

# Actor Jack Lemmon dead at 76: something essential about postwar America

David Walsh  
3 July 2001

Jack Lemmon, the American film, television and stage actor, died in a Los Angeles hospital on June 27 of complications from cancer. He was 76.

Lemmon (born in 1925) may not have been the most talented American film actor of his generation—Marlon Brando (1924), among others, would certainly outrank him—but few performers equaled him in communicating and indeed personifying, both comically and tragically, certain moral dilemmas of postwar American life.

Lemmon was born in a Boston suburb to a baking company executive and his “life-of-the-party” wife, who reportedly spent most of her nights in the bar of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Sent to the best prep schools and later Harvard, Lemmon saw his parents’ marriage dissolve when he was a teenager. He developed his “fun and games facade,” he later observed, in response to this. After graduating from Harvard (and a brief stint in the Navy during the last days of World War II), Lemmon moved to New York to work in the theater. Mostly, however, he found employment in live television, where he played more than 400 parts over the next few years. In 1953 a talent scout for Columbia Pictures noticed him in a Broadway play and Lemmon began his Hollywood career.

After two roles alongside Judy Holliday (*It Should Happen to You* [directed by George Cukor] and *Phffft!* [Mark Robson]) and in the midst of appearances in several musicals (most notably *My Sister Eileen* [Richard Quine] with Janet Leigh), Lemmon was given the role of Ensign Pulver in *Mister Roberts*, directed by John Ford and Mervyn Le Roy. In the scheming and hustling Pulver, Lemmon first established aspects of his comic persona: the irrepressibility, the manic energy, the crafty intelligence and, when push comes to shove, the essential integrity.

While Lemmon performed more than once for several directors, including Richard Quine (six times), Blake Edwards (three times), David Swift and Robert Altman (twice), there is little question that he found his stride and perhaps the most complete expression of his particular gifts in the films of the Austrian-born director Billy Wilder, with whom he worked seven times.

The first of these collaborations, *Some Like It Hot* (1959), is one of the most memorable. Lemmon and Tony Curtis are musicians in 1920s’ Chicago who witness a gangland slaying and are forced to pass as women to stay alive. They join an all-female band, one of whose members, Sugar Kane, is played by Marilyn Monroe. (Monroe’s performance is superb and especially remarkable considering that she was in such a state of self-doubt and crisis that

certain days she was unable to walk out on the set.) Sexual tension of various kinds abounds. The film undoubtedly contributed to a loosening of Hollywood’s official puritanism, which had dominated for more than a quarter of a century.

Lemmon’s next film with Wilder, *The Apartment*, is something more of a social commentary. C.C. “Bud” Baxter (Lemmon) is an ambitious junior executive climbing the corporate ladder by lending his apartment out to his bosses for trysts with their mistresses. When the woman he loves (Shirley MacLaine) turns up as his superior’s latest girl-friend and attempts suicide, Lemmon is obliged to come to terms with his corrupt and corrupting activity. The film takes an amusing and relatively sharp look at corporate America, with its conformism, hypocrisy and cruelty. The limitations of Wilder’s approach are also evident here: its cynicism, which too often turns into sentimentality, its tendency toward caricature and, above all, its acceptance of the fairly restricted confines of Cold War liberalism. Nonetheless, *The Apartment* sticks in one’s memory.

In the 1960s Lemmon was probably Hollywood’s leading and most reliable comic performer—in *The Wackiest Ship in the Army*, *The Notorious Landlady*, *Irma La Douce* (again with Wilder and MacLaine), *Under the Yum Yum Tree*, *Good Neighbor Sam*, *How to Murder Your Wife*, *The Great Race*, *The Fortune Cookie* and *The Odd Couple*.

Determined to show another side to his acting abilities, Lemmon starred in *Days of Wine and Roses* (Blake Edwards), as an alcoholic husband to Lee Remick’s alcoholic wife. The film is not entirely successful, but it demonstrated that Lemmon was not going to accept the limitations generally imposed on actors by the studios. (When, years later, he performed in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Lemmon spoke candidly about his mother’s addiction to alcohol and sleeping pills.)

Lemmon performed with numerous leading actresses of the day—Leigh, Monroe, MacLaine, Kim Novak, Lee Remick and Anne Bancroft—and later with Sissy Spacek, Jane Fonda and Julie Andrews, but he is probably best known for his association with Walter Matthau. The two performed in ten films together and remained friends until Matthau’s death a year ago. In their films Matthau generally assumed the role of the fast-talking hustler to Lemmon’s nervous or neurotic straight man. In the emblematic *Fortune Cookie* (1966), another Wilder-directed film, Lemmon is a television cameraman slightly injured during a football game and Matthau his shady lawyer brother-in-law who wants to bilk the

insurance company for all it's worth.

