

## Interview: Actor Craig Robinson, Director Chad Hartigan Reflect on ‘Morris From America’

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CHICAGO – When a 13 year old African American teenager is suddenly put into the atmosphere of Germany – specifically Old Heidelberg – then a whole new adventure awaits for “Morris from America.” Craig Robinson (“The Office”) portrays the title character’s father, and the film is directed by Chad Hartigan.

Hartigan is doing his third feature film, after the recent “This is Martin Bonner” (2013). “Morris from America” is slightly autobiographical, as his Irish father and American mother were missionaries, and he had problems fitting in wherever they moved (see story below). The film was shot on location in Old Heidelberg, and was financed in part through Germany.



Craig Robinson Portrays Curtis in 'Morris from America'

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

Craig Robinson is familiar to fans of the TV series “The Office,” in his portrayal of Darryl. He was born in Chicago, and graduated from Illinois State University. After a stint as a music teacher, he started doing stand-up and training in improvisation at The Second City. He landed the role of Darryl in 2005, and has also had film roles in “Miss March” (2009), “Hot Tub Time Machine” (2010), “Peeples” (2013) and “Get On Up” (2014). He also tried his hand at starring in his own sitcom, “Mr. Robinson” (2015), which lasted one year.

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Craig Robinson and Chad Hartigan together, when they were in town in May during the Chicago Critics Film Festival.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How do you think you and Curtis are most alike, and which scene did you feel like it was almost Craig talking, and not your character?

**Craig Robinson:** When I got the script, what attracted me the most was the language and vernacular of Curtis, because it was very close to how I talk. I love old school hip-hop, I don't have kids but love how my parents were – so I channeled that, to be the friend and father. I love music, so the comparisons he was making about different eras, I'm really turning into that guy. [laughs] Also like me, he's a bit shy in new situations, as when he goes out with his German buddies and acts a bit tentative...that is me as well.



**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chad, before you shot one scene, what measures in your pre-production work were there to make sure you could properly capture the atmosphere and attitudes of Heidelberg and Germany?

**Chad Hartigan:** I actually feel like that was one area of the film that I wish was stronger. The cinematographer and I don't like 'b-roll' [establishing shots of location atmosphere], so we tried to incorporate the scenery of the scene. In the end though, I wondered if we did that too much. I feel like we should have gotten more of a sense of where they were.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Craig, you have a magnificent monologue towards the end of the film, which you delivered with a perfected ease. What in your life was the inspiration for making that speech work, and honor Curtis in it?

**Robinson:** I thought about my father, and allowed my imagination to relate to Curtis and his situation, and Morris. I wanted to forget about acting and allow it to become a conversation. I probably made some substitutions as far as representing who I was talking about, but at the time I also imagined the relationship that Curtis had with Morris's mother.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chad, one of the beautiful elements in your film was the relationship between Curtis and Morris, with Curtis allowing more freedom for this 13 year-old son because of the guilt of bringing him to Germany. Why do you think this type of parenting is important for a character like Morris?

**Hartigan:** That comes directly from my parents. They were missionaries, so I grew up in Europe because of their work. Most people think, well, they must have been strict because they were religious – that wasn't the case. They were devoted to their faith, and made sure I knew it, but they were not strict at all. I grew up and became a good person because of that flexibility, and because they trusted me I wanted to award their trust. That was a dynamic between a parent and child that I hadn't seen in many movies, since most people would view it as 'undramatic.' But I tried to make it dramatic, and point out how that kind of parenting can be very valuable.



Craig Robinson and Markees Christmas in 'Morris From America,' Directed by Chad Hartigan

Photo credit: A24

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Craig, how many times had you traveled overseas before shooting 'Morris,' and what did you find as Craig that was even stranger than some of the stuff that happened to Curtis and Morris in the film?

