



JAMES CROMWELL INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

James Cromwell, Actor and Activist
July 28, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 29 min and 09 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

JAMES CROMWELL:

It's hard to-to play to an audience with the kind of sophistication that is in Succession. People are either going to love the show because it was brilliant, or they loathe the show because they don't want to spend that time — any amount of time — with those people. They were all negative, they were all dark, they were all lying, they were all abused...that's the cremé de la cremé that rises to the top, only it's not cream: it's scum.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

James Cromwell

Actor

00:00:41:00



INTERVIEWER:

I want to start before you were born. I'd like to talk to you about your father.
A remarkable man, and both your father and mother.

00:00:50:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

Two. Two.

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INTERVIEWER:

Two.

00:00:53:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

Did you know that?

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INTERVIEWER:

Two mothers.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Two mothers.

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INTERVIEWER:



I did not know that. Please tell-

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Ruth Nelson is my stepmother. And my mother, Kay Johnson.

00:01:02:00

INTERVIEWER:

And so both come out of the theater?

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Oh, yeah.

00:01:04:00

INTERVIEWER:

And your father, a director.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

And came out of the theater as well. Came to New York, in 1910 and worked as an actor until somebody I think must have told him the same thing he told me. "Well, don't be an actor. You're too damn tall." So he decided to be a stage manager and a director, and he did 57 pictures in Hollywood. And, a lot of them are good.



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INTERVIEWER:

And you entered the picture metaphorically in 1940. At this point, your father had been directing in Hollywood for at least a decade. You were born in Los Angeles. Did you grow up in that Hollywood world or were you removed from it?

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Well, of course, for six years, you really don't know what's going on. There were birthday parties, and the funders used to come to the birthday parties — and there was a friend of my father's, and—

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INTERVIEWER:

But it seemed just perfectly normal, as it would for a five and six year old. Your life is your life?

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah. My first six years were action packed. A lot of, taking self-destructive tendencies to it: right to the limit. So I had 2 or 3 very close encounters.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do tell.



00:02:23:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

I used to sneak out of bed and go into the bathroom and make a concoction in the glass and toothpaste and powder and whatever I could find just to make a glass. And I heard somebody come up the stairs, and I went to jump down, and I hit the glass with my knee, which fell to the tile below, and- and landed with the jagged edge up. And I jumped down on it, which cut my foot from the ball to the heel and all the way up into the ankle. And, I didn't make a sound because I didn't want to get in trouble. So I-I hobbled to the bed and got under the covers. Of course I cut an artery. So I'm bleeding out. And the guy who came up the stairs to go to my father's bathroom was an actor named Freddie March, and on the way down he said to himself that I should look in on Jamie because he had a son, the same age as me. And of course, he opened the door and saw this trail of blood. Well, that was the first one. The second one was — my father was a sort [of a] block warden — was during the war. And so he had a helmet, and a weapon. And my brother got into the drawer with the ammunition, got some ammunition, and put it in our playhouse in a vise, and started to — I saw the cartridge with a hacksaw, and I, I moved my head down to look at it like this. And as I pulled it back PEW, it went off. And then, we had a house at Lake Arrowhead, my father and mother, I guess they weren't doing too well at that point. And, they hired a UCLA football player to be sort of a chaperon for us. And we had a wonderful — Chris Creff, the motorboat. My brother got in and I looked from the dock. I looked at the boat and I said, I'm going in the water and I jumped. I missed the boat. I went down. They didn't see me because they weren't looking at the, you know...out.



I came up. I went down again. I came up, so I went down for the third time. And as I was going down, there was a girl on the beach, and she saw me go down. So she ran onto the dock. And as I disappeared on the thing, she grabbed me by the hair. I don't remember. It wasn't — it wasn't traumatic. I — it wasn't that I didn't panic. So, and then I had a dog chase me and bite me in the back and had to get the rabies shots in my stomach: 24 shots.

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INTERVIEWER:

I am not a religious person, but I now believe you were blessed or you wouldn't be here now.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

I think it was, I think I was. I think — I have-I have a lot of help from somebody, something. I've gotten in a lot of trouble.

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INTERVIEWER:

I hadn't intended to ask you how you spent the war years, but apparently, if—

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JAMES CROMWELL:

In the hospitals [LAUGHS]

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INTERVIEWER:

Your World War two was fairly—

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Well, I wanted to join in with the festivities.

