



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

FRANK LANGELLA INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Frank Langella, Actor
September 19, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 29 min and 35 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

FRANK LANGELLA:

When you're young, very young and growing up, your sentences always end with a question mark. Like what? When? Why? You're always asking your parents or your grandparents that. And then when you get to be old like me, and quite a few of my contemporaries are this way, their sentences end with exclamation points. Don't tell me, I know, I'm sure. You should keep the question mark always. What? Why? Explain that to me. Where have you come from? Who are you? What do you do? It makes life more interesting.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Frank Langella

Actor

00:00:58:00

INTERVIEWER:

Frank, welcome. Introduce yourself however you wish.

00:01:02

FRANK LANGELLA:

Well, my name is Frank Langella. I am 85 years old in my beginning, my 61st year as an actor, never quite imagining I would be at it so long and still love it so much. And I'm a working actor.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let me take you back to when you weren't. Can you tell me about Ida Zeit?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Yes. She was the principal of Number Three School in Bayonne, New Jersey. And she was what everybody would want their principal or their teacher to be. Loving, caring, always knew your name out of all the other--- oh, she knew everybody's name. And she was somebody that made you feel individual. Not in any ways special. Just whenever she looked at you, you felt very much that you existed in a way that you didn't always in your own heart.

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INTERVIEWER:

But in sixth grade, she changed your life. In a way, yes?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Yes. She came into the classroom where I was, homeroom, and she said, we're doing a musical called Lazy Town, I think, I need someone who wants to play an elf. And I just did that, having had no inkling yet at seven that it would be my calling. So I was-- I emotionally reacted and I went down to the... What's it called? The assembly and walked on to something that somebody called a stage, I never heard the word. And somebody said, stand in the wings. I never heard that word. But then when I walked out with this little piece of paper, things that elves say, it was here I am. Now I'm home. This is where I'm meant to be. And it's never changed. Never.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

From that moment, I've always felt extraordinarily lucky to have, and I don't use the word in any grand way, but to have a calling, because so many of my friends when I graduated college said, what do I do now? Who's going to do my laundry? What am I? You know, where am I going to go? I don't have any idea. Maybe I should be a lawyer. Maybe I should go back to school and study, you know, science or something. And. I was in a car on my way to a little summer stock theater the day after graduation. So if you do have a tremendous passion for something young, follow it. It's what you should be doing.

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INTERVIEWER:

Talk about a first opportunity you had to do a film was with Mel Brooks.



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FRANK LANGELLA:

Yes. Had never made a film before, and it was 1969 and Mel was doing a movie called *The 12 Chairs*, and I was helping Mel. We were best friends, a very odd pair, but we were always together, and the young leading man was yet to be cast, and he just made *The Producers* with Gene Wilder and Gene Wilder, very much wanted to play that part. The young leading man, if he could have a very explicit love scene in the movie. And Mel said, "I don't think anybody wants to watch you doing that, Gene." I never forgot it. And we were sitting around at the dinner table and mel said, "Oh, f**** it, Frankie, you do it." That was how I got my first part in the movies.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

It had never occurred to me that I'd be in a movie. I only wanted to be on the stage. That was what I loved the most, and it was the best beginning an actor can have. Never laughed so hard in my life. Never had so great a time. And the producer of that was a guy named Mike Hertzberg, who said to me, "It ain't always going to be like this, kid." And he was right. It's never like that again. Never.

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INTERVIEWER:

I know that you found something in another character that for the longest time, I think it was hard for you not to see its origin. And that's *Dracula*, a part that had been made famous by Bela Lugosi. And yet you approached it, I think, tentatively at first, right?



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FRANK LANGELLA:

When I was first offered it, I thought, I've never seen that character played in the way my instinct is telling me he should be played. So I read the book, and became more and more certain that I would not wear fangs. And more and more certain that I would never appear with blood coming down, and that I would play what I believed him to be. And I believed him to be deeply lonely, isolated as a result of his very interesting lifestyle. I knew what it was. I'm not saying it was, you know, Molière or anything, but unless I can find that in the character, unless I can find the heart... There was a wonderful character actress years ago in a movie, in a musical, and somebody rather condescendingly said to her, "You teach classes in acting, don't you?"

