

Citizens Band, Something Wild, The Silence of the Lambs, Philadelphia ...

Jonathan Demme (1944-2017): A talented filmmaker and a victim of stagnant times

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American filmmaker Jonathan Demme died April 26 in New York City from complications stemming from esophageal cancer and heart disease. He was 73.

Demme directed some 18 feature films over the course of forty years, the best known of which are *Melvin and Howard* (1980), *Something Wild* (1986), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Philadelphia* (1993), the second version of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) and *Rachel Getting Married* (2008). However, his best-known films are not necessarily his best films.

In addition, Demme made short and feature-length films with various musicians and bands, including Talking Heads (*Stop Making Sense*, 1984), Robyn Hitchcock (*Storefront Hitchcock*, 1998), Neil Young (three concert films in 2006, 2009 and 2012) and Justin Timberlake (*Justin Timberlake + The Tennessee Kids*, 2016).

He also directed a number of documentaries on social and political questions, of a generally left-liberal character, including *Haiti: Dreams of Democracy* (1987), *Cousin Bobby* (1992), *The Agronomist* (2003), *Man from Plains* (about former president Jimmy Carter, 2007), *I'm Carolyn Parker* (about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, 2011) and *What's Motivating Hayes* (about persecuted biologist Tyrone Hayes, 2015).

If anecdotes, interviews and memoirs are to be believed, Demme was a thoroughly decent man, a far cry from our stereotyped image of the film director as manipulative bully or egomaniac, or both. Moreover, he maintained over the course of his career a genuine interest in and sympathy for the lives and difficulties—and amusements and confusions—of America's underdogs, those who in one way or another have the deck stacked against them. His best films pay tribute to the essential optimism, ingenuity and rebelliousness, as well often the self-delusion, of those struggling to get by in the “land of the free.”

However, of course, no artist works under conditions of his or her own choosing. To cite the recommendation once more of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education following the Russian Revolution and a literary critic of note: “Be born a genius by all means—but the most important thing is to be born at the right time.”

Demme made films during several decades of extraordinary political and cultural stagnation and even reaction, a period characterized by the lowest level of open social struggle in modern American history. The containment of popular discontent in particular, in my view, influenced Demme's artistic spirits and output, weakening many of his later films and preventing others from being made at all.

That being said, I believe Demme's body of work, with its delights and its major inadequacies, is far more valuable and enduring than those of either of his almost exact contemporaries, the chronically misanthropic and morbid Martin Scorsese and Terrence Malick.

Demme grew up on Long Island, in New York City's suburbs. His father worked in public relations. His family later moved to Miami, and Demme had the early ambition to become a veterinarian, until he failed chemistry at the University of Florida. Through his father, now a publicist for a Miami Beach hotel, he met veteran movie producer Joseph Levine, who offered him a job.

Like a good many others, Demme eventually made his way into writing and directing films through the offices of Roger Corman, the producer or director of innumerable low-budget or “exploitation” movies.

Demme's early films stand out for their dark humor and populist sensibility. *Caged Heat* (1974), a “women-in-prison” film, has many foolish and gratuitous elements, virtually required by the genre, but it also includes a remarkable performance from Barbara Steele, the English actress generally associated with Italian horror films of the 1960s, as the repressed and repressive warden. Demme's script is not satisfied with one jail-break, but contains two.

Certain genre standards are also respected in *Crazy Mama* (1975), about three generations of a family on a cross-country crime spree, but Demme already hits his stride here with anti-patriotic, anti-religious and anti-big business irreverence. Ann Sothern's husband was killed when their Arkansas farm was repossessed during the Depression. In the present, 1958, another greedy landlord throws Sothern and her daughter, the remarkable Cloris Leachman, out of the hair salon they run in Long Beach, California.

The two women take off for Arkansas to buy back the ancestral farm, in the company of Leachman's daughter (a youthful Linda Purl), her two suitors, a feisty old lady and Leachman's newfound love, played by Stuart Whitman. *Crazy Mama* has its idiosyncrasies, but its affection for chaos, sensuality and rebellion is infectious.

Demme's *Fighting Mad* (1976), also produced by Corman, features Peter Fonda as an Arkansas farmer battling land developers who want his land for the purposes of strip-mining.

His next film, *Citizens Band* (or *Handle with Care*, 1977), is one of Demme's most appealing. It follows the lives of a number of individuals in a small, beat-up American town. Citizens band radio (CB) was popular at the time, and the film's various characters are all associated somehow with the technology.

