


ACTRESS GENEVIEVE O'REILLY SHARES HER FAVOURITE
MOMENTS PLAYING SENATOR MON MOTHMA IN  WORDS: TARA BENNETT



PORTRAIT: **KYLE GALVIN**

ACTORS ARE FOREVER ON THE HUNT. They seek characters worth exploring, productions worth investing their time and passion in, then chase those auditions that might ensure their art becomes a career. And for the lucky few, sometimes the role of a lifetime chases them.

Actress Genevieve O'Reilly is one of those actors engaged in an extended dance with a role that's been showing up repeatedly in her life for 20 years: that of *Star Wars'* Republic senator and eventual first chancellor of the New Republic Senate, Mon Mothma. While she didn't originate the role (that was actress Caroline Blakiston in *Return Of The Jedi*) O'Reilly has since embodied the strong-willed and very brave Mothma in five separate projects in the franchise.

"Over the years, it has been a surprise and a treat for me to get the opportunity to step back into her shoes, or the wig," O'Reilly tells *SFX* with genuine gratitude. "From the beginning, it was so lovely to be invited to take part, or to play her when she was younger. I felt very excited to be a part of that big *Star Wars* universe, and to get to witness it from the inside."

What makes her continuing adventures with the character even more extraordinary is that O'Reilly's first appearance as Mothma, in

Revenge Of The Sith was cut from the film by George Lucas to better focus on Anakin Skywalker's arc towards darkness. She says at the time she received a "deeply gracious and respectful" letter of apology from producer Rick McCallum, and thought that was that.

Fast-forward to 10 years later, when she got a call out of nowhere about playing Mothma again in Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One*, set right before the events of *Star Wars*. "I never expected that, and I also think that they could have recast with anyone," O'Reilly says. "The fact that they had the generosity to reach out to me was really astounding."

WOMAN'S WORLD

As a member of the Alliance Council, Mothma is part of the Rebellion's governing body that doesn't formally allow Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones) and Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) to try to retrieve the schematics for the newly discovered Death Star. "I loved playing her [again]," the actress says. "I was 10 years older but that initial experience, of course, it still stayed in my cellular memory. Getting to step into her for *Rogue One* felt truly special. Gareth was directing that, and that felt really brave. I know this might sound trite, but it did feel like an indie film."

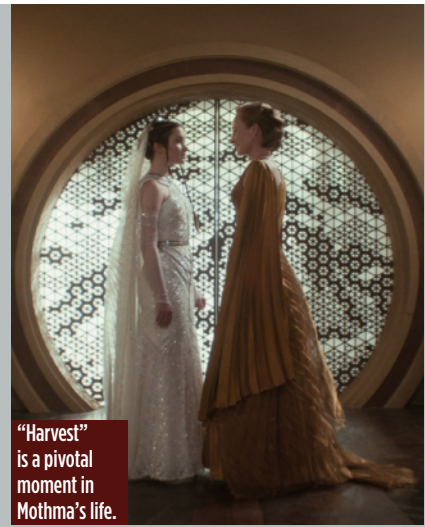
That was also where she was first introduced to screenwriter Tony Gilroy, who came into *Rogue One* and reworked "a number of storytelling elements" that included scenes with Mothma. "He has such a precise understanding of character and narrative, and what is required in each moment," she says. "I really revelled in that experience."

Five years later, *Star Wars* came calling again, with O'Reilly asked to reprise Mothma once more in the Disney+ prequel series *Andor*. She remembers telling a producer at the time, "I think I'd be really interested in playing her if we could write her up. If she could be more of a character force, rather than an expositional force within the piece." I remember they were really receptive to it, and then Tony Gilroy was there."

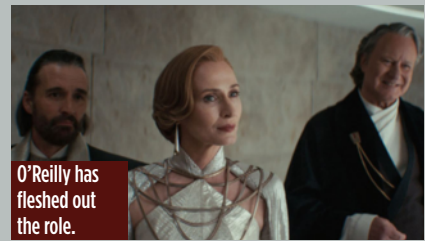
O'Reilly says Gilroy made it clear that he wanted *Andor* to be a "character piece" in which the story of the Rebellion is told through the eyes of ordinary people. "And to allow narrative space and storytelling time for Mon Mothma, which was new," she says.

The first season of *Andor* featured Senator Mothma as a secret collaborator and financial backer of Rebellion organiser Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård). Audiences were welcomed into the complicated personal life of the Chandrilan senator.

"You learn that she comes from a genuinely orthodox culture," O'Reilly explains. "There are strictures and rules, not only that she had to grow up with, but are very rigidly still in place. Even though she is this powerful



"Harvest" is a pivotal moment in Mothma's life.



O'Reilly has fleshed out the role.



Mothma, the New Republic senator.

Senator, and she is a voice for her people, when she steps home, she is within the machinations of that orthodoxy. She is a cog, and I thought that was so revelatory."

Audiences also come to know Mothma through her close friendship with her cousin Vel Sartha (Faye Marsay), also working with Luthen as a spy in the burgeoning Rebellion. "Seeing Vel have to step into that too, in the conversations of these two women and their lens, I thought, 'What a clever way to write scenes which are revelatory in themselves about character.'"

