

From Politician to Indie Filmmaker

The former U.S. Representative Robert Mrazek's first film debuted at the Sarasota Film Festival last week.

[CHRISTOPHER ORR](#) | APR 13, 2016



*Treat Williams stars in the film *The Congressman*. Sarasota Film Festival*

“I love movies,” says Robert Mrazek, “and I’ve always loved movies.” A five-term Democratic Congressman from New York during the Reagan-Bush years, Mrazek retired from politics in 1993 to write military-themed novels and nonfiction—he now has eight books to his name—but he never lost his love of cinema. And now, at age 70, he is the screenwriter and co-director of

his first film, entitled, appropriately enough, *The Congressman*.

The film, which stars Treat Williams and closed the Sarasota Film Festival last weekend, concerns a burned-out representative from Maine named Charlie Winship, who finds himself at the center of controversy after footage is televised in which he fails to rise for the Pledge of Allegiance on the floor of the House. He retreats to a remote lobster fishing village on the island of Monhegan—where Mrazek himself lives and writes for half of each year—and there reassesses his life with the help of the down-to-earth town librarian (Elizabeth Marvel).

Making films was always Mrazek's ambition. It just took him a little longer to get around to it than most. After leaving the Navy in 1968, he attended the London Film School, where he studied under the director Charles Frennd. But

after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, Mrazek says his fledgling film career felt “kind of trivial.” So he came back to the states, where he went to work for the anti-war Indiana Senator Vance Hartke before launching his own political career, first in the Suffolk County legislature and later in the House.

But the film bug never left him altogether. In 1987, he spearheaded a U.S. Congressional Lifetime Achievement Award for his favorite director, Fred Zinnemann, of *High Noon*, *From Here to Eternity*, and *A Man for All Seasons* fame. “I felt he had done great service to our country culturally,” says Mrazek. “He came to Washington and he stayed with me for a week, and we became really good friends.” A year later, in 1988, Mrazek led the fight for the National Film Preservation Act, at a time when studios were colorizing black and white classics, often to the filmmakers’ great dismay.

After Congress, Mrazek says he wrote a few screenplays before one of them, a Vietnam-era love story, came to the attention of producer Fred Roos, who’d worked with Francis Ford Coppola on such films as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Godfather Part 2*. (As Mrazek says of the former, Roos “held things together when Francis was having some emotional issues.”) But the script that had attracted Roos was a “much bigger budgeted picture,” says Mrazek, “and it’s been *in development*, so to speak. And I thought, Bob, you’re 68 years old, if you’re going to make a picture you’d better get started.”

Of his past lifetime in elective politics, Mrazek says merely, “I feel that I took a detour for 30 years.”

So he wrote *The Congressman* as an intentionally smaller film and arranged to co-direct with a friend of his who also lived on Monhegan, Jared Martin, an actor perhaps best known for playing champion rodeo cowboy “Dusty” Farlow

on *Dallas*, “when they decided that Larry Hagman’s wife ought to have a lover.” For inspiration, Mrazek looked to such classics as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Candidate*, *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, and *Local Hero*.

Getting Treat Williams to star as Charlie Winship was crucial, Mrazek says: “He felt he was on the same journey as the principal character. And when he arrived to shoot the film, he *was* Charlie Winship. He said, ‘I’ve been grinding my career the same way Charlie did in the House.’ He was perfect for the role. We got so lucky.”

As Williams sees it, his fit was apparent from the start. He describes the role as “one of those things that we all strive for later in life. I’ve been knocking my head against the wall for 64 years: What am I going to do for the next 20 or so?” (The answer, evidently, is that he’ll play members of Congress: He also stars as Ted Kennedy in HBO’s Clarence Thomas drama, *Confirmation*, which premieres this Saturday.)

The Congressman, which opens in New York and Washington, D.C. on April 29, is a self-conscious throwback of a film—as Williams describes it, “a little movie with a big heart.” Mrazek says that he deliberately chose to forgo most of the festival circuit because “it is not bleak, it is not dark, it is not violent ... I’m kind of cringing at what our Rotten Tomatoes percentage is going to be.” Regardless, Mrazek is clearly enjoying his new career as a filmmaker, however long he may have postponed it. Of his past lifetime in elective politics, he says merely, “I feel that I took a detour for 30 years.”