

Actor James Gandolfini, lead actor in *The Sopranos*, dies at 51

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Sadly, American actor James Gandolfini died June 19 while on holiday in Rome. Best known for his role on the HBO television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Gandolfini was only 51 years old. A very fine performer, who often played gruff or thuggish characters, by all accounts, off-screen he was a shy and unpretentious man.

Gandolfini was vacationing in Rome with family members, before an appearance at the Taormina Film Festival in Sicily this weekend. He had spent the day sightseeing in sweltering heat. According to media reports and the comments of his assistant, the actor suffered a heart attack in his hotel room at around 10 pm. An ambulance was called, but Gandolfini was apparently dead by the time he arrived at the hospital.

The future actor was born in Westwood, New Jersey, in suburban Bergen County, 25 miles west of New York City. His mother, born in the US but raised in Italy, served lunches at a school; his father, born in Italy but raised in the US, worked first as a bricklayer and later a high school custodian.

Gandolfini began acting on the New York stage in the early 1990s. His Broadway debut came in the 1992 revival of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Jessica Lange and Alec Baldwin. He first came to film prominence in the unpleasant and pointless *True Romance* (1993), directed by Tony Scott and scripted by Quentin Tarantino, playing a ruffian who nearly beats Patricia Arquette's character to death. In *Get Shorty* (1995, directed by Barry Sonnenfeld), another "black comedy," this time a little more comic, he played a stuntman-enforcer.

Gandolfini was a moving presence for the first time in a significant way in *A Civil Action* (directed by Steven Zaillian), a film about a lawyer's battle with ruthless, giant corporations who have dumped toxic waste and polluted a Massachusetts town's water supply. Gandolfini convincingly and feelingly played a worker who blows

the whistle on W.R. Grace, the chemical conglomerate.

The actor, by this time much in demand, performed in a number of other movies in the 2000s, including the Coen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2000), Rod Lurie's *The Last Castle* (2001), Todd Robinson's *Lonely Hearts* (2006), Zaillian's *All the King's Men* (2006), none of them truly memorable.

However, Gandolfini will unquestionably be best remembered for *The Sopranos*, which ran for 86 episodes. The series told the story of a fictional New Jersey mob boss with a conflicted soul.

The appeal of the program is understandable in both its healthier and unhealthier aspects. On the one hand, *The Sopranos* stood out in the general wasteland of American television as something more hard-hitting, adult and lively. The characters used four-letter words (often) and had sex and betrayed and battered each other in a manner that corresponded a bit more closely to life than the US viewer was used to. Its willingness to dwell on the vulgar, the unpleasant, the unseemly must have come as something of a breath of fresh air to many.

Moreover, in Gandolfini, the series had a charismatic lead, and he was partnered with a remarkable group of mostly Italian-American actors, including Lorraine Bracco, Edie Falco, Michael Imperioli, Tony Sirico, Aida Turturro, Steve Schirripa, Drea de Matteo and various others.

Both the tasteless nouveau riche and lower middle class suburban and rundown urban New Jersey locations provided an authentic-looking framework for the drama's goings-on. The series was designed, costumed, shot and edited well, with a clever, polished look, by professionals who knew what they were doing and the impact it would have on an audience.

However, at its core, in my view, the program was a largely implausible work that wanted to have its cake and eat it too.

On the one hand, *The Sopranos* delivered scenes husbands and wives, between parents and children, of-control psychopathic violence, in the mold of Martin Scorsese, albeit with the quirky, inappropriate humor at its darkest moments of Quentin Tarantino.

The implication of such sequences, in which the characters are simply unrestrained in their mayhem, is that ‘Now we have got to the real heart of things, the heart of darkness, as it were. This is life at its most unvarnished, realistic, we are truly plumbing the depths of human nature.’

This is nonsense. Scratch the average human being and you will not find a psychopath. The mafia is a social institution, a form of American business corporation (see *The Godfather*) that preys primarily on the poor, the working class, the small business person. It attracts the most backward and depraved elements and unleashes them on the public, most often with the cooperation of the police, local governments and other business enterprises. Organized crime is an integral part of American capitalist society.

Contrary to Scorsese and David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, there is little that is intriguing, heroic or anti-heroic about gangsters. The conversations of the late John Gotti, for instance, recorded by the authorities, were tedious and banal almost beyond belief.

Petty bourgeois artists of a certain type imagine that the mobster somehow is free of the constraints they feel restricting and oppressing their own lives. ‘To make your own rules! To be fearless! To walk into a bar and be able to knock anyone down! To have any woman [or man] you want! That’s the life!’ It’s mostly a childish fantasy and American films would be better off without any more of it. The life of a bricklayer or longshoreman is far more intriguing, viewed in the proper artistic and social light, and has more compelling drama.

On the other hand, the conceit of *The Sopranos* was that Gandolfini and the rest had the normal problems of American suburban families. Famously, of course his mob boss suffered from such serious anxieties that he had to consult a therapist (Bracco), who appeared in all of the 86 episodes. (Harold Ramis’ *Analyze This* [1999] was an attempt at a more consistently comic version of this problem.)

The somewhat deceitful element, of course, was that Gandolfini—and not only he—exuded a sensitivity and humanity that real thugs and killers do not. And, moreover, in the course of the more mundane sequences, a limited amount of genuine insight into modern human circumstances emerged. The tortured relations between

between generations ... some of this rang true and also drew in audiences. But such moments were the exception, not the rule.

The extreme physical aggression in the series was not only dubious from the dramatic and psychological point of view. *The Sopranos* ran during the period when official American violence erupted, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

US officials began speaking like mafia captains, referring to “killing” this one and “taking out” that one. Torture became a topic of dinner conversation in respectable liberal households. Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, rendition, waterboarding and “enhanced interrogation techniques” entered the lexicon. Bloody revenge became a motif, uncontested and uncriticized for the most part, in many films and television programs. This very well may not have been on the minds of those who created *The Sopranos*, but such things were in the air and absorbed by the intellectually unprepared or vulnerable.

After the program ended, Gandolfini noted that he was somewhat relieved to be done with the violence of the series. He produced two television documentary films on war and its consequences, *Alive Day Memories: Home from Iraq* (2007), interviews with wounded veterans, and *Wartorn: 1861-2010* (2010), about the effects of post-traumatic stress in various US military operations. Neither film took a clear stand on the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, although Gandolfini played a general in Armando Iannucci’s comedy, *In the Loop*, who opposes a US invasion of some Middle Eastern country. He also had a role in Kathryn Bigelow’s detestable *Zero Dark Thirty* as the director of the CIA.

At any rate, Gandolfini was an extraordinary actor and he will be missed.



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