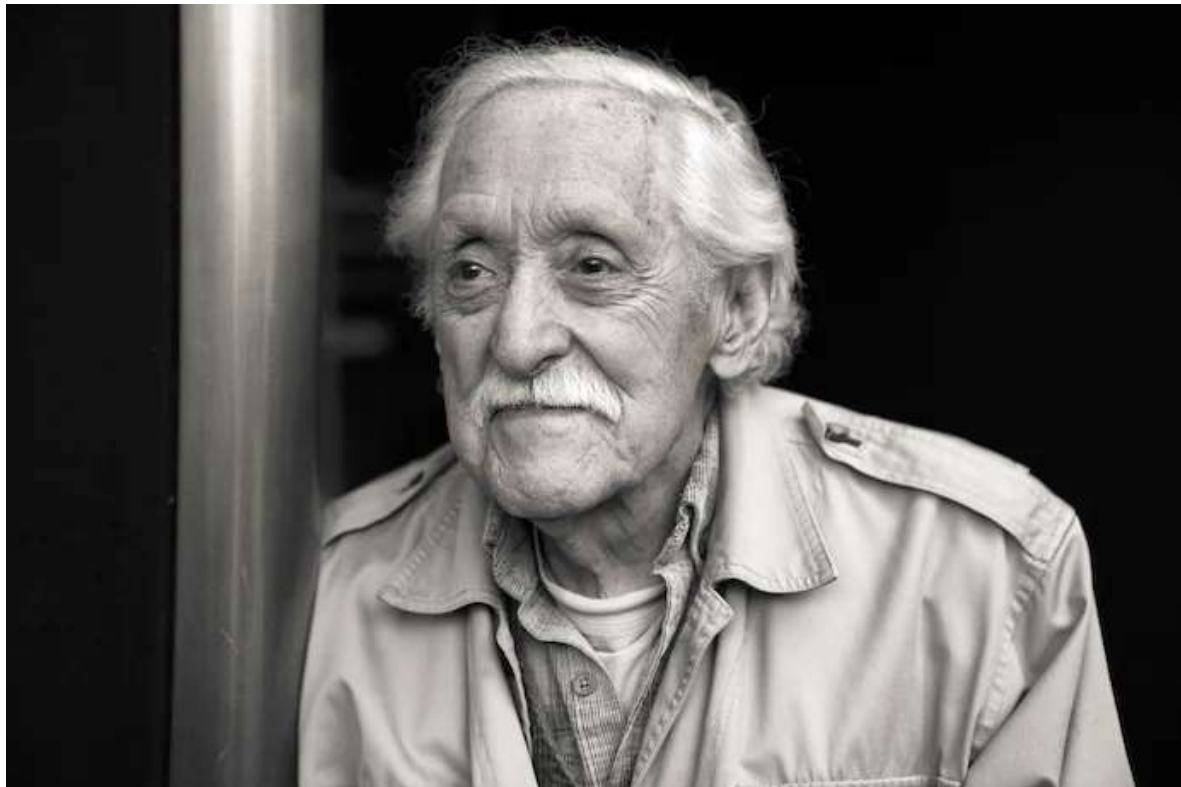


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## 97-year-old actor: ‘I enjoy working with other people, particularly young — well, in my case, they’re all younger than I am’



Mike Nussbaum, at 97, is a working actor who has done film, television and stage work. (KK Ottesen/For The Washington Post)

By KK Ottesen

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Mike Nussbaum, 97, is an actor whose long career includes work on stage as well as in film and television. He lives in Chicago.

**So you are reputed to be the oldest working actor.**

Equity says I’m the oldest still-working member of [Actors’ Equity Association, which represents theater actors]. I don’t know about movies.

**And that’s a title you’ve held, I think, for a number of years now. Why do you think that is?**

Well, partly because it's still fun for me. And partly because I can still memorize. Although I move with difficulty now, memory is not a factor — yet. And I enjoy working with other people, particularly young — well, in my case, they're *all* younger than I am. [Laughs.] I did a play recently where the youngest was, like, 19. And for me, it was a joy just to be a peer of these guys and not some old man on a mountain.

Also, I live in a [city](#) where I'm a part of a theatrical history. And the people who run the theaters all know me. And they know that people will come to see me if I'm in one of their plays. And so they cast me a lot. For instance, the last play that I did before the pandemic, I played the gravedigger in "Hamlet." It was a perfect part for me. I even had a song, at the end of which I said something to the effect of, "The longer you live, the sooner you bloody well die." And, of course that's true, but so far, it hasn't hit me.

