



MOVIES

Act with Anthony Hopkins? Even Jonathan Pryce was nervous before filming 'Two Popes'





"I thought when I was older I would find religion and have a very calm old age, but I'm still waiting," says Jonathan Pryce, who plays Pope Francis in "The Two Popes." (Michael Nagle/For The Times)

By RANDEE DAWN

DEC. 18, 2019
7 AM



New York — Jonathan Pryce knows what it means to play a religious leader: In addition to his extensive résumé of secular roles in "Brazil" (1985) and "Evita" (1996), he's also been blessed to play Cardinal Wolsey ("Wolf Hall") and the High Sparrow ("Game of Thrones"). But donning the robes again, this time as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio/Pope Francis in "[The Two Popes](#)," isn't what gave the veteran actor of five decades an attack of nerves — it was starring opposite fellow Welshman Anthony Hopkins, as Pope Benedict.

Pryce, 72, joined The Envelope here to discuss the Welsh mind-set, unexpectedly wading into #MeToo, and being called "No. 1."

Are you religious enough that playing a pope feels strange?

At the read-through in London, Tony and I were asked if we were religious. I said, "No, but I fully expect to be by the end of filming." I think something did rub off on me. It felt like a very good thing to be [Francis] for a while.

Were you more faithful when you were young?

I grew up in North Wales, which was very chapel-orientated. I went to Sunday school. But in the 1950s the entire congregation went to London for Billy Graham's Crusade and came back converted to evangelism. I couldn't take it; I didn't believe it. I thought when I was older I would find religion and have a very calm old age, but I'm still waiting.

'Two Popes,' 'Dark Waters,' 'Hidden Life' — filmmakers are finding religion

Dec. 19, 2019

What was it like to shoot again in Argentina, where you'd filmed "Evita"?

While I was in Buenos Aires filming, I was with another priest in priestly garb, and women were asking us to bless their babies. As I was leaving, the priest came to me and said, "Before you go, may I bless you?" No one had ever said that to me before. I said yes, and as he blessed me I got this overwhelming feeling of calm. I was almost crying. I cry easily — I'm Welsh, that's my excuse.

As is your co-star in "Popes." What was it like to work with your fellow countryman?

He's from South Wales, and I'm from North Wales. We're traditionally not supposed to get on. North Wales — it's all chapels and peering behind lace curtains. Even the accent, it's like they're taking their last breath at any minute. I was always a bit in awe of Tony and his career — I liked to think he'd heard of me. I was quite nervous, and I'm not a nervous person on set. But that awe toward Tony played well in those early scenes, and the more I got to know him, the more it mirrored how they got to know and respect one another.

MOVIES**Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce on how they prepared for the 'papal smackdown' of 'The Two Popes'**

Nov. 29, 2019

Last year, you and Glenn Close starred in "The Wife," a film that took many years to get made. Screenwriter Jane Anderson told me agents wouldn't put forward their male clients to play an unsympathetic second lead — but you took it on. What made you sign up?

Those actors should change their agents. It wasn't about my ego — Joe Castleman was a really good character. But by the time it was released, #MeToo had happened, and suddenly [Joe] was being painted as the Harvey Weinstein of the relationship. Any time I tried to protest, it was like I was holding on to nothing. But I couldn't *not* do the film. Glenn and I had a really good working relationship; we made each other laugh. It's like with Tony — it was competitive. Not about the work, but like whose music would play in the makeup trailer. I remember with Tony, I was No. 1 on the call sheet, and [he was No. 2](#).

And that's a hierarchy thing?

It means you have more lines than everybody else; it means you're top dog. Tony and I would see each other for breakfast most mornings in Rome, and he'd say, "Morning, No. 1" and I'd go, "Morning, No. 2." Now when we exchange emails, he writes, "Hello No. 1" — but then he signs off, "Bye for now, Sir No. 2."

Very clever, reminding you he's got a knighthood. You've worked steadily for decades. Has anyone ever warned you away from taking a particular part?

My first agent. He wouldn't advise me to do a terrible piece of work, but if it was half-good, he'd say, "If you don't do it, somebody else will. And that person will get the next job, and the next job." I always find something positive in what I'm doing. Even if something isn't well-written, you get to go to the Caribbean. Or you're well-paid.

[MOVIES](#)[AWARDS](#)[OSCARs](#)

NEWSLETTER

Get our weekly Indie Focus newsletter

Please enter your email address

Subscribe