

'Gunsmoke' Star Arness Marshals His Memories

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From 1955 until 1975, James Arness played the righteous, brave and gallant Matt Dillon, the marshal of Dodge City, on the landmark CBS western series "Gunsmoke."

The 78-year-old actor recently completed "James Arness: An Autobiography" (McFarland & Co. Inc.). He collaborated on the book with James E. Wise Jr. and Burt Reynolds, a regular on "Gunsmoke" in the early '60s, who wrote the foreword.

In his book, Arness writes about his happy childhood growing up with his younger brother, actor Peter Graves, in Minneapolis. He also talks about his experiences in World War II. A private in the 3rd Infantry Division, he earned the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. Arness also chronicles his early acting experiences in Hollywood, including his appearances in the classic sci-fi movies "The Thing" and "Them!"; his friendship and productive working relationship with John Wayne; and his experiences making "Gunsmoke," which also starred Amanda Blake as Miss Kitty, Milburn Stone as Doc, Dennis Weaver as Chester and Ken Curtis as Festus.

On Saturday the 6-foot-7 actor will make his only personal appearance related to the book, at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage. He will meet fans and sign copies from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Arness recently spoke on the phone about his autobiography.

Question: Why didn't Matt and Miss Kitty ever get together?

Answer: We used to get a lot of mail from people, especially from the ladies, you know, saying they want to see Matt and Miss Kitty go ahead and get married or something. The producers kicked that around. I think they felt if you did that, that you would suddenly be going in a different direction. Matt really couldn't go out and do the sort of dangerous stuff he was doing. It would limit the directions and the options you had.

Q: It would be difficult to see her with children or being called Mrs. Kitty.

A: That's right! Plus the fact, it worked out ideally because people would send in mail [about their relationship]. You realize that is what you want to do, keep them writing in saying that they want more this or that.

Q: You and Peter seem to have had an idyllic childhood.

A: We had a great childhood and boyhood. It was a wonderful time through those years. A lot of it was through the Depression years, when things were tough, but my dad always had a job. But I had a great time. I was kind of restless, and I had a hard time staying in school all day, so me and a few pals would duck out and go out on these various adventures.

Q: Why did you decide to write your autobiography?

A: It really started when I was contacted by [Jim Wise]. He is a retired naval officer, and he was doing books on actors who had been in the service. So he came over and he was going to interview me. We got talking about it, and he came up with the idea of doing an autobiography instead of it being a piece in one of those books. You don't realize it, but there is a lot of work involved. You have to go back through 78 years and try and recall everything. That is hard to do.

Q: I had no idea that you were wounded and won the Purple Heart.

A: That certainly was a searing experience. I don't know what words you could apply to it. It is something I'll never forget. There isn't any experience any more intense than that, I don't believe.

Q: Did you come back from the war changed?

A: I did. In my case, I spent almost a year in the hospital after I came back home. My school career hadn't been very successful. I thought I would go back to school and really be serious and try to get a college degree. But when I did get home, I still found that I had this restlessness and I wasn't cut out to be a student.

Q: John Wayne took you under his wing and signed you to a contract with his company. You speak very fondly of him in the book.

A: I have met many other actors who were great also, but there was something about him that was so special. He was just off in a class by himself somehow. It was a real privilege really to be around the man and to know him. I was with his company for three years, and it was just a special time.

Q: He also introduced the very first episode of "Gunsmoke."

A: It was kind of an incredible thing. I don't know if anybody else would do that, and he actually talked me into [doing the series]. I was kind of on the fence.

Q: Were you on the fence because your film career was gathering steam?

A: I hadn't done anything really important, but I worked my way up through the years. I happened to be doing a picture [when I was offered the part], and the director, I asked him about it. He said, "I don't know if you should do it. It might work against you later." I went to see Duke and he said, "Hey, take this. Do it. You'll get a lot of experience. The whole world will get to know you." He talked me into it, and thank God he did.

Q: Do you think part of the appeal of "Gunsmoke" was the fact that the characters, though archetypes, were three-dimensional?

A: . I think that's the key to it right there. As opposed to some other pretty much shoot-'em-up action westerns. We certainly did some of that too, but not just for its own sake. We did it if it has to be done, but there were more character studies. It was great fun for me. I enjoyed every year of it.

Q: You also enjoyed breaking up your fellow actors on the show?

A: That happened a lot. I think a certain amount of that is good for the show. You work on something day after day and month after month, and it kind of breaks the tension and all. That is the way you get through all of those years. We all, of course, got to know each other so well. We knew how to get along and have fun with the show, which we really did. The bottom line of it is I don't think you could make the series with the basic characters like we had unless they really got along well, which our people certainly did.

Q: You are officially retired?

A: I don't have the stamina to go out and do shows like that anymore. It's a lot of hard work.

Q: Well, you sound great.

A: I feel comparatively good. I had about as much fun and as great a time as I could ever hope to. I feel like a really fortunate person.

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James Arness will be appearing Saturday from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles, (323) 667-2000.

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