

## Interview: Actor James Cromwell on Role in Oscar-Nominated 'The Artist'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 30, 2012 - 12:31pm

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CHICAGO – The character actor has always been a fixture in Hollywood culture, and there are few as unique as James Cromwell. He's had many memorable roles in films like "Babe," "L.A. Confidential" and within the "Star Trek" legacy. Currently, he portrays Clifton in the Oscar-nominated "The Artist."

Cromwell was born of Hollywood royalty. His father was director John Cromwell ("Of Human Bondage," "Since You Went Away") and his mother was notable 1930s film actress Kay Johnson. He grew up in New York City, and studied acting at the Carnegie Mellon school in Pittsburgh. After years of stage work, he broke into TV in the mid-1970s, with a noteworthy role in "All in the Family," as the talked-about-yet-never-seen character of Stretch Cunningham (see story below). This started a series of supporting parts in films and TV throughout the next couple of decades.



James Cromwell as Clifton in 'The Artist'  
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

It was actually his very showy role as Mr. Slotnick, the father in the "Revenge of the Nerds" series of films, that brought him to the next level. He landed his break-out lead role in 1995 with "Babe," as Farmer Hoggett, landing a Best Actor Oscar nomination in the process. He hasn't looked back since, becoming an important link in the Star Trek universe (Zefram Cochran), playing the heavy in "L.A. Confidential" (Dudley Smith), anchoring the HBO series "Six Feet Under" (George Sibley) and appearing in "The Queen" (Prince Phillip).

James Cromwell sat down with HollywoodChicago.com, and talked primarily about his current role as Clifton, the loyal chauffeur to George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) in the Golden Globe winning, Oscar nominated film "The Artist."

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What silent film or silent film star did you study in preparation for “The Artist”?

**James Cromwell:** First of all, it’s not a silent film. We say lines, we do dialogue, but it’s not recorded. The narrative is told not through words, but more of your face and reactions. I started my film career as a chauffeur in “Murder by Death” [1976], so I feel I’ve already done it. [laughs] I knew how to drive a car, and I love to drive a car. And in this film, I kept my mouth shut. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The director of the film, Michel Hazanavicius, mentioned that he likes sound engineers, but they can be a pain...

**Cromwell:** They are. Whenever something happens on the set, it’s always ‘sound!’ If sound f\*\*ks up, we have to do it again. The thing about sound, bless their hearts, it’s not their fault. If anybody makes a noise or blows a line – and in ‘The Artist’ that was impossible – sound is responsible for setting it up again.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Then was it a relief as an actor not to have to deal with sound in ‘The Artist’?

**Cromwell:** It was a great relief. First off, when you’re a character actor or supporting role, the tendency is to get everything in the few lines you have. Because the animation in my face is what people tend to like about me as an actor, it was really nice to know that the lines were not the focus in this film. And because the character was taciturn and doesn’t say a whole lot, I had to improvise in the period. People are trying to read our lips, because that’s how their programmed, but you can’t do that with this film, you have to watch every frame.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There were particular American stars selected for their mirrors to the stars of the silent film era. Which film of that era do you think your “look” would have worked best with, and do you think your persona would have made a nice transition in the talkies?

**Cromwell:** I’d like to think I would have made the transition. My father came to Hollywood from his stage career in 1926, because they didn’t have directors that could handle actors who were speaking. Because Hollywood was silent, there was a distinct difference in the style of acting from stage. Since I have a speaking voice and was trained in the theater, I think the transition would have been easy.

I would loved to have done what Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin were doing. Of course the films of F.W. Murnau, Erich von Stroheim and Josef von Sternberg, to do that style of serious films would have been extraordinary.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your father must have known a lot of those people back then...

**Cromwell:** Probably he did. He never did silents but those people were still there. They must have watched actors like John Gilbert suffer because he couldn’t make the transition to sound. That’s what the movie celebrates.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I got the feeling that your character represents wisdom in the film, in sticking with George Valentin. Where do you think your wisdom fits in the overall sensibility of ‘The Artist’?

