

## Interview: Joel Murray Takes No Prisoners in ‘God Bless America’

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CHICAGO – Joel Murray, as most people know, comes from the Murray clan of Wilmette, Illinois, which includes his fellow actor brothers Brian Doyle and Bill. He has established himself as a memorable TV and movie character actor, and portrays a man gone wild in the Bobcat Goldthwait-directed “God Bless America.”

Murray is Frank, a middle aged man recently divorced, fired from his job and possibly terminally ill. With nothing much left to live for, he decides to take out his frustrations on what he considers the idiotic in society – he begins a shooting spree by targeting reality TV stars. He finds an unusual accomplice in a high school student named Roxy (Tara Lynne Barr), and together they embark on a nationwide assault on the pseudo-celebrities of America. This is Murray’s second film collaboration with director/writer Bobcat Goldthwait, having appeared in “Shakes the Clown” in 1992.

Joel Murray was one of nine Murray siblings, all raised in suburban Chicago. While his older brothers began getting some notoriety in show business, he was performing in Chicago at the Second City and Improv Olympics. After a series of character parts in TV and movies in the 1980s and ‘90s, he landed a supporting role on the popular sitcom “Dharma & Greg.” Since that series ended in 2002, he had a major part in “Mad Men,” as copywriter Freddy Rumsen, and recently was in the Oscar-winning Best Picture, “The Artist.”



Tara Lynne Barr (Roxy) and Joel Murray (Frank) in ‘God Bless America’  
*Photo credit: Magnet Releasing*

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with Joel Murray, as he talked about his new film and the variety of roles in his long career.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you have collaborated with Bobcat Goldthwait before, what had changed about his approach to filmmaking and his storytelling sensibility between ‘Shakes the Clown’ and ‘God Bless America’?



**Joel Murray:** He has a lot more to say I guess. Somewhere along the way he heard the Frank Capra quote, ‘if you have 200 people in the dark, you might as well say something.’ I’ve always been a fan and a friend, we met on the film ‘One Crazy Summer’ in 1985. His stand-up is always very political and very charged, and his filmmaking is going that way.

When I saw ‘World’s Greatest Dad’ [Goldthwait’s previous film] I was blown away, and I was envious that I wasn’t involved in that one. When he sent me the script for ‘God Bless America,’ I asked him which supporting role did he want me to play. He told me, ‘I was thinking you’d play Frank.’ I said, ‘The guy?’ And he said, ‘Yeah.’ That blew me away, but I knew I could drive this train. His film sensibilities just keep getting better, he’s is kind of a savant in the editing room. He doesn’t look at a script supervisor’s notes, he instinctively knows which ‘take’ works.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Were there any character traits in Frank that you picked up from either other literary characters or people that you know? What were you basing his emotions on?

**Murray:** I thought in way I was playing Bobcat. Bob is a smart enough guy to know he can’t direct a film and have his character be there 90% of the time. The movie was shot in order, so when you start off with a gun in your mouth, that takes you to a pretty dark place. It’s emotionally draining in your real life when you’re doing that. I kind of found this guy, and the main note that Bob gave me was ‘you really got this guy.’ I entered a dark place of my own.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It’s interesting that a 40-something man would team with a disaffected teenager to go on a shooting spree. Why do you think those two age groups work best in communicating the story?

**Murray:** It’s great, because you have two generations, and they’re both angry, each with their own reasons. I don’t why he chose those age groups, I know from early costume sketches that Frank was suppose to be even older. I think it’s to show the range of the outrage, the young and the old.



Joel Murray (center) with Jon Hamm (left) and John Slattery in ‘Mad Men’

*Photo credit: AMC*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It’s interesting that Goldthwait decided to focus on reality TV stars for pursuit. In your opinion as a performer, how does the proliferation of reality TV affect the show business environment as a whole?

**Murray:** I’m very anti-reality TV, my feeling is that if your life is so dull that you have to watch other lives like that, you need to get on with it. I’ll catch my wife watching a ‘Real Housewives’ and I’ll tell her to stop it, because those shows are just as scripted and fake, and it steals work from writers and actors. I’m completely against it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Do you think there is a cause-and-effect for the ‘dumbing down of American culture?’ Does corporate power and the political system want people to stay dumb, as not to question the current structure of capitalism and commerce?

**Murray:** Yes? [laughs] I met Penn Gillette once, and he showed me the secret to all magic [extends middle finger]. If we can keep people entertained with nonsense, then they won’t notice what’s going on in the international monetary fund, or what they’re pulling off. If firing a gun gets people’s attention, there is the wake up call. It’s a violent film about kindness, and why does everyone have to be such a jerk right now?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You were part of the group that started the Improv Olympics in Chicago. What were those days like and what was

most exciting for you in doing that work?

