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Opinion | I Despised Gorbachev Until I Played His Role

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5-6 minutes

The Wall Street Journal

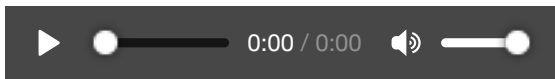
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President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland, October 1986.

Photo: Universal Images Group via Getty Images



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It's hard to describe how I felt when I received the call. I am Polish. For me and for my countrymen, Mikhail Gorbachev symbolized everything we despised in a leader. He was our enemy, the one who headed a system that took away our freedoms, including our ability to travel, associate with others and express ourselves. But I never let him and the system he represented shatter my dreams. I stood in a long line, got my passport to travel the world, and eventually became an actor.

Now I will play Mr. Gorbachev in the upcoming biopic "Reagan."

I had mixed emotions when the filmmakers offered me the role. This was a man I grew up disliking, but I had to find a way to get in his head, humanize him, and play the role. Before accepting, I looked for everything I could find about Mr. Gorbachev's life. I watched interviews, speeches and anything else I could get my hands on. I read his autobiography. I wanted to understand who he was and is, how he lived his life, and how he governed. I could tell right away the job of capturing this man would be difficult. I love a challenge, so I called the producers and told them I'd take the part.

When I arrived on the set in Guthrie, Okla., I was immediately impressed by what I saw. It was a safe place for actors to explore their unique characters. I noticed right away that producer Mark Joseph and director Sean McNamara worked very well together and trusted each other. But I admit I was still nervous about how I

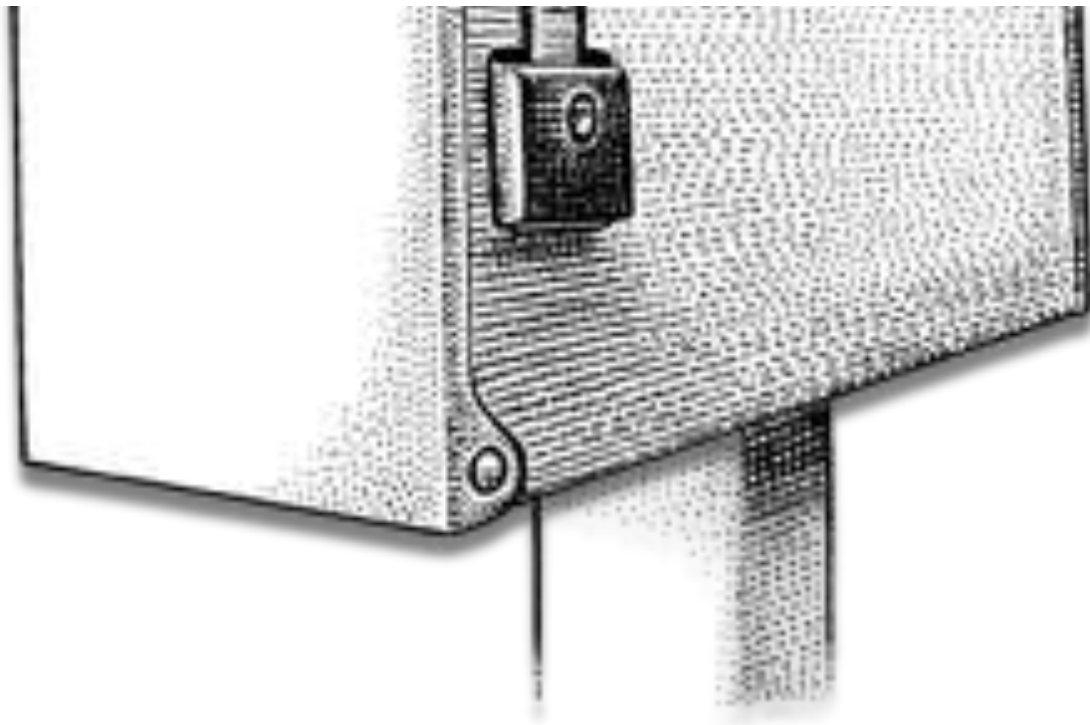
would play opposite Dennis Quaid, who was playing Ronald Reagan. He was humble and gracious, and a tremendous bond began forming between us.

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Our first scene together found us at the Geneva Summit in 1985, and I began to see the characters as two romantics who stood for what they believed. We were moving beyond two actors having a dialogue. I started witnessing Dennis embodying Reagan's character, and the same happened with myself and Mr. Gorbachev. By the time we performed our finale, an emotional showdown at Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1986, we had connected in a remarkable way.

Our characters had gone from yelling and fighting to sharing with each other their fears and dreams.

I left the set as an admirer of the incredible team I had a chance to work with. And I learned an important lesson about how all of us are capable of growth and change. While I don't and will never support Mr. Gorbachev's policies, I began to understand more of who he was as a person. I respect the ways that he worked with Reagan even when their advisers told them to cut ties and continue fighting. I came to the set of "Reagan" with preconceived ideas about my character, which melted away as I opened my heart to acting. For that I will always be grateful.

Mr. Krupa is an actor.

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WSJ Opinion: Hits and Misses of the Week

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