After 1970 Lemmon's roles assumed a different, generally more somber color, in keeping perhaps with an increasingly complex and polarized social situation in the US. To put it crudely, if Lemmon's films in the 1960s suggest on the whole the comic side of greed, lust and social-climbing and exude an overall optimism, the later films paint a darker picture of a postwar society in crisis and not at all sure of the way forward.

The complication is that this more distressing reality does not always (or even often) find adequate artistic representation. So one confronts the paradox that while the films of the 1970s are usually not of a particularly high quality, Lemmon seems to be coming into his own—as a personality filling an entire body of work—as the prototypical anxious, harried executive or salesman confronting new and troubling realities. It is to the actor's credit that, intuitively or otherwise, he gave himself up to this changed situation. Both his political liberalism, which remained unchanged to the end of his life, and his own unsettled family background may have contributed to this. Matthau, who grew up in poverty on Manhattan's Lower East Side, once described his friend as “a clean-cut, well-scrubbed Boston choirboy with quiet hysteria seeping out of every pore.”

In *The Out-of-Towners* (1970), Lemmon and Sandy Dennis perform as an Ohio businessman and his wife at the mercy of New York City on a trip where everything goes wrong; Lemmon is a garment manufacturer in *Save the Tiger* (1973) at the end of his wits; in *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, he has a nervous breakdown; in *The Entertainer* (1975), the second filmed version of John Osborne's play, Lemmon plays a seedy vaudevillian; in *Alex and the Gypsy* (1976)—a dreadful film—he is a cynical bail bondsman. At the end of the decade, in the *China Syndrome* (1979), about an attempted cover-up of an accident at a California nuclear power plant, Lemmon is a dedicated executive determined to see the truth come out; and in *Tribute* (1980), he plays a Broadway press agent stricken with cancer attempting to reconcile with his son.

One of Lemmon's most enduring contributions is his performance in Constantin Costa-Gavras's *Missing* (1982), based on the true story of American businessman Ed Horman who traveled to Chile after the Pinochet coup to search for his missing son, a leftist. Lemmon is remarkable as Horman, whose trust in the US government is destroyed when he confronts the lies of its representatives in Chile and the reality of their complicity with the military butchers.

Lemmon obviously felt strongly about the project. In an interview he described Costa-Gavras as “both professionally and personally ... one of the greatest men I've ever known.” He continued: “When I read the script, *Missing*, I was nuts about it. I was dying to work with him. I called Costa and I said, ‘Why don't you come up to the house where it's quiet and we can talk.’ So he came over, and all he could say was, ‘Jack, this is not a comedy.’ I told him, ‘I'm not stupid. I can read. I want to do it!’ He thought about it for a while and then said, ‘Okay, but remember, Jack, this is not funny...’”

Even a glance at Lemmon's work over the next two decades suggests an effort, within the limits of his social and artistic

outlook, to choose worthwhile projects. There are the tributes: to Billy Wilder, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin and George Cukor. There are the television roles in *The Murder of Mary Phagan* (1988)—about the lynching of Leo Frank by an anti-Semitic mob in Georgia in 1915—and remakes of *12 Angry Men* (1997) and *Inherit the Wind* (1999). There is his role in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), the remarkable performance as the real estate salesman going under in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (James Foley, 1992) and his participation in two of Robert Altman's films—*The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993). There is his performance as James Tyrone, Sr. in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1986 and, a decade later, a brief appearance in Kenneth Branagh's version of *Hamlet*.

It is striking that every significant comment that appeared in the press at the time of Lemmon's death was obliged to mention the disturbing note that recurred in his work. The *New York Times* quoted Lemmon himself: “I'm attracted primarily to contemporary characters. I understand them and their frustrations,” and called him “the definitive comic hero for an age of anxiety.” The BBC quoted an unnamed critic who sounded the same theme, terming Lemmon “a clown for the age of anxiety,” and suggested that he frequently portrayed “the decent, middle class American struggling to retain his integrity.” The *Washington Post* cited the comment of Donald Widener, Lemmon's biographer: “For all his persona on screen, he was one of the saddest men I've ever known. You could see it in his eyes. The face would be laughing, but the eyes were sad. I never found out why that was.”

One can find fault with almost all of Lemmon's work. He was susceptible to sentimentality. He wanted to be liked a little too much. On his very first film George Cukor gave him what he later described as the best acting advice he ever received, as they did retake after retake: “Jack, less, a little less.” And Lemmon's tendency to ham things up, particularly when the material was thin, never entirely disappeared. At his worst moments he could be nearly hysterical.

His weaknesses deserve to be weighed up, but one remembers Lemmon in the end for his best qualities: the intelligence, the sweetness, the vulnerability, the democratic spirit. He committed himself to the portrayals of individuals *genuinely struggling* with their own flaws and with the world. If the ultimate failure of postwar American society is not overtly raised by this struggle, it will certainly appear to the observant spectator as an issue.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**