At Catskill Animal Sanctuary in New York, Cromwell tempts Nadine the pig with an apple.
It was 20 years ago when a heartwarming Australian movie about a sociable pig named Babe captivated audiences in theaters across America. The media was touting blockbusters like Apollo 13 and Braveheart, but moviegoers just couldn’t get enough of Babe.

Grossing $254 million at the global box office, the tale of a little pig turned shepherding champion won an Oscar for best visual effects (one of seven for which it was nominated) and nearly two dozen other awards. James Cromwell’s performance as farmer Arthur Hoggett earned him an Oscar nomination for best supporting actor. The experience, he says, changed his life.

Before Babe, Cromwell had appeared in TV movies, sitcoms and a few big-screen films. But in his mid-50s at the time and burned out on smaller roles, he worried about his future in Hollywood. So Cromwell, who grew up in Manhattan, went to New York, where he rekindled his love for acting in a Broadway production of Hamlet. When that gig ended, his agent approached him about Babe. He almost turned it down. Almost.

Since Babe, Cromwell has starred in dozens of major films and TV shows, including Star Trek: First Contact, The Green Mile, Space Cowboys and The Artist. He’s received many award nominations, most recently winning an Emmy for his portrayal of Dr. Arden in American Horror Story: Asylum.

But Babe didn’t merely boost Cromwell’s career. After working closely with animals on the movie set, he adopted a vegan diet. He has since championed myriad animal protection causes, from the use of animals in entertainment and research to factory farming, horse slaughter and hound hunting. He presented at the HSUS Genesis Awards ceremony (now celebrated online) nearly every year since Babe won a Genesis Award for best feature film in 1996. And in 2014, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from The HSUS.

In this edited interview with staff writer Ruthanne Johnson, Cromwell discusses the animal issues near to his heart and the ways Babe changed his life.

“"I would say that I owe my career to a pig.""
What inspired you to do *Babe*?
I got the script, which only had about 16 lines, and was going to turn it down. But one of my best friends, a wonderful actor named Charles Keating, said, “Listen, why don’t you go? It’s a free trip to Australia, and if the film fails it’s not your fault. It’s the pig’s film.” I’d hitchhiked around the world for 18 months in the early ’70s and loved traveling but had never seen Australia.

How did the role impact your life?
It was transformative. It made my career and allowed me to have the life that I’ve had since. I would say that I owe my career to a pig. It’s interesting: I made a choice to put animals into a central position in my life, and I was rewarded by an animal.

It also inspired me to become vegan. After having worked all morning with these extraordinary animals, I’d see their relatives on the lunch table. They had ham and duck, every animal except horse. That’s when I said, “I’ve got to try to be a vegan.” And for the most part, I have been vegan since 1994.

You were vegetarian before *Babe*.
What inspired that change?
I rode across the country on a motorcycle in 1975. I remember it was the worst time of year and bloody cold. When I was going through Texas, I went through the feed-lots, which I had never seen before. It was a very sobering sight—heartbreaking and awful. It’s a corporate system completely out of touch with what is sustainable, what is humane, what is compassionate. At the time, I didn’t even know what a vegetarian was. I just thought, “I can’t eat [animals] anymore.”

What’s your favorite scene from the movie?
I love the dancing scene. It was at this moment that my character shifted from a man who would think to shoot the pig to seeing this little creature in his lap who is not only in pain but suffering. His response is to entertain, to inspire, to celebrate. He begins to sing and dance for this pig and it becomes infectious.

What have been your favorite responses to the movie?
There was a press junket for the movie *Apollo 13*. Reporters had come in from all over the country to tour NASA and see the film. When they got on the bus in the morning to head back to their respective cities, somebody from Universal said, “Listen, since some of you have a late departure, we have this little Australian film about a pig that we’d like you to see.” And everybody on the bus went, “Oh, god. Do we have to?” They had nothing better to do and went to see it, and they all adored it.

Gene Siskel was one of the very strong supporters from the beginning. He knew he was going out on a limb, and he said, “This is a very important film. This isn’t just a kids’ film. This is something very special.”

In some ways, my persona entered the consciousness of a lot of children and they feel sympathetically toward me, and that’s very nice. The film is about the pig’s journey, but it’s also about the human’s journey. And when the kids get older, it still resonates.

Why do you think *Babe* had such an impact on audiences?
The story has for all ages so many levels of understanding and wisdom. Babe’s destiny and his desire and the sweetness with which he goes about it, and his acceptance and perseverance, are very uplifting and inspiring. At the same time, it’s a morality tale that begins in a slaughterhouse, or a piggery. These animals are sent to the slaughterhouse, which is the mindless destruction of billions of animals regardless of their potential.

Animal welfare is a seminal issue. It addresses almost all of the problems. It deals with what we are doing to the environment. It deals with our inhumanity.
towards other species and towards ourselves, the amount of cruelty that we can tolerate. It deals with social and moral issues. It deals with politics, sociology, psychology in almost every way.

How does that translate to the treatment of animals on factory farms?
Everything has a consequence, and you have to look at those consequences honestly. And all of this was in this little film that never preached. One of the nicest parts of the film is the opening; the narration is beautiful. Roscoe Lee Browne’s voice says, “This is the tale of an unprejudiced heart.” What a concept, an unprejudiced heart.

What animal issues are important to you?
All animal welfare—factory farming, spaying and neutering pets, our relationship to all sentient beings. My wife and I went to Borneo to observe orangutans in a sanctuary. There’s a pressing issue. These extraordinary creatures now live in a very small, restricted area right across the river from a 5-million-acre palm oil plantation, which is only the third largest in Indonesia. Palm oil is used in just about everything: food, lipsticks, shampoos, emulsifiers, automobile products. It’s responsible for the destruction of Indonesian rainforest and the possible extinction of this extraordinary animal. Every species that comes up against human encroachment is at risk.

What’s your advice on influencing people when it comes to animal welfare issues?
Be the thing you want to see in the world. If you care about animals, get involved in mitigating the suffering that’s right outside your front door. Feed them. Love them. Care for them. Talk about them. Get other people to understand enough to care for them. If we do that, you know, one heart at a time.