived with the script for a long time, it is based on someone he knows, and we were pretty much on the same page right away. We didn't disagree about anything.

HollywoodChicago.com: The character of Chicago plays alongside Joe May. How does the aspect of the city of Chicago that Joe May and you know, feel as if it is fading away like the character?

Farina: Well, I’m getting older, too, so a lot of the things that were around when I was younger aren’t around anymore. [laughs] We always thought the city would play a character, and especially the weather. Because if you shoot this movie in May or June, it has a completely different feel to it. We shot it in December in Chicago, but that’s a character in the movie. It’s gray, and Joe is in the grayness of his life. Sometimes if you go out and take a nice walk in the sunshine, it changes your day, but not for these people in the film. It’s winter in Chicago.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you first read the script, what kind of impression did you have of Joe as a character and how did you bring that impression to him when you played the role?

Farina: After I read the script I had an idea of Joe, and what he should do. I remember reading that after he came out of the hospital, he went to a bar. Now normally when people come out of the hospital they get picked up, or he could go to his son. But what does he do? He goes to a bar. And what it the first thing the bartender says, ‘Geez Joe, I thought you were dead.’ That’s how insignificant people think he is. He doesn’t think he’s insignificant, but they do. He’s starting to come to this reality.

HollywoodChicago.com: The title contains the term ‘last rites,’ a very Catholic ritual, a sacrament. Do you feel that Joe is on his road to Calvary, is he climbing to his cross?

Farina: I’d like to think he is, but Joe is the kind of character, if he’s on that journey, he’d like to sell some crosses along the way. [laughs] In God’s good graces, that is how he would welcome Joe.



Dennis Farina in ‘The Last Rites of Joe May’
Photo credit: Tribeca Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What part of Chicago did you grow up in? What parts of the old neighborhood still feels the same when you visit?

Farina: Larabee [which Farina pronounces ‘Lar-bee’] and North Avenue, near Ogden Avenue. But any remnant of it is all gone. Where we shot Joe May, around Grand and Ogden, it still looks pretty much the same. But where I was born and raised, it was called ‘Little Sicily.’ It was an Italian community with stores and bakeries, and people playing cards in the summer. It’s all long gone, too bad.

HollywoodChicago.com: You famously worked as a Chicago police officer in your early career. What lessons did you learn in serving and protecting that you were able to utilize in your acting career?

Farina: First of all, I don’t talk about my police career that much. And I don’t know if you can do that, because there is a big difference between a movie set and what goes down on the streets. I think it’s a mistake to confuse the two, and I never used it as a bridge.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve worked with a variety of big-time directors. Which of those legends ran the most impressive set in your view, and which one gave you the most leeway as an actor that produced what you feel was your best performance in a major film?

Farina: Boy oh boy, you’re going to get me in trouble with some of these directors. [laughs] I think the good ones always stands out, certainly Steven Spielberg. I remember being on that set [‘Saving Private Ryan’] in Ireland during the invasion scenes, and he was just up there and calm, with everybody working. It was like, ‘action,’ and he let everybody do what they had to do.

Also Michael Mann, of course. This is a man, he’s a friend, but this is a guy when he does a movie like ‘Public Enemies’ he found out everything there is to know about John Dillinger and Melvin Purvis. And you better know as much as he does. [laughs] At the same time, he’s very open to a lot of stuff.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this was your second career, what role was the breakthrough for you, that gave you the room to know that you were going to quit being a cop, and what was it about that role made you know that it was all going to work out?

Farina: I don’t know that it is. [laughs] I don’t know if it was the right move or not. The timing was right. It was a process that took many years. And acting is one of those businesses where if you think you know everything, you’re in trouble. I always keep an open mind about stuff.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a fan, what do the Cubs need to break the curse?

Farina: I just don’t know. I love the Cubs, I was in the play ‘Bleacher Bums’ and I love Wrigley Field. I just don’t know. They are the most popular team in the world, I don’t know that it’s good or bad. I think being a manager on any level in this league is difficult. I certainly wish

whoever gets the job the very best over there.