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INTERVIEWER:

So your father really had not been political, as I read it, the first time was when Roosevelt ran for a third term in 40 — the year you were born. He got involved with the Hollywood Democrats.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

And really had not been involved before.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

No. Probably not.

00:06:16:00



INTERVIEWER:

You know, and that was hardly radical, certainly when he was doing — [it was] not a radical organization. But what began to happen, as we know, is that anyone and everyone, by the end of the war and the beginning of HUAC, suddenly, any association was guilty until proven innocent.

00:06:39:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

Well, that's an interesting story, because dad's story was he went out to the mailbox and got his copy of LIFE magazine, and the-the middle center spread was about HUAC. And it had a series of photographs at the top — a man that my mother was making a picture with, Adolphe Menjou, testifying before the House un-American Activities Committee — and the quote was, "And the biggest communist in the whole of Hollywood is John Cromwell." He made up that jerk. He was, in general, a lousy actor. So my-my father was called in to testify. And when my father was called before the committee, almost all his friends in the studio cut him. They wouldn't talk to him. And, I'm sure my father had severe doubts. He was not one to panic, but he did tend to get dark.

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INTERVIEWER:

As you're going from child to young man, you're watching what's happening to your father.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

No, I didn't, you see, because my father [and] mother were divorced and my mother had moved to the East Coast, and I saw my father fairly infrequently until he was blacklisted. And then he was in New York doing the theater. And...these were things they never discussed with me. My mother never said anything about it. Ruth never said anything about it. I was divorced, I was. I was very shy and naive. I was privileged. That's what it was. I came from a privileged family, and, when I was in my 20s, a couple of things happened. John F Kennedy was killed. That was a shock. I went to England to be part of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. And when I got back, my father had cut out a little squib from the New York Times, from one of the theater sections that — there was a theater that was going to tour the South, with two plays, Purlie Victorious and Waiting for Godot. So he said, "Why don't you go down and audition?" I'd been out of college one year at the Cleveland Playhouse. So I went down and I auditioned, and I got the job. I directed Waiting for Godot, and I played in both of them, and we rehearsed at a Black church in New Orleans. The churches we played in were magnificent. And, we had the southern version of Black Panthers around in Indianola. It's nothing-nothing like being taught by people who understand, Mal — not from the book, but from the life that they lead everyday — understanding that America is the paper tiger and political power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Which were the kind of things they used to ask us in some political education class. And and I had no idea. I had no idea what they were talking about — it took a long time. But, so basically the impetus for my politics came from my father's life, the choices that he made, the choices he presented to me, and then the circumstances. So those, those, those two pebbles that fell in



there formed this awareness, nascent awareness of the corruption, and the racism and the greed and the mendacity and that exists at the very core of our governing system at every level. Government is, is power, and power is destructive, which I watched over and over and over and over again everywhere.

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INTERVIEWER:

You know, Jimmy, I'm realizing your age here. You're in your early 20s, you've gone down to do theater, and suddenly you have become, just by experience, drawn into this fight, one could even say radicalized. At this point, we're moving into a place of seeing the connection between the civil rights movement and the injustice of Vietnam.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

And you got involved in that as well.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah.



00:11:28:00

INTERVIEWER:

And the anti-war movement. Can you talk about that?

00:11:34:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

I was working at Stratford, Connecticut, doing Shakespeare at the Shakespeare Festival, but we decided to go down to Washington for this anti-war march, which was, I think, the biggest one they ever had. They arrested 45,000. So it must have been a pretty good size. We were — the next day we were going to march and, and they took away the permits to March. So it was decided that the women would march because the pickups might be a little more forgiving for the women. Little did we know. Well, the cops moved in, and this one cop that I was standing next to had his baton, and he hit this woman in the face, breaking both her glasses, bloodied her nose and knocked her to the ground. And I thought that that wasn't nice. So I grabbed the cop. And I'm — I've got a hold of the cop, and now I'm surrounded by cops and I'm bent over. And then the cops are on me. And I see this sleeve with stripes on it saying, get a baton around his neck. And I-I felt this baton go like this, and I reached up like this and I twisted and it came off in my hand. Now I had a cop's baton in my hand [LAUGHS]. And I thought to myself, is this a good thing? And, if I take a swing at them, they're gonna — they're gonna swing back. So I let myself be led to the paddy wagon. We were in a cell in a lockup in a station house. And, the next morning, we were all released, so we went — I ramble a lot — but we went back to the hotel to take a shower, and we saw downstairs, looking down at this, at this, square....wafts of tear



gas, and then some kids, obviously from our side, running through the through the park. Chased by men on horses. Cops on horses with their batons....trying to. And it would look like — it looked like...it looked like East Berlin. I mean, it just was...it was incredible.