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FRANK LANGELLA:

She said, "Yeah, baby, I do." "Well, what do you tell your students?" And she said, "I just look at them and say, baby, you gotta mean it." Well, there's \$1 million worth of advice there. That's my mantra, too. When I walk in the dark from my dressing room down and I'm going to make my way to my first entrance, my mind is clear of everything I don't--- I don't prepare, as we haven't for this, I don't think about how to say something. I've done my work and my rehearsals. I am going to leap empty handed into the void. I'm going to go out there and see what that night brings me. And I only think, mean it. Mean the first line you say and mean everything you do, and it gets more important to me the older I get. That I'm there as a vessel to the writer, and my job is to project to the audience what he wants them to know. And I tell you, it relieves all nerves, which I never



had anyway. It relieves any tension or any desire to impress or to think about yourself. It's a good rule for life in general. Just get out of your own f***ing way.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the experience of becoming Richard Nixon.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

I was at a particularly good time in my career, so I was offered a television series at the same time, and I read the script and I thought, oh, I don't think I can resist this part because it frightens me so much. I'm not Richard Nixon. I'm not a character actor in that sense. But I kept going back to the text, which is everything. And finally, at the end, I called the director who was in England and I said, "Okay, I'm going to... I'm warning you, I have no idea how to play him. None. But I'd like to take a chance." And it was only eight weeks in the Donmar Warehouse in London, so I thought, you know... And my agents, of course, were yelling and screaming. They're going to pay you 200 pounds a week or this or that, and this movie is offering you this and this TV show's offering...

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FRANK LANGELLA:

So I said, there's just something drawing me to the danger of not knowing. And I said yes. And then there was a month or two before I had to leave for London. And of course, I just thought, I've made this terrible mistake. But I went to the Library Arts of TV and whatever it's called. And I said, do you



have material on Nixon? And they said, yes. And I sat down for a day, a full eight hour day, and I just sat with a remote and I watched Nixon being interviewed, and I thought it just got worse and worse. I just thought, oh, there's still time to get out of this. And I hit the pause button and went to the John. And when I came back, I was really thinking, this is a mistake, and there's still time.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And I re-hit the button. Well, this is what I call the lucky accident. I hit the slow mo button instead of the play button. And when I hit the slo mo button, I went and I stopped and I saw this fear and this shifty... The way he moved, the way he spoke was totally revelatory to me, and I watched many hours of him in slow motion, which I think would probably pay for any number of people. You could learn more about. And I said, okay, I found him. I found the road to him. I don't know whether I can do that, but I found the road to him.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

The next day it happened. It began to happen, and they were relieved. And I was relieved. And then he began to grow and grow and grow inside me, to become one of my most favorite characters. I've had some hallmarks that I'm both proud of and grateful for. And that truly was one. Be dangerous. Do something you're afraid to do. Take a chance. Don't rely on what's always worked for you. See what you could do that would be different. In the previews of Frost Nixon, there's a marvelous monologue that Nixon has on the telephone to Frost, who's across the stage. And it's



brilliant, brilliant writing. And... I had done it 400 times already in London, and I was doing it all during the previews, and the director came back and said, "I don't know about that, darling, I don't know, I'm not so sure. Maybe that monologue--- do you think Nixon would save this and do that and with his hands? Maybe it's a little theatrical."

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And I just looked at her and I said, okay, I'm going to do the speech tonight with both my hands in my pockets. I'm never going to take my hands out of my pockets. And I had done it many times and it was a very successful speech. And he said, "You can't. I know you can't. You won't be able to do that." And I shoved my hands in my pockets and I thought, f*** you, I'm going to do this. And I went on and I started the speech, and my body wanted to do what I'd always done, you know, Mr. Frozen, I want to and I didn't, and I just it was agony. But the explosion of applause at the end of that monologue was extraordinary. And, backstage I looked at him and I said, "I'm never, ever going to play that speech again with my hands anywhere but deep in my pockets." Because it gave me an inner life that the theatrical side of it, it worked, but that that theatrical side hadn't done. The rage in Nixon and the need to prove himself against the Kennedys and all of the people he believed thought of him as a common, everyday schmo was so powerful. And I never did it again with my hands outside my pockets.

