Heath Ledger dead at 28: a life tragically cut short

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The sudden death on January 22 in New York City of Australian actor Heath Ledger, best known for his role as Ennis Del Mar in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, has seen an outpouring of heartfelt tributes by filmmakers, actors and movie fans around the world.

A detailed autopsy has not yet been released but 28-year-old Ledger is believed to have died from a toxic combination of Ambien sleeping tablets and other prescription drugs. He was living alone in a $23,000 per month sparsely-furnished apartment in Manhattan's SoHo district and was discovered lying face down in his bed in the mid-afternoon.

Whatever the exact cause of Ledger's death, his passing is a sad event and tragically ends the career of an intelligent and naturally talented actor who had much to contribute to his craft and the film industry.

Heath Ledger was born into a comfortable middle class family in Western Australia in 1979. His parents—Sally, a French teacher, and Kim, a racing-car driver and mining engineer—named him after Heathcliff from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Ledger excelled in hockey and other sports but resolved to pursue a career in the dramatic arts and left school at 16, after sitting for early graduation exams. He moved to Sydney in the mid-90s and acted in some local television shows, including "Sweat" and "Home and Away".

In 1997 Ledger landed small parts in two Australian films, *Paws* and *Blackrock*, and two years later starred in Gregor Jordan's black comedy *Two Hands*. Jordan's movie about a naïve young teenager (Ledger) on the run from some buffoonish but dangerous Sydney gangsters was a local box office success and secured him a lead role in the American teen comedy *10 Things I Hate About You*.

Between 2000 and 2003 Ledger starred in six features—*The Patriot*, *Monster's Ball*, *A Knight's Tale*, *The Four Feathers*, *Ned Kelly* and *The Order*. None of these were great movies, in fact, most are probably best forgotten, but Ledger's talent—his intensity and energy—caught the eye of a range of filmmakers.

Despite an increasing number of movie offers, the young actor refused to allow himself to be type-cast and, not having had any formal dramatic training, decided that the only way to develop his acting skills and emotional range was by appearing in a variety of roles.

Attempts were made to turn the young man into a new teenage idol. For example, after the success of *A Knight's Tale*—a silly mediaeval romp with a contemporary rock soundtrack about a commoner pretending to be a knight—Columbia Pictures tried to groom him for the teenage movie market.

Ledger told the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 2006: "They offered me ridiculous amounts of money to make franchise movies, Spiderman to James Bond. Studios do this—find one person, invest a lot of money in him like a product, own and make money off him. At the end it was, 'So kid, whaddya think?'... I had Amy Pascal, head of Columbia Pictures, on the phone to me ... 'Listen kid, hear this, your career will be over, you'll never work again, you'll never live again unless you do this for me'."

To his credit, Ledger rejected these demands. "I knew I was being offered a deal with the devil," he said. "I didn't trust it, it felt short term; they weren't going to take responsibility for me if I fried. I also felt professionally cheapened—like, 'Is that all they think I'm capable of?'"

In early 2003 Ledger returned to Australia to promote Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly*, a movie in which he starred as the country's most notorious late nineteenth century outlaw. Ledger's recitation of Kelly's famous "Jerilderie Letter", an angry denunciation of the colonial government authorities and their repression of dirt-poor small farmers, is one of the movie's better moments—but the film was ill-conceived and superficial.

Unlike several high-profile Australian movie stars, Ledger refused to remain silent about the impending US-led invasion of Iraq and used his scheduled media appearances to denounce this war crime and Australian involvement in it. Along with *Ned Kelly* co-stars Joel Edgerton and Naomi Watts, Ledger joined antiwar demonstrations in Melbourne, telling journalists that it was "strange" to be publicising a movie in the midst of the outbreak of war.

"It's surreal for me to be sitting here, talking to you and giving an interview while they're dropping 3,000 bombs on Baghdad," he said. "It's really hard to sit here and be happy about a movie opening, 'cause it just makes you realise the insignificance of this, it means nothing in comparison... I don't

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think war is the answer to anything. It's a very, very sad day."