### **When did acting first grab you?**

I went to a boys' camp when I was 9 years old and was offered a part in an evening presentation. I was dressed as a clown and got to do a cartwheel onto the stage and go like that [throws hands out] and introduce the show. I did all that, and then I saw all the people. And I froze. I couldn't say a word. And they had to carry me off the stage. Literally. I cried for hours.

### **So at what point did you say, "I want more of that"?**

Immediately after I stopped crying. I mean, it was so exciting. And I would do plays every year. Sometimes talent shows, where I would sing and dance — and I can't do either. In high school I used to do a routine: how famous actors who play gangsters die on stage — Edward G. Robinson and Jimmy Cagney — they all have different ways of dying.

After the war, I came home and got married and tried to go to theater school. But the time of the year was wrong, or the schools that I had applied to were all filled. And so I put it aside for a while and tried to earn a living.

### **And wasn't it a PTA play at your kids' school that eventually kicked things off for you?**

It was at Lincoln School, their grammar school. I played Pecos Bill. And they told me I was very good. Then what happened was that all the nonprofessional community theaters in the suburbs heard about it. There were very few men in community theater, so I became a sought-after commodity. Then I started doing a lot of commercials and began to realize that there was a possibility of making a living doing this. Even in Chicago. So finally, my wife and I agreed, and I sold my business. I was in my mid-40s before I went full time as an actor. So while I'm very old, my career is only 50 or 60 years.

I was lucky enough to be associated with [David Mamet](#). He was a gofer, a 14-year-old kid working backstage in a play that I was doing at Hull House, which was the beginning of the theater movement in Chicago. So I was in the original "American Buffalo" and the original "A Life in the Theatre" and the original "Glengarry Glen Ross." And many other original plays of his.

**In acting, how important are the people around you, fellow actors and directors?**

They *create* the moment. Acting is reacting. That's what I say. And I learned this, I think, essentially from Mamet, that your job is to respond to what the other actor says. And the nuances of change in what the actor is doing. Every night, it changes slightly. You have to be alert to that and not do your thing by rote. And that gives it its freshness. Otherwise, it becomes repetitious. And that's the death knell of good acting, I think.

**The last year and a half have been a terrible time for theater. Have you done things exclusively on Zoom?**

It's been the worst. For any audience-based activity. Music or dance. It's not the same doing it on Zoom. It's like doing a TV show. And I don't want to do TV shows anymore. I never knew how to talk to the camera. I realize that now. If you look at *anything* on TV, any film — everybody whispers. Nobody speaks in a normal tone of voice. It becomes a really nuanced kind of acting. I love projecting for a theater. Making it small enough, and yet large enough, to get to the back row. And to adjust to any kind of sound coming from the audience, to laughter. A part of it is the evanescence, that it disappears.

**Is there something that would make you say, “Okay, time to hang up the spurs”?**

No. Nothing will make *me* say that. I just don't want to give it up. The fact that nobody would call me and hire me, that's what's going to do it. And who, in their right mind, would hire me for a play they're going to do in six months or whatever, at 97? What guarantee can I give them that if I'm alive, I'll still be able to memorize — or move? [Laughs.]

**Over the time you've been acting, has your approach changed, evolved?**

Every time I get on now, I stand in the wings for five minutes before the curtain goes up to listen to the audience. To get energized by the fact that it's a new audience every night. And [that] somebody important to me — and I'll name them — is in the audience. So that I have a reason to be nervous and energized. And if I would tell myself, “Oh, David Mamet is in the audience tonight” — even if it was phony. I love the fear that energizes a performance. And I cultivate it by doing that.

**Do you ever wonder about if you hadn't done theater?**

I would have probably died at 60. I was an exterminator. So I spent an enormous amount of time with terrible insecticides in very close proximity. I practically bathed in them because we were doing mosquito control. And I was in the DDT fog hours at a time. Literally. And here I am, 97. Tell me why. I don't know if it is a factor in my longevity, having fun doing what I do at 97. I guess it is. I've had a wonderful career. But it's pure luck. People who do what they love die early, too. I'm ready to go anytime. But I'm also ready to do a show.

KK Ottesen is a regular contributor to the magazine. Follow her on Twitter: [@kkOttesen](https://twitter.com/kkOttesen). This interview has been edited and condensed.