**Cromwell:** One of the questions I asked Michel when I did it, because they sent me the story instead of the script and I thought he was nuts. I told him if I commit I didn’t want to be just a joke in this ‘gimmick’ of using silent film and black and white. My question was ‘how does a silent film story relate to a contemporary audience?’ It’s taken me seven or eight viewings to understand what Michel understood about the medium, how he engaged the audience, his ability to layer the story, the visual cues and the wonderful irony of ‘I won’t speak’ being the first line, and making it all work together.

My second question was ‘why the chauffeur?’ Michel said the chauffeur was George’s best friend. It’s the loyalty of all these people, who serves him not because he is a movie star, but because they care about him. That there is loyalty and comradeship that doesn’t have to do with the class position of the superstar and the non-entity. We are the human race.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since this was such an unusual direction to go in a modern film, what were you telling people you were doing while you were filming ‘The Artist’?

**Cromwell:** What got people especially, is that they knew that no one would get to first base by pitching a silent black and white movie. You wouldn’t get past a secretary. When I said it was an old Hollywood picture, they had in their head ‘A Star is Born’ or ‘Stage Door.’ But when I prefaced it with the word ‘silent,’ and it was unheard of, impossible.

To me, the fun of it is that it flies in the face of conventional wisdom in Hollywood. I believe it is informing a whole generation of young filmmakers, to say we don’t have to make films like everyone else does, we can make films with our own vision. As one of my old instructors told me, ‘dare to be an artist.’ And the picture is called ‘The Artist.’ It’s not called ‘The Actor,’ and it’s not only about George Valentin, it is about everybody and their artistry on a film set, demanding their vision to do it the way we see it, and that it will touch people. That is what the film is about.





Jean Dujardin and Bérénice Bejo in 'The Artist'  
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** As you probably heard, a couple in England walked out of 'The Artist' because they didn't realize it was a silent film. If that couple came to you and asked for a refund, would you give it to them?

**Cromwell:** I'd say, I'll give you double your money back, but you have to sit through the entire picture. And if at the end of the picture, you still feel cheated, I will give you the money!

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you grew up presumably around show business, what was behind the decision to focus on stage in your early career and finally get into television in your mid-thirties?

**Cromwell:** My father and mother divorced when I was six years old. I lived with my mother in New York City. She never went back to acting after the divorce, so I wasn't growing up around it any more. I went to college to be a mechanical engineer. My father visited me there the Sunday after a Saturday night fraternity party, with puke on the floor and rubbers all around. [laughs] He was shooting a picture in Sweden with Ingrid Bergman, and he took me there. It was the first time I saw adults talk to each other on a film set. And I thought, 'dammit, the girls are really pretty, they talk about cool sh\*t and they eat good food. I'm going to do this!'

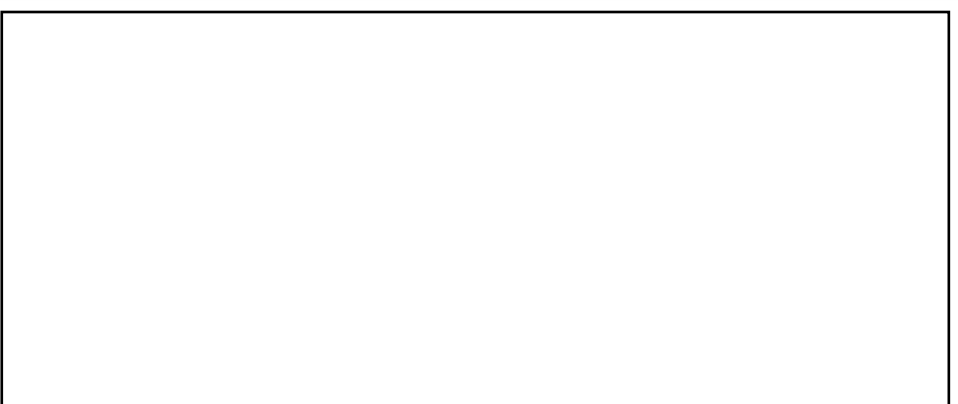
So I went back to college, joined the theater department, and instantly knew more than anyone else, even though I knew squat! [laughs] I got myself in a lot of trouble, and quit school. When my father contacted me, I told him I was going to go into the theater. He told me not to be an actor, because I was too damn tall [Cromwell is 6-ft 7-in.]. Because of that, I guessed I had to be a director.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did you transition from thinking about directing to actually making stage appearances?