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INTERVIEWER:

Jimmy, what strikes me is that you are not someone who has ever stood down in the face of personal danger.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

It's been all uphill.

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INTERVIEWER:

Well, you've shown a lot of fearlessness. And it's said that the courageous man doesn't know his own courage. He just does what he does. And I think you wanted to go to the Ballona.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah. I got involved with a group that was trying to protect the Ballona on wetlands in, near Venice, California. I was all set to go, and, my wife, then wife, was highly disappointed with me and felt that my career was threatened. So I thought, well, I got — I got four kids. What am I gonna do? So



I called him, and I said, listen, I'll do anything you want. I'll march. I'll give you money. But I can't be the poster child. I can't be at the front because I think it would adversely affect my ability to get a job. And, so I backed away, and about a week later, I'm watching the news. And who's there, handcuffed to the chain link fence that they've put up around the wetlands but Martin Sheen protesting. I thought, damn it. He doesn't care. Why should I care? Martin was a man of his principles, and I had violated my principle. And I swore to myself. I will never do this again. There will be consequences. There are always consequences. But...so....I'm sort of — I'm the reluctant, I'm the reluctant revolutionary. The heart's in the right place. The body's sometimes someplace else.

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INTERVIEWER:

I've got to ask you about your career choices, because it looks to me that so many of the choices you made have been informed by your values.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah. Though when I first came back, because of course, I was born here, and I had been back several times, as a kid. But when I came back here in '75, I got a call, on a Friday, it's like 5:00 from my agent, Ro Diamond. Wonderful agent. Wonderful, a delightful person. So she, she said, get over to CBS...it's for a show called All in The Family. And, I didn't know All in The Family. I didn't watch television, so I didn't know what — and they handed me a script and I looked at it and, having never seen the show, I didn't know. And I don't know



what came over me. But I started to... embody a character that Art Carney, his character, for Stretch Cunningham. "Hey, you know! Talking like this, you know, it's the character that I don't get to play because I look a certain way, and, I'm not the working class," you know what I mean? So this is my character, and this is what I did, and...so then she said, "oh, that's fine." I did it for the director. He went up, said, okay, we'll go up and do it for, for Norman did it for Norman. He said, fine, I'll see you on Monday. I thought. Wow. I'm — I just got here, and I've got this series. I'm on a series!

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INTERVIEWER:

It was a show that from out of the gate, politically changed our culture.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

Talk about your experience, at least in seeing — being from the inside of All in the Family and working with Norman Lear and then going on to another show of his Hot I Baltimore.

00:18:08:00

JAMES CROMWELL:



I did a lot of shows with Norman. Most of his shows I did. Norman, of course, has an incredible political acuity. And, and it's always there, whether it's there — Hot I Baltimore was revolutionary, which is why it didn't last, of course, because we were banned in some of the cities in Baltimore for one.

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INTERVIEWER:

First gay characters.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah. First gay characters of the leads, two prostitutes. It was funny. It was a really wonderful play. And it was a really good series. It just, it, it ran up against it — so that's that's the nature of politics in the industry. Things are killed and marginalized and blacklisted, in such a way that you hardly notice. It's just, one day you have a job, and the next day you don't.

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INTERVIEWER:

But Norman, by example, showed you that you can bring your values to your art and be commercially successful. Even when everyone told you that would be impossible.

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JAMES CROMWELL:



Yeah, it's not impossible. It takes an incredible amount of chutzpah, and, sharp intellectual acuity that it's, it's a — at that level which I have never been at, it's a very rough game played by very smart people. And every once in a while more, in terms of some people than others, it produces something unique, something transformative, something where, you know, Shakespeare says the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own image, scorn her own penchant — I forgot what it is. In other words, we see ourselves in the stories that we tell. It used to be the theater, now it's film and television. And by seeing ourselves and by empathizing, we can learn the lessons. We can see where the character makes a wrong turn. You have to see the darker side, to learn what it is that an audience is getting from the work that you're doing.

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INTERVIEWER:

Now, particularly with television, we see almost a reflection of ourselves, but we both reflect and affect who we are. So what Norman was showing a lot of people hadn't seen before, and they changed as a result that that happened for you in a very real way when you did a film called Babe.

