

James Arness



Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke*

James Arness does not accept praise easily. In 1998, an overwhelming majority of 50,000 *TV Guide* readers named *Gunsmoke* their favorite western and Marshal Matt Dillon “the greatest gunslinger” from all shows in the CBS library.

Yet Arness, the actor with an imposing 6'7" frame and shy demeanor, claims he did nothing special to merit such recognition. To hear his account, the writers, producers, and fellow cast members did the heavy lifting while he merely tried not to ruin the magic around him.

“The bottom line is I was fortunate to get this role and be in a project that had such quality material,” Arness says. “It was mostly a question, especially in the early going, of the role carrying me along.”

Longtime fans of TV’s first “adult” western (1955–75) might beg to differ. There was a deceptive quality to Arness’ work. Even in his most challenging performances, it rarely seemed as if he were “acting.” As a result, his skills were often underappreciated.

Arness, the older brother of actor Peter Graves, toiled in obscurity in Hollywood for nearly a decade before landing the role that made him famous. The oft-repeated story

that John Wayne vouched for Arness with higher-ups at CBS, helping him to get the part, is, he adds, “the honest-to-goodness truth.”

“You never know in this business,” he says. “There’s a lot of luck, providence, mixed into every successful career.”

In addition to two later TV series (*How the West Was Won* and *McClain’s Law*), Arness, now 77, did five *Gunsmoke* movies between 1989 and ’94. He and his wife of 21 years, Janet, now keep busy with various charity projects. A bad leg (from a World War II injury that earned him a Purple Heart) has slowed him down in recent years.

Arness, who lives in suburban Los Angeles, is also writing his autobiography. “It really has been a great career, a great life,” he says.

With wife Janet; they’ve been married 21 years

