

Sam Waterston returns to Rosecliff 51 years after 'The Great Gatsby' filming

'Law and Order' actor Sam Waterston headlined a talk by the Preservation Society in the ballroom of Rosecliff, where he portrayed Nick Carraway in the Robert Redford 'Gatsby'



by [Ryan Belmore](#) and [Veronica Bruno](#) July 12, 2025



Photo by Veronica Bruno, What'sUpNewp

Celebrated actor Sam Waterston sat down with NBC News' Chief Environmental Affairs correspondent, Anne Thompson, at Rosecliff mansion on Wednesday, July 9, as part of Preservation Society's David B. Ford Family Lecture series, "'The Great Gatsby' Revisited: An Evening with Sam Waterston." "The Killing Fields" actor returned to the gilded halls of Rosecliff—"The Great Gatsby's" most iconic backdrop—to talk about the experience of filming the cultural juggernaut locally in Newport, 51 years later.

Even though it was a packed house fully of enthusiasts for the actor and the original film, Waterston, 84, was generous with his time. He greeted many of the guests on hand at the

reception before the talk and even after its conclusion, conversing with so many individually. When I spoke with him, we talked about how serendipitous that last year was the 50th anniversary of the film and this year F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel celebrated its centenary.



Photo by Veronica Bruno, What'sUpNewp

Some of the fun at the event was seeing the various ways Gatsby fans dressed up for the occasion as well.

Another fun tidbit: a mini replica of his character Nick Carraway's house was on display in the foyer, next to the heart-shaped grand staircase. Waterston joked that when he arrived back at Rosecliff, he looked for this house, which was temporarily built on the grounds of the estate for filming the movie, only to be jokingly disappointed with its disappearance.

"I looked for it again, but now found out that it hasn't been there for a long, long time," he said, laughing.

There were also a handful of extras in the audience, who each stood when journalist Thompson pointed them out. They were paid \$1.65 for 12 hours' worth of work at the time.

"I think there was a huge amount of enthusiasm," Waterston said about filming in Newport, "because there was an invitation to anybody and everybody who wanted to be in the movie to come be an extra. And I think there were a lot of volunteers." Among them was the actor's own mother.

Waterston—a multi-award winning actor—spoke to Thompson at length about the experience, including some surprising anecdotes about the film that gave him his breakthrough role. Working with entertainment titans such as Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, Waterston—a Yale graduate—charmed the Newport audience with his stories from the set and takeaways in his career. Here are some of the highlights that stood out for me.

He fought hard to land the role

"I told my agent that I really wanted it," he said to Thompson.

“I was sort of an early stage hippy. And I went to the audition looking like an early stage hippy. And so it was hard to see through all that to the possibility that I might be able to play this part.”

He eventually broke through with a slight change to his appearance. He said that the director, Jack Clayton, asked him, “You know, Sam, would you mind just going into the bathroom and putting a lot of water into your hair?”

Waterston was also told that he was “too ethnic looking,” to which he replied, “I listed all the people that my mother was related to going back to Plymouth Rock, and he said, ‘Oh, well, that might help,’” drawing laughs from the audience.

He described how his deep “hunger” to take on the role was discernible to the director. “I think, if you see that one of these people who’s going to lay down his life to do it, well, at least they’ll be enthusiastic.

“It was perfectly obvious that I was desperate,” he added.

His hotel room was disturbingly ransacked

Waterston surprised the audience with a story about his hotel room in Newport being broken into (he did not disclose the name). He recounted the chilling incident, noting that nothing was stolen, but that his items were rifled through and then spread out on his bed.

“It was really creepy,” he explained, saying that the incident prompted him to move out when a local Newport resident offered up her house to stay in while he finished filming.

“I don’t know her name, and I would love to be able to thank her,” he added.

Lavished praise on the cast

Not one to gossip, Waterston only had admiration for his hugely famous co-stars, Redford and Farrow, among others.

“When I asked Sam if we could do this for the ‘Today Show,’ he said, ‘I would do it under one condition, and that is I want to talk about how wonderful my costars were,’ explained Thompson. “And I think that is one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard anybody say in the many years that I’ve done this business.”

Waterston described working with Redford: “He was completely genuine, feet on the ground, completely direct, totally without airs.

“And that was true of Mia and Scott Wilson, who became a friend for life.”

He also shared the prophetic advice that Redford imparted to him about the entertainment business. When Waterston first got to set, Redford asked him how everyone was treating him, to which Waterston enthusiastically replied, “Wonderful!”

Redford took him aside and cautioned him, however: “He said, ‘Don’t be fooled. It’s not love. They want something that you’ve got. Don’t mistake it for love.’”

He’s never seen other versions

He was asked if he had viewed the other remakes, including the 2013 Baz Luhrmann-Leonardo DiCaprio collaboration (which is probably mostly famous for its DiCaprio champagne glass meme now).

“I haven’t seen any of the remakes, and I also haven’t seen the Alan Ladd version [1949], which I hope to see someday,” he added.

How he related to Nick and why he believes the story continues to resonate

“I don’t think I’ve ever talked about this, but my family grew up near money without having any, and I think that’s just like Nick. So I think that that’s rare, and if you have that experience, there’s a built in kind of distance.”

Thompson asked him why Jay Gatsby’s tragic story still endures. “We as Americans do not have a subtle relationship with wealth and power. We’re as fascinated by it as anybody else, and we would like to have it all as much as anybody else. And at the same time, we have the Declaration of Independence and the whole idea of a country where power flows from the bottom to the top, not from the top to the bottom. And it’s been flowing both ways from the beginning, and this book does that, tells that, makes that vivid in the midst of a really Impossible romance.”

Prior to the lecture, Thompson filmed a special segment at Rosecliff with Waterston and some of the extras for NBC, which is set to air on the “Today” show Monday morning, July 14, between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. You’ll definitely want to check that out. Preservation Society of Newport Country’s [summer lecture series](#) continues with a July 17 talk with Lark E. Mason Jr., former President of the Appraiser’s Association of America. Another highlight to look for is “The Gilded Age’s” Christine Baranski on August 7.