00:21:14:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

Yeah

00:21:15:00

INTERVIEWER:



It changed your life because you learned about some of what was going on that has changed the way you live your life. You were a vegetarian before you did, Babe, but you became a vegan after. Why?

00:21:32:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

The Australians really only like to eat something that they've killed [LAUGHS] — that's not fair...but...and so all the animals that I worked with in the morning, their cousins were laid out on the table and I thought, Ah I mustn't do any of this anymore. I must become a vegan. And that was no problem. Becoming a vegan was quite simple. However, it has — that has influenced...I guess that's — this is my activism in a nutshell. If you love animals, don't eat them. By not eating animals, we affect a lot of different things because everything is interconnected. So by depriving ourselves for one day, beginning with one day, I won't eat meat, for one day I won't eat dairy. I will eat a vegan diet for one day and see how it feels. You can make a bigger contribution to what is happening to our planet and its climate. Then you could, by writing 100 letters or marching in tens of protest movements — by doing that, you are taking your power back. We change that dynamic. We change the climate. We change capitalism. We change what has happened to our government — how our government has been taken away from us. And so you see and out of a very simple, simple choice that anybody can do — it's only one day — and then now you're a radical. Now you do it two days, three days, four days. You're a radical. And you'll think radically, and you'll talk radically, and you'll change people's minds. And you'll change the planet for the better. The power resides in the people. And when the people of the



United States get that through their thick heads, we are going to turn this country around and make it the country we all want it to be. I don't know how I got there from Babe, but that's what the little pig does.

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INTERVIEWER:

Well, let's talk about holding a mirror to society. You've been through an experience in doing Succession that obviously hit the zeitgeist. It reached so many people. Do you think that people looked at that and said, gosh, I wish I were like that and could be that successful? Or did they loathe what they saw?

00:24:12:00

JAMES CROMWELL:

People either loved the show because it was brilliant, or they loathed the show because they didn't want to spend that time, any amount of time with those people. They were all negative, they were all dark, they were all lying. They were all abused. That's the creme de la creme. That rises to the top. Only it's not cream, it's scum, actually, and, you couldn't miss a beat. What the president of Disney said about actors going on strike. How inappropriate and selfish it was, given the economic conditions for a man that makes \$25 million a year. I mean, you have to have some sort of chutzpah to do that and that kind of person who has a class might as well have been him, they are worse. And now the question is, did those people who enjoyed the show because it was so, artistically and thematically, brilliant. Did they make the connection? Do they? I think they did. And I realized at the very end when he



gave me the eulogy to do. My character was not other than those people. My character had a 100,000 acres farm in Montana and \$1 million in stocks, \$1 billion in stocks of the company. And he was just as much — they're all of a piece and he managed to connect that all together. To tell the story about what happens to us as individuals. I'm really going far off.

00:26:08:00

INTERVIEWER:

You're not because you're talking — that eulogy was the moment where, for the first time, we saw the human being, the child of Logan Roy: your young brother, the two of you on that crossing. And that was one of the most magnificent moments, because someone we had just seen as all black, no white. We saw this child being very afraid and having to be quiet. That must have been an extraordinary thing for you to read and see.

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JAMES CROMWELL:

Unbelievable. What the series they did, like one of my favorites...Doctor Cornel West always says, "See? See the dysfunction, but don't give up the human being." Address your compassion and your understanding and your willingness with that part of the person, and not with the part of the person about which you have judgments and evaluations, so that we can begin to talk to each other and begin to tell the truth.

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INTERVIEWER:



There's one thing that seems to bring joy to everyone, and that's the power of music. And I know you sing like a bird. You said—

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JAMES CROMWELL:

[LAUGHS] As long as it's Irish.

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INTERVIEWER:

What music gives you joy?

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JAMES CROMWELL:

All music gives me joy in all arts. Actually, all art gives me joy and hope. Always. It doesn't matter what the medium is. It's the self-expression. It's the — it's the looking at reality in a unique way, which is everybody's vision and being able to have the craft, the talent, the dexterity to translate what you believe in, what you have experienced, what you think about what you hope for into a tangible form, which is a work of art. It's not possible. I'm debating this, but I don't think it's possible to have a work of art about a lie. It's not possible. Art is the truth. This is all a creation of our own doing and it is perfect exactly the way it is. What is not perfect is the way we resist what is so. And when we stop resisting and start reaching out, it will shift.

END TC: 00:29:09:00