EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“There Was a Detail in the Book That I Actually Got Wrong”

James Ortiz talks with Paul Salfen about playing Rocky in Project Hail Mary, and how a misreading of Andy Weir’s novel became the key to the character, as the film returns to theaters December 11 in IMAX and select 70mm.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Official theatrical poster for Project Hail Mary. The key art lists the original theatrical date of March 20, 2026, and the line “Filmed for IMAX.”

Amazon MGM Studios is putting *Project Hail Mary* back in theaters. On December 11, the adaptation of Andy Weir’s novel returns to screens in the United States and Canada, including IMAX and select 70mm engagements, with a new official trailer that asks audiences to see it on the big screen once more. The film, directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller from a screenplay by Drew Goddard, opened in the United States on March 20, 2026, and has grossed more than $685 million worldwide. Ryan Gosling stars as Ryland Grace, a science teacher who wakes up on a spaceship light years from home and has to figure out why the sun is dying. He does not have to do it alone. The unexpected friend in the official synopsis is Rocky, an alien traveler brought to life, on set and on the soundtrack, by James Ortiz.

When Paul Salfen reached Ortiz for AMFM Magazine, the puppeteer and actor did not talk about Rocky as a visual-effects problem that had been solved. He talked about a character he had found, in part, by getting the book wrong.

“There was a detail in the book that I actually got wrong, but it became a touchstone for me,” Ortiz said, “which is that an Eridian second is like 2.5 seconds faster than an Earth second. And I want to say, I actually misread it in the book because it’s actually meant to be slower. But the fact that the 2.5 second is faster than an Earth second told me, oh, maybe Rocky’s heartbeat is like this. So he just was always crackling and moving very quickly. And always, always, always, always, always, always moving. He was never stiff.”

He found out later that he had the science inverted. In Weir’s novel, an Eridian second is longer than an Earth second, not shorter. Ortiz kept the choice anyway. “And then I found out much later that I misread that. And in fact, an Eridian second is 2.5 seconds slower than a second. So I just said, listen, he’s traumatized and he’s anxious. Okay. So those would be some of the keys in. And I think also that became sort of the base for the comedy in a funny way, that Rocky’s kind of gone through some stuff before the story began.”

That is the whole trick, hiding in a unit of time. A misread metronome. A creature who never stops moving because a first-time film performer thought his seconds ran fast, and then decided, once the facts caught up with him, that anxiety was a better explanation than accuracy. The rerelease gives audiences another chance to sit with that little life in a dark room. The story of how it got there starts with a book, a wrong number, and a refusal to go still.

A TOUCHSTONE HE GOT WRONG

Between action and cut, Ortiz said, he would stay inside the character. Not all day. Just when it counted. “Rocky is a pretty anxious, pretty shellshocked, kind of feral little guy who is actually, you know, smarter than a computer and has so many different qualities to him.” The book gave him a scientific clue, or so he thought, and he turned it into a pulse. If an Eridian second was racing ahead of an Earth second, maybe Rocky’s heart was too. The puppet could not be a statue. It had to crackle.

The later correction might have flattened the performance. It did the opposite. Once Ortiz understood that Weir had written the time unit slower, not faster, he did not slow Rocky down. He gave the restlessness a backstory. Traumatized. Anxious. Already carrying something when the story begins. The error stopped being a mistake and became, in his word, a touchstone: the base of the comedy, and the reason the character feels like he has a private life offscreen.

That is a puppeteer’s kind of invention, and it is also an actor’s. Ortiz did not design the creature alone. The physical Rocky seen in the film was built by creature designer Neal Scanlan and his shop, with Ortiz involved in how the puppet could be performed. What he did invent, and what he described to Salfen with unusual precision, is the inner tempo. The misreading is not a cute press-line. It is the character.

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I WASN'T EVEN SUPPOSED TO BE THE VOICE

None of the aftermath, Ortiz said, had been on his bingo card. “I wasn’t even supposed to be the voice. I wasn’t even supposed to. I was supposed to be there on set for a couple months to just help this character come to life. Help Ryan, help us, help all the filmmakers. And then that was going to be it.”

Instead he stayed, performed the puppet, and became the voice audiences hear. The official credits list him in the cast, alongside Gosling, Sandra Hüller, Lionel Boyce, Ken Leung, Milana Vayntrub, and Priya Kansara. For Ortiz, the surprise is not only personal. He thinks it says something about the moment the film arrived in.

“It feels like we’re really interested in tactile art,” he said. “We’re really interested in storytelling that’s made by real people in real rooms really doing it. And the fact that I think the studio was excited about that too is, what a cool surprise. But yeah, the word I would use is big surprise.”

Salfen asked whether there had been a single on-set moment when Ortiz looked around and could not believe the life he was in. Ortiz said it happened every day, and then he described a slower kind of shock. “There was more than one moment where, you know, because sometimes you’re in the middle of the work. You’re trying to figure out the character, you’re trying to figure out the scene. You’re sculpting it with Ryan. You’re working it out. There would be months that would pass where I was like, That’s Ryan, my scene partner. And then at a certain point, we would just be standing and talking to each other and I would just glaze over and go like, That’s Ryan Gosling.”