In season two, Mothma is an even bigger player in the story as she moves closer to the Rebellion and further away from the Senate and her home planet. "I feel that Cassian steps into his destiny, and while stepping into his destiny, he is surrounded by ordinary folk who also have the opportunity and do choose courage instead of fear," she says of the second season's fleshing out of the ensemble. "That's where you feel like his journey creates the apex of that triangle, and then everyone can step into their courage around that."

O'Reilly says as she got her scripts, she was amazed by how Gilroy wrote Mothma to be so "nuanced and intricate". In particular, she cites the season two episode "Harvest", which is pivotal for Mothma as she tries to protect her teenage daughter Leida (Bronte Carmichael) from undergoing a traditional Chandrilan arranged wedding.



The last of six dresses worn for the wedding.

“I know this woman in a way I just really didn't know her before. I understand the pain”

“Tony and I had discussed this when he said she was getting married and I was like, ‘Oh, no, she's not gonna do this to her daughter,’” she says. “He's great about having character conversations with actors. He's so deeply collaborative and curious about the actor's perspective. I remember saying to him, ‘She has to give her an out. If it's that woman who was there in *Rogue One* and *Return Of The Jedi*, I understand that there's a pain within her. But if it is that woman who can be a pillar, then what would *she* do?”

She says they decided to have Mothma give Leida an out, after explaining the pain of her own wedding when her drunk mother did not do the same for her. “He allows for a woman to be a Senator, to be a mother, and to be a child. She talks about her mother, so you get these intergenerational layers of one woman,” she explains. “And then for Leida to turn the way she did, it just broke my heart. It's deeply brutal but it was a moment for Mon to gather herself. We saw that. We saw the pain. And I'm sure there were many reasons, but there is a power dynamic shift

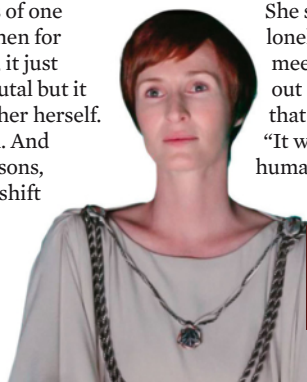
where Mon steps in to who she is. You end in this huge, big [dance] piece where you understand the chaos that everyday people have to hold. And not just everyday people, but somebody who's managing to help build rebellion; what that is and what that chaos within that woman must be.”

THIS WOMAN'S WORK

Another notable Mothma moment comes in the ninth episode of season two, when she finally meets Andor for the first time, right after her incendiary speech condemning the Empire for the Ghorman Massacre.

“I was so curious to know how Tony was going to bring these two people together,” O'Reilly says. “I didn't know where it was going to happen or when. But I did know that he wanted to lean into the speech and the escape from the Senate, which I was thrilled about. He was so clever to carve out a separate moment for you to really hear Mon Mothma's voice. I'm so grateful to him for giving her that opportunity for us all, to see and hear her passion and her voice. To see her risk it all.”

She says it was perfect that in the lonely moment right after, she finally meets Cassian as he arrives to get her out alive. “What I loved about it was that there was no trumpet,” she says. “It was so subtle and beautifully human. In fact, we did it so that I was coming into a corridor and it's



Rogue One covered a later period in Mothma's life.

almost like a second glance of, ‘Who's that? I don't know that guy.’ The idea that these two people really don't know each other, and how quickly you have to decide to trust or not to trust, given everything that Mon has been through in the lead up, but then in just that 24 hours. But what he does is talk to her about Vel, and that's really clever intimacy that Tony connected it to.

“And then, of course, that big shootout scene!” she continues of their fraught escape, her first *Star Wars* action scene. “There was that beautiful moment along that really high concourse up in Valencia where Cassian shoots her driver. To be face to face with the reality of the mortality of a rebellion, seeing someone that she knows shot in front of her, and the idea that Cassian is so trained in this.

“He's a soldier and she is so not,” she emphasises. “She's crossing a threshold. We played the moment so vitally different, that she would just be in shock and recoiling and this is really the moment of him offering her his hand, and her deciding to take it.”

Mothma's story, like Cassian's, dovetails into *Rogue One*, and the actress continues her character's story in the animated *Star Wars Rebels* and *Ahsoka*. Asked if she thinks Mothma ever goes back to Chandrila or connects with Leida again, she muses, “In my head, you can't have both. Of course, maybe you would want both, but by even wanting both, you risk everybody. You risk those outside the rebellion and those within it. My instinct, and this is only me, is that she devoted herself to fighting the Empire and making lives better that way.”

As for how long she'll continue to portray Mothma in the *Star Wars* universe, O'Reilly says that is entirely dependent on others planning the ongoing narrative. “But I am really grateful that Tony and Kathleen [Kennedy] and Disney have given space for this woman to have a story,” she says. “I know this woman in a way I just really didn't know her before. I understand the pain of her rebellion. I was always keen to be able to close that circle with Caroline Blakiston to maybe have an understanding of what is in her eyes when she says that line that everyone quotes to me, which is, ‘Many Bothans died to bring you this information.’ There was always such a pain and an empathy within her, and I was always curious what that was? I finally feel I've closed that circle. I go, ‘Okay, I get her now. I understand that woman all through those films and that arc.’

More importantly, she got to play Mothma as a woman who has impact with her voice alone. “She doesn't pick up a gun, she doesn't pick up a lightsaber,” O'Reilly points out. “She can be impactful with diplomacy, with a fierce intellect and a loud voice.”

Andor is on Disney+.