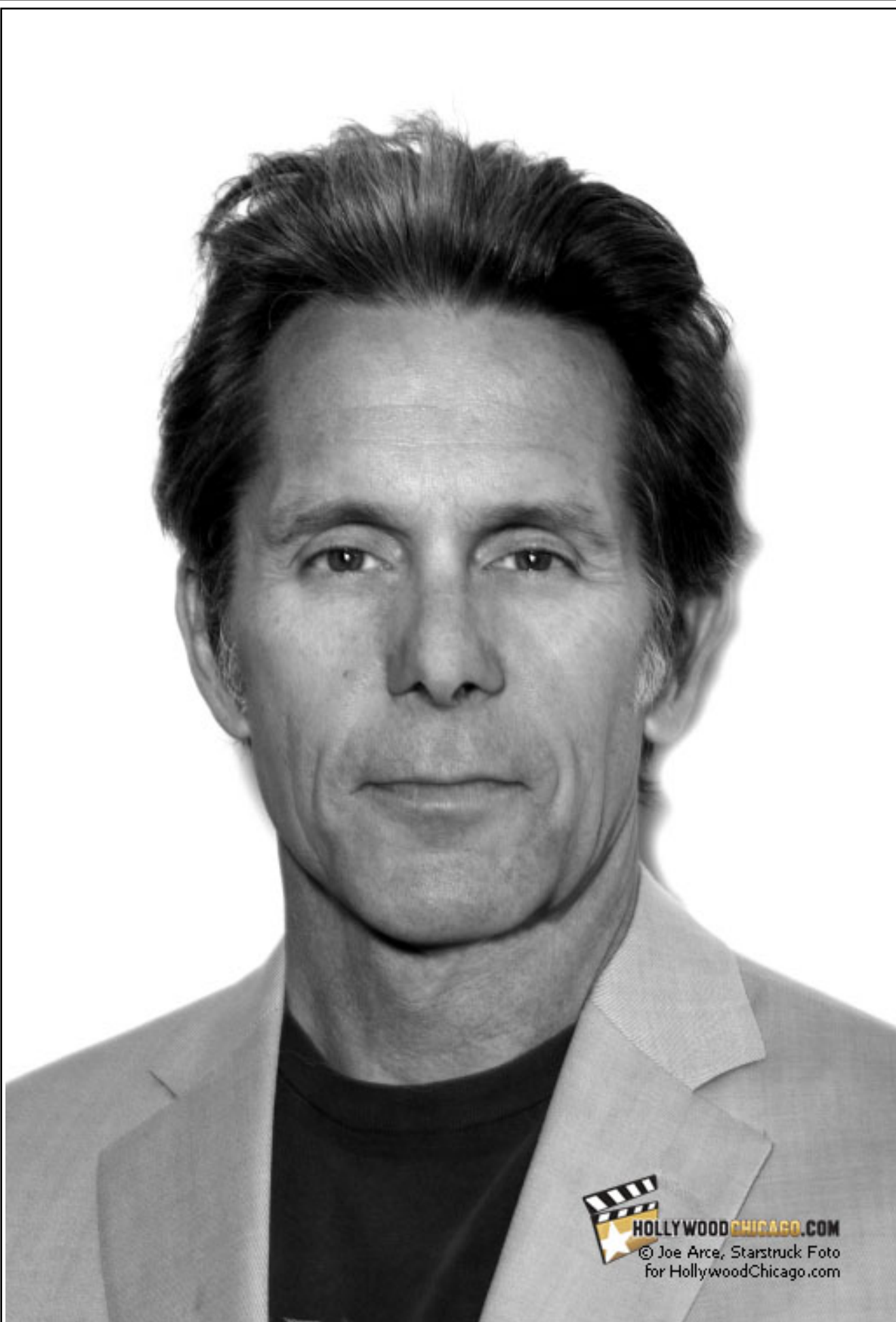
HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what is your favorite Chicago memory before, let's say, 1980?

Farina: It was with my father, in 1948. During the war, you couldn't buy a car, and my father had an old 1936 Packard, which was as long as this room. He traded it in, and we got a 1948 Buick. In those days, the dealership was on Diversey and Racine.



Gary Cole, Portraying Lenny in "The Last Rites of Joe May"

Gary Cole was born in Park Ridge, Illinois, and attended Illinois State University at the same time as John Malkovich and Laurie Metcalf, both of whom went on to the famed Steppenwolf Theater Company of Chicago. Cole himself joined Steppenwolf in 1985. After doing several Off-Broadway shows, he made a name for himself as the title character in the TV show, "Midnight Caller" (1988) and was unforgettable as bureaucrat Bill Lumberg in the cult classic "Office Space" (1999). He also made a splash as Mike Brady in the two Brady Bunch spoof movies made in the 1990s. He recently joined fellow Chicagoan Jeremy Piven on the HBO series "Entourage," and portrays Lenny in "The Last Rites of Joe May."