**Cromwell:** It was difficult to break in as a director, because the people who had built theaters then, they didn't want young directors, so you had to get in as an actor in a company, then direct something on the side to get in. I did that for ten years on the stage, thinking I would work in theater. My father, instead of saying to me just go to Hollywood, said nothing. He had a thing about nepotism, he wouldn't have helped me at all.

Luckily I didn't go to Hollywood until I was ready, and didn't have my big success until I was ready. I did a bunch of film and TV, but 'Babe' came at the perfect time, when I didn't get distracted and stupid.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** As a child of the 1970s, I remember precisely when you came onto the landmark TV show, 'All in the Family.' What was the circumstance of getting the part of Stretch Cunningham, a character that had been talked about on the series for a couple seasons, but never seen?







As Stretch Cunningham in 'All in the Family'  
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

**Cromwell:** I had met the casting director through Mike Sevareid, the son of CBS newsman Eric Sevareid. I went to CBS, she looked at my resume, and found the one thing – that I had understudied the role of Claudius at Stratford, and I thought, 'f\*\*k, I'll never work here.' [laughs] But then I got a call from my agent, who told me to go right away to CBS. I go in, they handed me some sides, but I had never seen 'All in the Family.' I made a choice, just off the top of my head, and it was Art Carney from 'The Honeymooners,' because I loved him. [in Stretch Cunningham voice] 'Hey Archie, this is the guy.'

I did this in the audition, and the director came down, he said fine. I then met Norman Lear, was hired, and then I was on the legendary set. The deal was that Carroll O'Connor had quit the show in a contract dispute, and the decision was made to kill off the Archie character. In the story I was taking Archie to a convention in Buffalo, and I lost him. I did two shows, where I came back to the Bunkers and was helping in trying to find him. During the warm-up between the shows when we were filming the episodes, somebody the audience asked Norman when he was going to give that tall guy his own series. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Is that how you got the Norman Lear show, 'Hot L Baltimore'?

**Cromwell:** That's exactly right. And Carroll never let me back on the show when he settled the dispute and came back. I got all the laughs, and oh f\*\*k he hated that. [laughs] I was talking to Sally [Struthers] one day when I later visited the set, and Sally told Carroll that I wanted to come back on the show. Carroll said, 'he's better off where he is.' At the time, I was unemployed. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have political roots as a 1960s-era progressive. What do you see as the overriding flaws in a political system that serves only the masters that pay the most money? How does the average voter, in your opinion, maintain a voice in such a system?



James Cromwell in Chicago, January 20th, 2012  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Cromwell:** I believe that the political system in this country is based on a lie, the lie being that democracy and capitalism are compatible. I do not believe that they are. I believe that capitalism is the enemy, not the small business as the lifeblood, but the multi-national corporations who have no concept of the damage they are doing to us as a civic group, to individuals in their rights and liberties. They will give up that up in an instance.

Why the American people take this, is that since the advent of advertising, the best and the brightest minds take our perceptions and convince us that we are isolated individuals, that we only succeed as individuals, and that life is a competition, kill or be killed. As in, my survival depends on someone else failing. There is no cohesion as a people with a common interest, either as Americans, Chicagoans, New Yorkers, because everyone in this country has the same perception problem.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How do the type of politics practiced out of Washington contribute to that problem?

**Cromwell:** They are convincing us that the problem is black people or Mexicans or people from the West Coast, and it's all bullsh\*t, and it

comes out of that dysfunctional place called Washington, which is a goddamn snake pit. People think was can solve this problem by electing people. It can't be by election. This government, and this country belong to us. But we have to take responsibility for it, we have to participate in it. That's what I think the Occupy movement is saying to us. Come out on the street and really feel it on the street. Feel what it is like to take your power back. Once somebody gets a nose for that, they never want to stop. That's what they know will happen.

*“The Artist” is currently in theaters. See local listings for show times. Featuring Jean Dujardin, B  r  nice Bejo, James Cromwell, John Goodman, Penelope Ann Miller and Joel Murray. Written and directed by Michel Hazanavicius. Rated “PG-13”*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 2:57pm):**

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