**Robinson:** I've traveled overseas for both pleasure and business several times. What I know about traveling to a foreign land, for me, is to find out more about who I am. I often end up at a bar playing piano, and everyone is having a good time, and I have made that happen around the world. Who you are, and how you respond to the country around you, is how it works. If somebody serves me a local delicacy, like monkey brains [laughs], I'm diving right in.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chad, you are a person who was born in Cyprus, and eventually ended up working in the United States. What were some of the experiences you had being a stranger in a strange land, that you transferred to Curtis and Morris?

**Hartigan:** A lot of it. So much of the film was autobiographical, and specific scenes were directly taken from my childhood. The broader sense was feeling like an outsider. I skipped some grades in how I was schooled, so by time time I was in eighth grade I was only 11 years old, and everybody around me were developing adolescents at 13 and 14. I felt like I was on a different planet.

Those experiences went into the story of Morris. I think the film is personal, even though Morris is a different kid with different circumstances,

he was a lot like I was. When you put your experiences in the hands of someone else, it really tests the universality of the experience.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Craig, you have such an unflappable style when it comes to creating character. What kind of range did you have to test to satisfactorily complete the assignment of Curtis?

**Robinson:** I absolutely had to go to places I hadn't been as an actor, because it was the meatiest dramatic role I'd ever had. I had to be a father and friend to Morris – plus I was a sad widower – and had to tow the line so that it was believable, so people can respond to it.

There is one scene that jumps out for me, between Curtis and Carla, who was Morris's tutor. I had to make an abrupt turn in character, and had to get super protective. He's mad about what is going on with Morris, but what he's really mad about is that Carla is poking around in their personal business. There were many different tracks to play with Curtis.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chad, what was the reaction of the local coordinators that you worked with in Germany, in regard to the subject matter of your film? Did you get feedback or backlash?

**Hartigan:** I was surprised – the German producers responded positively almost immediately. There are certain moments in which the German characters are not portrayed well, but because of Germany's history they are more than willing to self examine their society and flaws through their art. We were financed mostly through German arts fund, and they're willing to explore in ways that Americans wouldn't necessarily do. In essence, I made the kids more of the assholes, but the adults were all nice. Kids can be a-holes anywhere. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Craig, so after being on one of the most successful TV series in the medium's history, you broke out on your own with the show 'Mr. Robinson' last year. What did you take from 'The Office' that you applied to that series, or did you just want to approach it completely different?



Chad Hartigan & Craig Robinson in Chicago  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Robinson:** Besides 'The Office,' I observed experiences on 'The Bernie Mac Show' and 'Curb Your Enthusiasm.' From all the lead actors on those shows, they all get the biggest trailer, but they spend the least amount of time in it. [laughs] It is about the work ethic, being nice to people on set, working closely with everyone and coming up with ideas. I got good training, and was ready to go into the lead spot, which was most important for me.

I wanted also to hire people who had collaborated before, that's why I had my band on the show, for example. It's all designed to make it more comfortable, so in a sense you're right at home. That is what I learned from what I did before.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chad, when you're stuck in a sticky creative situation, what filmmaker would you have on your 'What would Jesus Do' bracelet, as in 'What would \_\_\_\_\_ do?'

**Hartigan:** It can change from film to film, but for this one I was really inspired by the French filmmaker Céline Sciamma ['Girlhood'] Her films deal with youth, and they are so natural, and the performances she gets out of her actors are insane.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally Craig, if you were to sit down and have a drink with Curtis, what do you think you'd talk about, in the sense that you are celebrity Craig Robinson, and he is a guy taking a risk by living overseas. What would he learn from you and what you learn from him?

**Robinson:** I'd think we'd talk about women, specifically how women are in Germany. He would probably ask me, 'well, you're a celebrity so you must get with whoever you like,' and I'd say, 'you'd be surprised, bro.' [laughs] Then we'd hang out.

*"Morris from America" continues its limited release in Chicago on August 26th, and is also available with Video-On-Demand. See local listings/digital providers for show times, theaters and VOD info. Featuring Craig Robinson, Marquees Christmas, Carla Juri and Lina Keller. Written and directed by Chad Hartigan. Rated "PG-13"*





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