Ledger's determination to hone his acting skills bore fruit in 2005 with *Brokeback Mountain*, his most powerful role. Nominated for the Best Actor Oscar, numerous critics correctly praised Ledger's nuanced but intense performance as Ennis Del Mar.

Ledger seemed to have an uncanny ability to capture Ennis's passionate but socially suppressed life-long love for fellow cowboy Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal). As E. Annie Proulx, the story's author, commented: 'How did this actor get inside my head so well? He understood more about the character than I did." Although Ledger did not win the Oscar, at 26 he was one of the youngest actors to be nominated for the prize.

Ledger went on to star in Lasse Hallström's light but subversive *Casanova* and then Neal Armfield's *Candy*, the harrowing Australian story of two young lovers—a poet (Ledger) and an art student (Abbie Cornish)—who become heroin addicts. He also appeared as a drunken Californian skateboard guru in *Lords of Dogtown* and then with Matt Damon in Terry Gilliam's comedy *The Brothers Grimm*.

While these films were not great commercial or artistic successes, Ledger's performances reconfirmed his standing as a substantial actor. Likewise his recent role in *I'm Not There*, the film about Bob Dylan, has been critically praised along with his performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, the yet to be released Batman film.

Despite his growing profile and financial success, Ledger was always ambivalent about his "star" status and unsettled by the constant scrutiny of photographers and gossip columnists.

After falling in love with Michelle Williams, his co-star and wife in *Brokeback Mountain*, the young couple moved to Sydney and had a daughter, Matilda Rose. They hoped to raise a family in Australia while developing their acting careers but were constantly stalked by the local paparazzi. This harassment reached a peak during the Australian premiere of *Brokeback Mountain* when Ledger was doused with water by photographers in order to capture and sell his angry reaction.

Ledger was deeply distressed by the event and the couple left Sydney two days later, sold their home, and returned to the US for good. When Ledger came back to star in *Candy*, he was again harassed by Australian photographers and journalists.

Like all serious artists, Ledger was sharply critical of his own work, constantly striving for more emotionally honest performances. He told the media last year: "I feel like I'm wasting time if I repeat myself. I can't say I'm proud of my work. It's the same with everything I do: the day I say 'It's good' is the day I should start doing something else."

While there has been much media speculation about whether Ledger's death was an accident or not, his parents and other close relatives deny that he was suicidal. Whether this is true or not, the past 12 months were personally difficult for Ledger.

Ledger split up with Williams in August last year and although publicists said the separation was "amicable", it no doubt had a big impact on the young actor who was intensely devoted to his wife and daughter. He was reported to be pining for his young daughter and feared that he may be facing restricted access to the child.

Last year Ledger told the *New York Times* that he was suffering from extended bouts of insomnia and had been "stressed out" over his part in *I'm Not There*. "Last week I probably slept an average of two hours a night," he told the newspaper. "I couldn't stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going." He later admitted to the media that was having difficulty, physically and mentally, playing the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, a character he described as "a psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy".

As we go to press, the US media is alleging that Ledger had serious drug abuse problems that precipitated his break up with Williams. Unnamed sources quoted in a British newspaper last week also claimed that he was suffering from a "deep, dark depression" with "terrible mood swings".

Without commenting on the accuracy or otherwise of these assertions—and they have been denied by Ledger's publicist—the 28-year-old's life had clearly reached a turning point. His personal life was disintegrating and he was being provided with few genuinely artistic challenges in his work. His highly-paid role in *The Dark Knight* blockbuster can hardly have been satisfying, let alone provided him with the inner strength to weather his breakup with Williams or rise above other personal difficulties.

At his best, Heath Ledger brought genuine honesty and subtlety to his roles and an ability to convey the most complex emotions with few words. His death marks the end of a naturally gifted performer.

Explaining his infatuation with cinema and the dramatic arts he told one journalist: "I love the striving, the process of being part of something bigger than me, because it forces me to examine myself and my own life." In contrast to an industry which encourages complacency and self-satisfaction, Ledger's approach and artistic contribution was refreshingly different.

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