

“The easiest thing to say is, ‘Oh, you always play nice guys.’”

Tom Hanks goes back to college—and to his younger, more humble days—to play Larry Crowne.

By **Rod O'Connor** Photo illustration by **Jamie DiVecchio Ramsay**

Tom Hanks, who turns 55 on Saturday 9, is bouncy as he greets me in his downtown hotel suite. After offering me a snack from his fruit plate, and fetching an office chair so we can get cozier, the iconic movie star—looking trim and dapper in a lavender dress shirt and black tie—settles in to talk about his new film, *Larry Crowne*. Director and cowriter, Hanks also plays the title character, an affable big-box worker who falls victim to the recession before reinventing himself as a scooter-riding community college student hot for teacher Julia Roberts.

What inspired you to build a story around a middle-aged guy going back to college?
Well, I'm middle-aged... [Laughs]

I understand it was based somewhat on your own junior college days in the 1970s.

I wanted to talk about reinvention on a realistic—wait a minute, not realistic—on an authentic scale. I just got it in my head: What about a guy who has done everything right, but one day he walks into work and they say, “Nothing personal, but you’re fired”? And that made me think going back to college would be probably the only thing you could do. And then what if Julia Roberts is his teacher?

When you decided the story would be informed by the current economic situation, did that authenticity become a goal?

We were looking to do that from the get-go, and quite frankly, current events caught up to us. When we were going into production, [cowriter] Nia Vardalos came in and said, “Larry has to lose his house.” And that just opened up this huge aspect: What do you do when you owe \$300,000 on your house and it’s only worth \$270,000? That’s ripped right out of today’s headlines.

The movie basically says, if you’re open to it, you can have a second act. Was there a point in life when you rediscovered yourself?

Look, I’ve only ever been an actor. I was in college; I had a kid. And I put everything in the back of a car and drove across the country to take a job. That’s a pretty big of leap of faith. Because you’re thinking, Okay, I have this and this is five months of work. And I have faith that something else will come along. So you’re living by your wits. But you’re also living with the promise that you will meet people that will focus your attention—and that’s exactly what happened [with me].

What about your shift from comedic to dramatic actor—was that a process of rediscovery?

Yeah, I was, like, 36 or 37 and said, I gotta take this whole kind of, like, movie off the table because, one, I’ve been doing them for ten years, and secondly, I don’t want to do ‘em anymore. Because I’m 37 and I’ve got three kids now and I want to play a man who’s been through more things than [*Hands to face, woe-is-me voice*], “Oh gosh, I’m in love and she doesn’t love me.”

Did you draw upon your younger self to play a guy who’s drowning in debt? Being someone who’s a Hollywood player—

Ah, well, that comes and goes.

But is it difficult, as somebody who makes millions per movie, to relate to a blue-collar guy who lost his job?

Oh no, no. My job has always been to hold a mirror up to nature. Because otherwise, who would I play? I wouldn’t be able to play Jim Lovell in *Apollo 13*. Maybe I could get away with [*The Da Vinci Code*’s] Robert Langdon, the Harvard

professor who runs around the world. All I get to play then are, like, successful guys who don’t have to worry about money? What a drag.

Yet most of your characters are nice guys. You’ve been tagged as a modern-day Jimmy Stewart. Does that ever get to be a burden?

No, because the only thing all of these movies have in common, quite frankly, is I’m in them. I’m very satisfied with the depth and range of stuff that I’ve been able to play. I think the easiest thing to say is, “Oh, you always play nice guys.” Well, yeah, but I’m not so sure Robert Langdon is a nice guy. He’s kind of a pain in the ass.

This is your second movie with Julia Roberts where her character succumbs to the charms of your character. I noticed, in both cases, heavy drinking was involved.

Ha! [Laughs] In *Charlie Wilson’s War*, they were fucking long before that movie started. Forgive my language. They had done the deed. They knew each other very well.

Your son Chet is a junior at Northwestern, as well as a budding rapper. When it comes to being a college student, how does he stack up against his old man?

He’s doin’ great. I went to college because I didn’t have anywhere else to go and it was a fabulous hang. And while I was there I was exposed to this world that I didn’t know was possible. I didn’t know you could study theater. I wish I could’ve gotten into Northwestern. I didn’t have the grades.

As rappers, which of you has the fresher flow?
[Laughs] I’ll give that up to the kids.

Larry Crowne opens Friday 1.