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INTERVIEWER:



Let me ask you about the real Nixon. Did you have an opinion of him in life coming into that? What did you think of Nixon before you ever had that?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Well, I don't. I wasn't very politically minded in the 1970s when Nixon was president. I was more interested in my career and, you know, the usual thing young actors are interested in. So I didn't pay too much attention to him. I thought he was funny to look at and funny in his demeanor. And I thought, what an interesting character he was. But I do, when I decided to play the part, I went down to the Branth Bookstore. I think it's called, in The Village, and I got every book I could find about him. And one of the books opens with the writers saying that there are these pathways underneath either the white House or Congress or the Senate, where the members can travel. And and they're very narrow, little walkways.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And the writer said he was walking through one, and in the distance he saw Richard Nixon coming toward him, and his head was down, and he was thinking about something, and he was barely-- there was barely any room either side of the pathway. And the closer Nixon got to him, the more he realized that Nixon wasn't going to make a sideways turn, wasn't going to give in, wasn't going to say hi and move on. He's just going to keep going. And he said he flattened himself as much as he could against that wall, and Nixon went by. He said, I don't think Nixon even knew I was there or saw me. So I grabbed that and saved it as an example. And then I



was lucky enough, one night at dinner at the white House, to be talking with Hillary Clinton.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And she told me that they had invited Richard Nixon to the White House because he'd not been invited by anybody. And that he arrived sweating, you know, the little handkerchief in his hands. He was very nice to Chelsea, asked her a question about a subject he obviously knew she was interested in. They had their conversation. He talked. He then turned to Hillary and discussed with her something that was important to her. And then he had a very strong and wonderful rapport with Bill Clinton over whatever the subject was. And then the rest of the night he just sat like this. Never spoke again. Never said a word. He had memorized three things of the three people he felt he needed to connect with.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And then he just went back. And his particular... I relate to this very strongly. The characters I enjoy playing a lot like Nixon and like Skeletor, and even like Hoffman in Chicago 7. They are all somehow damaged people who isolate themselves in order to survive, and they've all reached pinnacles. You know, every one of those characters became the top guy in his world, and they're wonderful to play. I'm not a regular guy at all. I and I don't play regular guys well. I've hardly ever played them.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you think that's because when you were in Bayonne as a boy, feeling trapped, that there was an isolation?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Yeah, sure. I mean, if you ask any actor, he will tell you always. Most actors will tell you, at least actors who care will say, I had a terrible time as child, I couldn't... I felt my grand--- I asked my grandmother where I came from and she said, "Oh, I just went out to the cabbage patch one day and we cut open the cabbage, and took you out, and washed you up and gave you to your mother." I believed her for... And I was 27. That's not true. I was a little boy. Anyway, I did feel that I was adopted. I did feel I didn't belong in this Italian family where nobody read a book. Everything was plastic flowers. And I just thought, what am I doing here? How did I... And that sense of I just can't, I don't know how or what to do to fit in was very dominant in my persona.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And I've discovered in talking to other actors that many actors felt that way. But the trick that took me a while to learn is you don't run to the stage to get away from yourself. You run to the stage to find yourself. Saying oh, I can put on makeup and I can do this and I can become another person for a few hours. It's not the way it should be, and I didn't know it always at the start the way it should be is I don't know how to be. I have to find myself. Why am I choosing this part? Why do I want to express these emotions? The road should always be toward finding your self within whatever it is you're doing. Real power doesn't come from doing, and



owning, and grabbing, and making money and all of those things. It comes from the revelation of self. That's real power. When you begin to reveal to yourself who you are and what you are. And unfortunately, it takes a lifetime to do.