Gary Cole at the Chicago International Film Festival, October 6th, 2011
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: This is a bit of a homecoming for you. What feels authentically Chicago about the film that satisfies a native like yourself?

Gary Cole: First of all, visually. When I first saw it, I had some flashbacks to living here, standing on the cold el platforms, seeing your breath

coming out of your mouth. The story could have taken place anywhere, but because it is Dennis it is an immediate connection to the city, in both his career as a police officer and an actor. With him at the center of the film, it had to be here.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you know about your character in Joe May the first time you read the script, and how did that revelation come out when you actually played him?

Cole: I think characters are informed through the other characters that they deal with, and obviously Dennis as Joe is the center of the film, and the characters around him serve a purpose to tell his story. My purpose was a connection with the past, his connection with my father that was imagined or real at whatever level it was. It was also a generational thing. Joe was from an era that has passed him by, and I'm right under that. My purpose was also to dismiss him, because that's what he is facing.

HollywoodChicago.com: Steppenwolf Films is partly responsible for getting this film made. What kind of quality can we expect when we see the Steppenwolf label on a production, based on your association with that legendary stage company?

Cole: There has always been a recognition of material, the written word. In the theater certainly, but that also holds true for film. You always heard the argument that film is a director's medium, that is true more or less, but you still have to have something to start with, and the film division at Steppenwolf can focus on stuff that has a good foundation, well written and well realized. When you do that, you don't have to invent so much on the day.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the spark that lit the fire for you as an actor? When did you realize that against all the odds, you were going to pursue acting as a career?

Cole: It seems to me I made that decision fairly early. But a lot of it had to do with a lack of ability in other areas. [laughs] You focus on something, you do it, you seem to have some type of ability at it, but it is to the exclusion of everything else. But the time I was 20 years old, and I was in college, and that what I was doing, I seemed to have no inclination about anything else. It just was built-in that I was in for the duration.

HollywoodChicago.com: What aspects of that college program at Illinois State University way back when still resonant with you as an actor today? Was there one particular mentor that made a huge impact?

Cole: I always say when I talk about it that it wasn't just the faculty, which was incredible, it was also the students there. For whatever reason, there just happened to be an enormous amount of talent in this one place. I learned as much from Laurie [Metcalf] and John [Malkovich] and Terry Kinney as I did from the faculty. They were all characters, but they were all passionate.



Gary Cole in 'The Last Rites of Joe May'
Photo credit: Tribeca Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you do that got you noticed at Steppenwolf enough to get that audition or opportunity to join the ensemble?

Cole: I was connected to it early, and I aggressively sought them out when I got to town. I did wind up also starting another theater company called Remains with other folks for awhile, and still worked occasionally at Steppenwolf. It's a small world in Chicago theater.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you nailed the Robert Reed version of Mike Brady in that film series, what quirk of Reed's performance as Mike helped you find the character? Did you look at a lot of tape?

Cole: I did. [laughs] It was weird, because I did it for the audition. When I walked in, there were guys with Brillo pad wigs and paisley shirts, but I wasn't dressed as anything. The only thing I could think of doing was to watch him, which at first glance I thought there was nothing distinctive going on here. But then I noticed that there was a rhythm, a cadence that Robert Reed had, and it had to do with the rise and fall of his voice, and he always was a lecturer, he was always the moral of the story. As parents can sometimes sound, it was always a little condescending. For our movie, I chose to make him as vacant as possible.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the underrated films and performances you had was in 2009's 'The Joneses.' What do you think a character like Larry symbolizes in today's economy, and how did you and director Derrick Borte pull off that homage to 'Night of the Hunter'?

Cole: That sequence was brilliant. It was a great metaphor, and it was a lot about what's going on now. You think there is a certain reality, and you come to realize that there is not. If it's too good to be true, it probably is, he was literally swallowed by his own consumption. That

character dealt with the darker side of that film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What role – stage, screen or television – has felt like the purest to you or closest to the type of roles that best suits you and why?

Cole: I’ve been able to survive because I haven’t done anything that really stands out as opposed to doing things that are kind of different from each other. It’s hard for me to choose, I think it’s up to the audience.

“The Last Rites of Joe May” has a limited release around the country. Check local listings for show times and theaters. The film is also available through Video on Demand. Check television providers for availability. Featuring Dennis Farina, Gary Cole, Jamie Anne Allman, Meredith Droeger, Ian Barford and Chelcie Ross. Written and directed by Joe Maggio. Not Rated.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [15]

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