

**Richard Schickel**

*Author, Conversations With Scorsese*

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A Life In Film



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JAMES CAGNEY, A LIFE IN FILM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## JAMES CAGNEY, A LIFE IN FILM

One day in 1929 **James Cagney**, then 30 years old, out of vaudeville and beginning to make a modest mark for himself in musical and straight plays, both on and off Broadway, found himself with 20 or 30 other players of roughly his age and station in life in the outer office of a Broadway producer awaiting a chance to audition for a role in a new play. It was called *Maggie, the Magnificent*, and it was by **George Kelly**, who was also going to direct. Glancing through the open door, Kelly's shrewd eye fell upon Cagney. "Send that boy in," he said to an assistant. "And I went in and I got the job," James Cagney recalled. "It was easy."

Recounting the tale over a half century later, James Cagney laughed and added, "He said I looked like a fresh mutt. I said, 'Is that the reason?' He said, 'Yes, everything that you are is in your face.' I didn't know what he was talking about, but it didn't matter to me. It was a job."

"It was a job." The phrase was almost liturgical with him. It occurred and recurred in every interview with him, the principal bulwark in his defense of creative privacy. Or perhaps he fancied it as the best explanation he could offer of that which is to anyone inexplicable, his or her own gift. Or perhaps, in his seventies and eighties, he was just tired of the whole subject, this essentially modest

man, and wished to turn it aside as politely as he could.

Still, in the anecdote there appeared to be an opening. And the canny interviewer attempted to squirm through it. “Do you know what he was talking about?”

Pause. Reflection. “Yeah, I guess I do. Yeah . . . fresh mutt.” He laughed. “Sure.”

Sure. In the beginning, before he developed his screen character, before he permitted people to know him – it - a little better, that explanation would have done. But later? When a certain vulnerability, even an air of victimization were allowed to show? And still later, when he took his character into realms of psychopathy where no major screen star dared to linger as long as he did? No, it wouldn’t do. Of course, in his later years everyone stopped thinking about him critically at all, permitting him to make the transition from mere celebrity status (where, as the celebrated phrase goes, one is known for one’s wellknownness) to the status of legend (where, naturally, one is known for one’s legendariness). This was an impermeable state, impenetrable by conventional journalistic means, because neither the journalists nor their audience were interested in returning him to the land of the living. It was so much easier, so much more comfortable to love, honor, obey, and, above all, cherish the image, the impossible (or anyway improbable) image.

But yet . . . Here he was. And here I was. It was November 1980. James Cagney and I were seated at a table in the center of the largest stage at the Shepperton Studios outside London. Workmen were putting the finishing touches on the set for what was to be the most lavish interior sequence of *Ragtime*, the film adaptation of **E.L. Doctorow**’s novel. The set was a reconstruction of the rooftop restaurant of the first Madison Square Garden in New York.