

## GINA PICCALO

### Becoming Bill Clinton

by Gina Piccalo



Dennis Quaid plays Bill Clinton in HBO's *The Special Relationship*—he tells Gina Piccalo about his guys' weekend with Clinton, gaining 35 pounds, and why he almost said no to the part.

Dennis Quaid's hotel room smelled like the half-spent pack of Marlboro Lights that sat on his hotel coffee table and the TV was turned onto the news. Then he offered a handshake and engaged that high-wattage grin, as if all his grave thoughts had just drifted out the window and impaled themselves on the swaying palm fronds.

Quaid is often called a "reliable" leading man. He's been in over 50 films in his 35-year career and his versatility is under-rated. Sure, Quaid's got a face that can go from smirking bad boy to earnest all American in the time it takes to read this sentence. But there's also something believably wounded in him that comes through in his best performances, his Jerry Lee Lewis in *Great Balls of Fire!*, his 1950s gay husband Frank Whitaker in *Far From Heaven*. Even in otherwise pedestrian roles (which have clotted his [resume](#) in recent years) Quaid is still fun to watch.

"I don't look anything like him. My mannerisms are completely different than his. I didn't really see myself in him at all."

Now he takes on a real humdinger: Monica Lewinsky-era Bill



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...now he takes on a real hunkin'ger. Monica Lewinsky-era Bill Clinton. Quaid plays the former president in HBO's *The Special Relationship*, screenwriter Peter Morgan's third film in the Michael Sheen-as-Tony Blair trilogy (*The Deal* and *The Queen* being the first two). It debuts Saturday and marks Quaid's biggest risk yet. So big, in fact, that he was almost paralyzed with fear when he took the part.

"I almost said no," he said, chuckling. "Because I knew [Clinton] back when he was in the White House. I don't look anything like him. My mannerisms are completely different than his. I didn't really see myself in him at all."

But Quaid went for it, anyway. Even though he worried his version of Clinton's characteristically hoarse voice would sound too much like, he said, a "*Saturday Night Live* impression." (It's dead-on, but does walk that line.) He spent four months packing on some 35 pounds, gobbling up McDonald's just like Bubba, so his face would fill out properly. He shaved his eyebrows to match Clinton's and donned a wig. Then he studied miles of footage to perfect Clinton's sweeping mannerisms. All the work rendered Quaid

nearly unrecognizable.

In the film, which recounts the tumultuous late 1990s, Quaid plays the Clinton oeuvre. We see the folksy, backslapping everyman, the brilliantly nuanced statesman, the F-word spewing diva and Hillary's bumbling husband. The story spans Clinton's second term in office when he and Blair forged a tenuous friendship that led to some monumental achievements amid Clinton's near-impeachment. Above all, it was the president's tenacity that moved Quaid.

"We're all flawed in one way or another," he said, flashing that grin. "What I thought was incredibly amazing was that he was able to get through that and still go on to really have a viable presidency. That's a huge accomplishment really. I remember when the Lewinsky scandal first came up, pundits on television were saying he was going to be resigning in 36 hours."

A few years after that, Quaid and Clinton crossed paths. The president invited the actor to spend a guys' weekend in the White House back in 1999. It was just a month after the Senate finally closed the book on the sex scandals and the impeachment by acquitting the president of a raft of charges. After a State dinner for the King of Spain, Clinton asked Quaid to stay on. Hillary was out of town and the two dudes spent their days watching March Madness, chucking a tennis ball around for Clinton's dog Buddy, munching Subway sandwiches in the back of the presidential limo and playing golf.

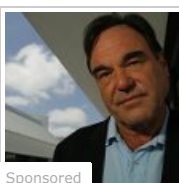
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