He called Gosling “the most generous, amazing scene partner,” and then he gave him the credit that matters. “I do credit Ryan with a lot of this. If he didn’t believe in Rocky as much as he did, then we wouldn’t be having this conversation. 100 percent.”

A practical alien only works if the human across from it treats the puppet as a person. Gosling did, and Ortiz felt it. That belief, as much as any rod or animatronic, is why Rocky holds a frame.



Official artwork from the Amazon MGM Studios announcement of Project Hail Mary’s return to theaters December 11.

RUNNING TOWARD MY PASSION

Salfen, broadcasting from Dallas, noted that Ortiz is from Richardson, just up the road. Ortiz said yes, and that he had not been back in way too long. The Texas detail is not a detour. It is where the path started. Ortiz has said elsewhere that he grew up in Richardson and found puppetry at a hometown marionette theatre, the place where fine art and theatrical storytelling first occupied the same room. He has spent the years since in New York as a designer, performer, playwright, and director. He won a 2016 Obie Award for puppet design for *The Woodsman*, the Off-Broadway show he is most associated with. In 2022 he won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Puppet Design for the dinosaur puppets in Lincoln Center Theater’s Broadway production of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. That same year, his puppet design for the Broadway revival of *Into the Woods*, including the fan-favorite cow Milky White, became a calling card of its own. He is a co-founder and co-artistic director of the devised theatre company Strangemen & Co.

Salfen asked, as he often does, for a Hail Mary: the moment in a life or career when someone had to go for it. Ortiz would not pick a single throw. “It’s hard for me to pull one thing because I’ve been an actor and a puppeteer for, I don’t even want to think, it’s been 20 years, but it seems like it has been. And all of that lifestyle, that artistic path, all of it requires full commitment. If you don’t, then it won’t happen. So I kind of feel like I couldn’t begin to pick one.”

He did name a turning point, and it sounds like the same instinct that later kept Rocky moving. “I think a big Hail Mary was actually that I said, no, I think puppets are going to be the thing for me of all the things in the world, because I was always really drawn to fine art and performance and engineering, and those are just things that bring me joy. And of course, at a young age, everybody says, pick one job that’ll make you money. And I said, no, no, I’m going to pick several that’ll make me nothing.” The Hail Mary, as he finally framed it, “was always running towards my passion.”

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What would he tell someone who hears that and wants the same life? “Find out the things that bring you the most joy and keep doing them. Don’t put them aside because they aren’t perfect yet.” People, he said, often have “trauma around artistic pursuits,” the reflex that says they cannot paint because they are a bad painter. “I think most things, I don’t know if talent is the center of everything. I think a lot of it has to do with commitment, and a lot of it has to do with running towards bliss. So I would always say find the things that bring you joy and then keep doing them, because they will only enrich your life, and maybe they might even turn into a job.”

In Ortiz’s case, they did. The jobs just did not stay in one lane. A person who refused to pick a single practical career ended up, years later, on a studio set, trying to make an anxious alien breathe in real time, then discovering that the studio wanted to keep his voice. He still sounds slightly amazed that the tactile work traveled this far. “I’m glad that people can play with Rocky,” he said, when Salfen mentioned a plush toy. The surprise is the point.

Salfen closed by congratulating him on the Critics Choice celebration, and by reminding audiences that the movie is coming back to theaters. Ortiz received the Innovator Award for *Project Hail Mary* at the Critics Choice Association’s Celebración of Cinema & Television on October 2, 2026, in Beverly Hills. The larger Critics Choice Awards nominations for the 2027 film season have not been announced. What is already on the calendar is December 11: IMAX, select 70mm, and a second chance to meet a character who was never supposed to stand still, because the man inside him first read the clock the wrong way.

“This was a blast,” Ortiz told Salfen. The film goes back where a puppet this alive belongs, with an audience, on a screen big enough to let a small, crackling life fill the frame.

FIND PROJECT HAIL MARY

Returns to theaters: December 11, 2026, in the United States and Canada, in IMAX and select 70mm (and in all formats, per the official trailer).

Tickets: amazon.com/salp/projecthailmary

New official trailer: Project Hail Mary | Returning To Theaters, from Amazon MGM Studios

Official site: projecthailmary.com

Original U.S. release: March 20, 2026, from Amazon MGM Studios

Box office: More than $685 million worldwide, including about $344 million in the United States and Canada (Box Office Mojo figures as of the re-release announcement).

The film: Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Screenplay by Drew Goddard. Based on the novel by Andy Weir. An Amazon MGM Studios presentation of a Pascal Pictures, Open Invite Films / Waypoint Entertainment / Lord Miller production. Starring Ryan Gosling, with Sandra Hüller, James Ortiz, Lionel Boyce, Ken Leung, Milana Vayntrub, and Priya Kansara. James Ortiz performs and voices Rocky. Running time: 2 hours 36 minutes. Rated PG-13 for some thematic material and suggestive references.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.