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INTERVIEWER:

And it's still happening.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

For me? All the time, yeah. More and more.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you feel that as you continue to be curious when you're talking with these younger people who are still curious, they learn from you?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

I've had the privilege of working in the last ten years, which have been the best years of my career, really, in the films I've done, and the actors I've worked with. I see myself in them, I see their angst and I see their rigidness about: I'm supposed to be like this. I'm supposed to be like that. I have to make this choice. I have to do that. And they don't go with the flow, to use an expression. And I think the reason why I've been able to relate to them is I don't in any way judge them at all. If if an actor is really difficult and problematic over this or that, I look back and think, yeah, I



can understand it, I was that way. So I try the best I can to be just there and just the old guy.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

And listen. It's a big... A huge lesson to teach young people. Listen. Don't... Not... That doesn't mean obey. That doesn't mean do what you're told, young man. It doesn't mean my way or the highway. And it doesn't mean I know better. It just means listen. If the generations were to do that and really listen, and the young people would say, well, he's been around for 85 years, maybe there's something he knows I don't. And if the older person didn't say, well, in my day we used to do that, then there's this wonderful meeting of the minds and also a great deal of laughter. All my... There's just a great... A lot of fun to be had. The fact of the matter is that every generation should be able to learn from the other generation. There's no one better than the other.

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INTERVIEWER:

I was struck in your book by the fact that you so wanted to learn from an actor who had passed, Charles Laughton.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

That you sought out his wife, Elsa Lanchester. Can you talk about that?

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FRANK LANGELLA:

I don't remember how it happened, but a mutual friend knew-- knew them both. And Mr. Laughton had died. And I said, "May I go and meet Mrs. Laughton?" And he said, "Oh, she'd love to. She doesn't have a lot of company." And I wrote my experience of meeting her. And, she told me a wonderful story about Charles Laughton, that whenever he received very bad notices, and he did a lot, he would save them and in his acting classes, in his house, when he'd have a bunch of students around, he'd say, I'm now going to do a recitation, and he'd take out all of his bad reviews. And if the reviews said Mr. Laughton was overly dramatic and theatrical and terrible to watch, Laughton would say, "He was overly theatrical, and today..." He would make it ten times worse. And then he'd set fire to it.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

There aren't a lot of those goes around anymore. No. And there was another actor called John Gielgud. I was doing a movie in Egypt. I was the young leading man. And so suddenly I looked around and there was John, and he had come all the way from England. And I said, "What are you doing were? He said, "Well, I'm going to play two scenes in your film, dear. I play the antique dealer who gets grotted at the end." And I said, "That's an awfully long way to come from London to Egypt, just to get your throat cut." And he looked at me and said, "Darling, one day you're not going to be pretty anymore. And as you get older, you're going to be offered smaller and smaller roles. Take them, but only if they're effective." And it was a



brilliant piece of advice. It was one of the reasons I like to think I've lasted a bit of a while.

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Because I try never to take anything that I don't think I can land with, that I can't find some-- something to hang on to inside. But as much as you can, I believe no matter what you do, if you're an actor or a... You know, if you're a plumber, it doesn't matter. Try to do it with the height of integrity. Not to be grand and not to sit on a pedestal and not to feel you're better than anybody, but that you'll know every night when you go home that you've lived up to your calling or your job of that day. I'm not an actor who says, I take a job because it's near my favorite golf course. I'm not one of those guys. I just...

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FRANK LANGELLA:

Nor am I somebody who can just do crap. I just... I pay too big a price for it. When I was 23 years old, I was crazy in love with a girl, and I stayed in Virginia at the farm of her family. And her mother was my one of my great mentors of my life until she died at 106. And I sat down once at the edge of her bed. And I said to her, "Help me learn how to be." Because I grew up in a narrow world of an Italian family, that everything was pretty much what everybody believed you should do. And, I said, "I need to. I need to learn how to be."

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FRANK LANGELLA:



And she took a very long time and just looked at me, and I thought I was going to get some... Be polite, be nice, be friendly. But you know whatever. And she said, "Be curious. Just be curious." It is among the many things that I've tried to tell you today that were very important to me during the course of my life. It was something would happen, or someone would say something that would take me to a path I'd never dreamed of. I never dreamed of that answer. I just was the last thing in the world. I would be curious. Well, I've tried to be. I haven't always succeeded. But I think that maybe close to the best advice I've ever had.

END TC: 00:29:35:00