

Comic actor Gene Wilder: 1933–2016

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American comic actor Gene Wilder died August 29 at his Connecticut home, as the result of “complications from Alzheimer’s Disease,” according to a statement from his nephew. He was 83 years old.

Wilder had done little film work in the past 30 years, but he will be long remembered for *The Producers*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Silver Streak* and others. His principal attractiveness as a performer lay in his imbuing nearly all his characters with a gentleness and warmth that came across as genuine.

Wilder was an immensely talented and, by all accounts, decent human being who intently guarded his private life. He rarely gave interviews. Often described as shy, he would deny that claim when asked. Though Wilder didn’t consider himself a funny person, he was confident in his ability to make people laugh when the situation called for it.

In his 20s, Wilder—born Jerome Silberman in Milwaukee to a Russian-Jewish immigrant family—was cast in an off-Broadway stage production while studying at the famed Actors’ Studio. He hastily came up with the name “Gene Wilder” because, “I wanted to be someone else—not that guy.” His stage work led to several television performances in the early 1960s.

His first film performance came in 1967, playing a small but memorable role in Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, which featured Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway. That same year, he was cast alongside Zero Mostel in Mel Brooks’ iconic comedy, *The Producers*. This was the first of several films he would do with Brooks, a comic giant, and the beginning of a lifelong friendship. The association with Brooks was the most important and productive in Wilder’s career.

The actor’s next film with Brooks was the 1974 *Blazing Saddles*, a Western spoof in which a black man is appointed sheriff of a small town. Wilder joined a talented cast that included Cleavon Little, Slim Pickens, Madeline Kahn, Harvey Korman and Brooks.

In a remarkable 2013 interview with film historian

Robert Osborne, Wilder described writing some notes after seeing the original movie version of *Frankenstein* (1931, directed by James Whale). Wilder said he wanted to give the story a happy ending. Coincidentally, his agent, Mike Medavoy, who went on to become a producer and co-founder of Orion Pictures, indicated he would like him to make a picture with Marty Feldman and Peter Boyle. When asked why, Medavoy explained that Feldman and Boyle were now clients of his. Brooks was eventually contacted to direct the film project. With trepidation, Brooks agreed. The film became *Young Frankenstein*.

To this writer’s mind, this is Wilder’s most memorable and enjoyable film performance (as Dr. Frederick Frankenstein, “mad scientist” Victor’s grandson.) It was shot in black-and-white as a parody-tribute of the original, and featured Teri Garr and Kahn. One’s comedic education is incomplete without seeing this film. Many samplings are available on YouTube.

The 1970s and 1980s were Wilder’s most prolific period, during which he starred in a score of films, some more notable than others.

Many commentators consider his 1971 role as chocolate factory owner Willy Wonka his most significant and enduring. Created as a children’s film, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* has over the generations acquired a massive following. The film, originally released by Paramount, was re-released in 1996 by Warner Brothers, and grossed more than five times the original box office.

Based on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, British author Roald Dahl’s 1964 children’s novel, *Willy Wonka* would have little of the edge of the book without Wilder’s input.

Wilder teamed with the late Richard Pryor in three films: *Silver Streak* (1976), *Stir Crazy* (1980) and *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989). Pryor was an enormous talent with enormous problems. His drug addiction made sticking to film production schedules problematic. Nevertheless, Wilder enjoyed working with Pryor, and their comedic rapport was incontestable—although the

three film's scripts did not measure up to the performers' collective skill.

Recent years have seen no Wilder films. When asked about this by Robert Osborne in the same interview mentioned above, Wilder explained he would be willing to make a film if he saw a good script and it was right for him, but "nothing came around."

He added, "I didn't want to do the kind of junk that I was seeing. I didn't want to do 3D, for instance. I didn't want to do ones where there's just bombing and loud and swearing—so much swearing going on! ... Once in a while it comes in handy, but not running all the way through the film. And that put me off a lot."

When asked about Hollywood, he simply said, "Yuck! I don't like it." He said he loved acting and making movies, but not the film business. "I love the show, not the business."

Wilder was married four times. His third marriage was to *Saturday Night Live* regular Gilda Radner, with whom he made three films. They were married in 1984. The union lasted until her untimely death from ovarian cancer in 1989. She was misdiagnosed until 1988 by which time the cancer had become untreatable.

Wilder then became active in promoting cancer awareness and help found the Gilda Radner Ovarian Cancer Center in Los Angeles. He co-founded the cancer support group, Gilda's Club.

In the 1990s, Wilder was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins lymphoma. He went through several rounds of treatment, including a stem-cell transplant procedure at New York's Sloan Kettering Cancer Center before he was diagnosed as in "complete remission."

Most recently Wilder added writing to his talents, publishing a series of books and novels, starting in 1998. The reader should discover these for him or herself.

Gene Wilder will be remembered for his poignant and often hilarious portrayals in his best films. And bringing characters "a lot like you" to the screen.



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