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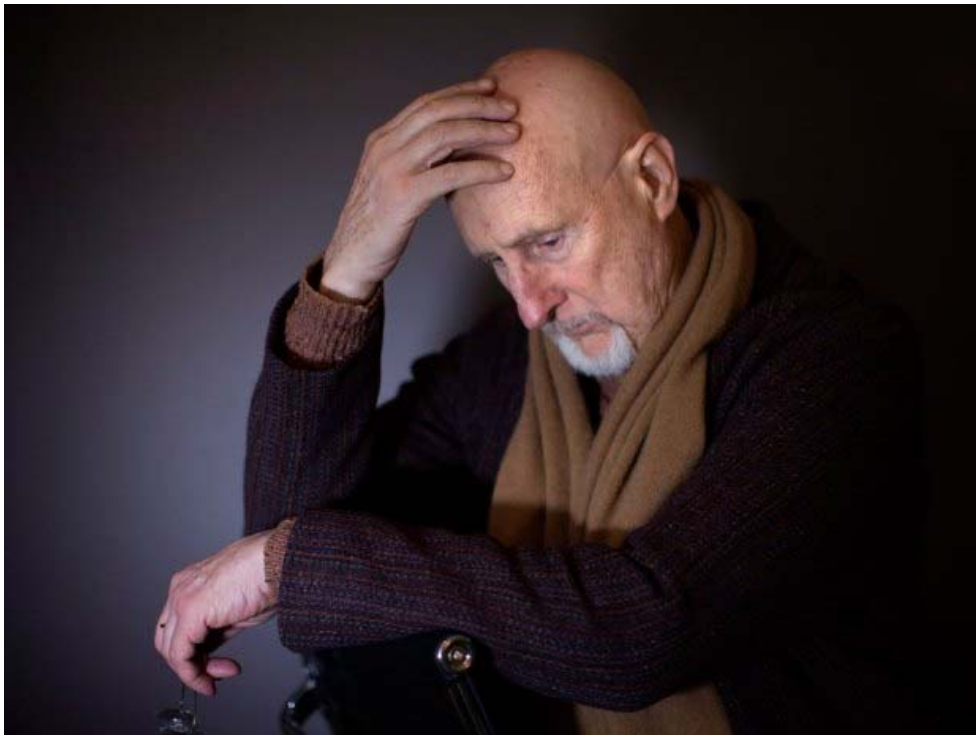
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## Role of a lifetime: At 73, veteran actor James Cromwell gets top billing in *Still Mine*



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James Cromwell is finally getting his moment in the (main) spotlight with *Still Mine*.

Chris Young/Canadair

James Cromwell would like to point out that, in a career that has stretched through four decades, more than 50 film roles and many more TV appearances, he has never played a leading man. Until now.

“I’ve always said I wish I could be in something that allowed me to be this guy that’s talking to you now,” says the erudite 73-year-old. “I never get the girl. I never get to express my exuberance. I never get to speak this fast. I never get to speak intelligently, as though there’s a brain in there. So I’m very grateful to this picture.”

This picture is *Still Mine*, Toronto writer/director Michael McGowan’s unique and touching man-versus-the-system story. Cromwell plays the man, 89-year-old Craig Morrison, a farmer building a new house on his New Brunswick property for himself and his wife played by Geneviève Bujold.

The system is the Royal District Planning Commission, personified by an overzealous building inspector (Jonathan Potts) who demands that Craig build his home strictly according to code or not at all. Craig, who learned carpentry at his father’s knee, refuses to jump through what he sees as needless bureaucratic hoops. The government takes him to court.

**'If I don't read a script in a very calm and considered way ... I tend to miss what the thing is about. And I did'**

Cromwell was touched by the screenplay, which is based on a true story. But he didn't understand its nuance and subtleties right away.

"I mistook the script originally," he says. "If I don't read it in a very calm and considered way ... I tend to miss what the thing is about. And I did."

Cromwell says he came back to McGowan with "some really wretched notes, which he was kind enough to include in a second draft." Then the actor read that version. "I was appalled, because everything that I didn't like was my suggestion. So we got on the phone for two hours, and he listened to every argument that I made against what I had originally said, and ... he stuck it all back. Which was really wonderful."

**Cromwell says he was predisposed to trust McGowan because he likes the Canadian zeitgeist**

McGowan's version has a more gentle edge. "There was a bit of back and forth," he says, "and the amalgamation ultimately made it better."

Both men agree that they enjoyed working together. "I trusted Mike almost immediately," says Cromwell. He was predisposed to, because he likes the Canadian zeitgeist. But he also sensed that McGowan wasn't trying to handle or manipulate him. "There are a thousand ways to do that, and when I sense that my back goes up."

The serendipitous icing; both Cromwell and McGowan are serious runners, though Cromwell is more of a bicycle man these days. One of McGowan's first films was *Saint Ralph*, about a young boy participating in the Boston Marathon. "I understand those people who are drawn to an endorphin high, and that sense of pushing yourself and exceeding yourself," says the actor. "I like that."

McGowan came by the story of Craig Morrison through a newspaper article. He had been working on another script about an elderly character when he read about the goings-on in rural St. Martins, N.B. Within a day, he was on a plane to the Maritimes to find out more. It had all the elements of drama: a protagonist pursuing a dream; a foil in the form of the planning commission. "And the fact that he did it for love."

Still, it was important to the director that the story not be one-sided. "Craig was a bit of a pain," McGowan says, adding in what part of the body he was a pain. "And I really tried with the building inspector to make him not the villain. Craig wasn't a jerk to him, but he wasn't a saint to him either."

Without spoiling the ending, McGowan will say that the courtroom scene in *Still Mine* was not about victory or defeat. "I wanted to set up the dignity, the perseverance, the ability to keep going with his convictions in spite of everything as the heroic elements of the film," he says. "Those are small-h heroics ... and there's a beauty in that."

Bujold's character is also suffering from dementia. "It's about the ache of experience to me," McGowan says of that.

**'I know I got Craig right, even in the stuff that I made up'**

["Craig's not going to win, because his wife is not who she was five years ago, 10 years ago, two years ago, and he knows that. There's a](#)

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Morrison died in February, aged 93. “He had a chance to see the film, and he loved the film,” says McGowan. “I know I got Craig right, even in the stuff that I made up.”

For his part, Cromwell won the best leading actor prize at the inaugural Canadian Screen Awards in March. It was the first time he had received an award for his work, though he was Oscar-nominated for a memorable performance in 1995’s *Babe*. But don’t presume he was the lead in that story. “This is his first time being number one on the call sheet,” says McGowan. “The pig was number one in *Babe*.”

—*Still Mine* opens May 3 in Toronto and Vancouver, and in wide release on May 10.

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