**Murray:** We were doing improv five nights a week, and making about eleven dollars. The exciting thing is we were studying with Del Close [a legendary Chicago improvisation teacher] twice a week, and when we would get done with class, we would go out drinking until 4am to talk about the craft. We'd talk about how 'he just gave it to us today, the key to comedy!' We thought we were finding the grail of comedy. One of my distinct memories is hitchhiking on the Congress Expressway here to go out to Oakbrook to paint a house, and then hitchhiking back to do improv at night. That on-ramp was exciting.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did your brother Bill's explosive fame tilt your family dynamic, and when did you feel you separated your own career from that of association with Bill's career?

**Murray:** Brian actually started it in Second City, and both Brian and Bill were on the National Lampoon Radio Hour, and that was huge to me. I would sit home on Friday night and record it on WSDM. When Billy got on 'Saturday Night Live,' I'd be at party watching the show and people would ask me why, I'd tell them my brother is on it, and it's pretty funny, but that wasn't a big deal. It switched after 'Meatballs' and 'Stripes.' I'd want to go somewhere in college, but people would want to stay home with early cable TV and watch 'Caddyshack.' They'd ask me, 'have you seen it?' He was everywhere for awhile.

As far as the fame and money, what was the goofy brother with the Fu Manchu mustache now was the foremost expert on everything, because of all that. [laughs] I feel like I've done enough to separate myself, we really haven't done much together.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Having been part of the 'Mad Men' universe, how did it feel playing an adult around the time you were born, and did you seek any advice outside the production to crystalize the character of Freddy Rumsen?



Joel Murray in Chicago, April 27th, 2012  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Murray:** I lost my Dad in 1967. I've always got a kick out of talking with old men, because I lost my Dad so young – older ad guys I'm particularly fascinated with now. I had seen the show already before I auditioned for it, and it was my favorite show, and now I had a chance to be on it. It blew me away that all of a sudden I was doing a scene with Peggy. Here was Elizabeth Moss, and I'm thinking she's really good, and then sh\*t I have a line coming up. [laughs] Can I remember it when it was my turn?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had the privilege of a supporting role in last year's Best Picture, 'The Artist.' What did you want to make sure your were doing in a sort of serio-comic Keystone Cop role, especially opposite a sympathetic dog?

**Murray:** [Laughs] My agent called me and told me the audition was on a Friday at 5pm, and I was thinking really, aren't they seeing people any other time? Oh, and by the way, it's for a French, black and white, silent movie, and the scene is with a dog. [laughs] Traffic-wise, it's the worst possible time, but I zig-zagged my Vespa there, and the audition was just goofy and had no lines. They would just tell me things to do [imitating French director Michel Hazanavicius], '...and now a bird is flying over. I like the way you look at a bird. Good. Now a dog is tugging at your leg, let it tug you.' It was surreal.

I watched a bunch of the film before I performed, which consisted of two days of wind sprints, in 1920s boots and a wool suit. [laughs] When I was doing those sprints, I was thinking of all the fat guys at the audition who would be dead. When I watched the playback, every frame was gorgeous. I thought he was creating a masterpiece.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you grew up in a middle class Catholic family, how does that affect how your observe the world of wealth and power that you have been privileged to participate in. What has blown your mind the most in that realm?

**Murray:** Growing up middle class Irish Catholic, at a school where you did social services, plus growing up as a Democrat – my mother's obituary said in lieu of flowers, vote the straight Democratic ticket – it blows me away to be out there with guys I know who are now staunch Republicans. I'm like, 'really?' People say once you buy a home, you turn Republican. Well, I have a house. It blows me away how people change in wealth.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you've had the opportunity to direct, write and produce outside of performing, which of those three did you find came most naturally for you, and what plans do you have coming up in any of those realms?

**Murray:** I really enjoyed directing four camera sitcoms, that was a real blast, and I'd love to do more of that. Unfortunately, there are not enough sitcoms now, and lately it's been just one guy doing all the episodes. There are more sitcoms pilots right now, so hopefully that will



come back as a viable job opportunity. I still write, and I’m pitching a hybrid romantic comedy film right now, and I do voiceover work. Hopefully, with more lines in the water, I’ll catch a fish with one of them. I’m also doing a voiceover part in ‘Monsters University,’ the new Pixar movie.

*”God Bless America” continues its limited release in Chicago on May 11th, and is available with Video On Demand. See listings for theater, show times and channel providers. Featuring Joel Murray, Tara Lynne Barr, Mackenzie Brooke Smith and Rich McDonald. Written and Directed by Bobcat Goldthwait. Rated “R”*



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