Paul Le Mat's “Spider” is the central character, a well-meaning man obsessed with cleaning up the CB universe, including chasing out a neo-Nazi who broadcasts white supremacist messages. His former girl-friend, “Electra” (Candy Clark), has taken to carrying on erotic conversations over the radio. She also becomes involved with Spider's brother, “Blood” (Bruce McGill), the local high school basketball coach. Meanwhile, two

women (Marcia Rodd and Ann Wedgeworth) arrive in town on the same bus and discover they are married to the same truck-driver (Charles Napier), etc.

The film's sympathy for its hard-pressed, eccentric characters, all of whom are operating with the best possible, if misguided, intentions, is striking. Le Mat, an underappreciated actor, along with Clark, McGill, Rodd and Napier, is especially memorable. Demme is able to see something endearing and even noble in the people here, amidst the economic decline and tawdriness of everyday life, which other filmmakers were missing or which failed to interest them.

Citizens Band, released in September 1977, was not a success, in its original version, or when re-edited and re-released as *Handle with Care*. This is where social processes come into play. To a certain extent, although Demme could not have known it, the writing was on the wall for the type of relatively oppositional, "shaggy dog," personal film he had been making. The mood was shifting in America and internationally, with the receding of the radicalism of the 1968-75 period.

Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, released in June 1975, George Lucas's *Star Wars* (May 1977) and Spielberg's *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* (November 1977) helped usher in the "blockbuster" era. The economics of filmmaking, as well as the social psychology of wide layers of the population, were undergoing a sharp change. Demme would know his greatest box office successes in the subsequent decades, but at a cost.

His *The Last Embrace* (1979) is a fairly conventional thriller, with a not terribly likeable central figure (Roy Scheider). *Melvin and Howard* (1980), primarily due to the presence of Le Mat once again, as Melvin Dummar, the Utah service station owner who claimed to be the beneficiary of a will drawn up by reclusive tycoon Howard Hughes (Jason Robards), was something of a return to earlier form.

Demme's *Swing Shift* (1984) is a weak and sanitized version of World War II, viewed from the standpoint of a group of women who go to work in a defense plant. Goldie Hawn, who played the lead and clashed with Demme, apparently insisted on significant changes and re-shooting. This may help explain the tepid character of certain episodes, but it is hard to believe she is solely responsible for the thoroughly patriotic and conformist feel of the whole thing.

After that humiliating experience, Demme took a break from Hollywood and directed the Talking Heads performance film, *Stop Making Sense* (1984).

His *Something Wild* (1986) has many admirers. A heretofore unadventurous New York City banker (Jeff Daniels) suddenly takes off on a road trip with the "wild" Lulu (Melanie Griffith). He falls in love with her impetuosity and unpredictability, and things go relatively well, until her psychotic former lover (Ray Liotta) turns up. Events rapidly turn pretty grim and violent.

The three performers certainly perform admirably (Demme was always skilled with actors), Daniels especially, but I always found the film's theme of the battered, bloodied middle class individual combating and finally triumphing over the proletarian "beast" somewhat disturbing. Although vivid and sometimes amusing, *Something Wild*, it seemed to me, was making concessions to certain unpleasant moods emerging in the mid-1980s. Demme was probably unaware of it, but the decade provided no shortage of justifications for vicious corporate and government attacks on the working class on the grounds of its laziness, loutishness and generally undeserving character. To put it another way, the crazed Liotta character was not one who would have appeared in *Citizens Band* or *Crazy Mama*.

Married to the Mob (1988), with Michelle Pfeiffer and Dean Stockwell, was another fairly commonplace effort. Demme registered one of his greatest successes, of course, with *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Although effectively and chillingly made, the film, ultimately, is extremely distasteful and wrongheaded. Based on a novel by Thomas

Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* has three central figures, an FBI agent and two serial killers, one of them who eats his victims and the other who skins his female victims' corpses. Again, the thematic and tonal shift in Demme's filmmaking, and filmmaking as a whole, is the element that needs to be especially taken note of.

To his credit, film critic Dave Kehr, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, was one of the few critics at the time who took note of the film's nastiness and its manipulative character. Kehr noted that "More than a disappointment, the film is an almost systematic denial of Demme's credentials as an artist and filmmaker. ... *The Silence of the Lambs* is a film that exerts a vice-like grip on the viewer; it's as closed and claustrophobic as Demme's other films have been open and democratic." As opposed to the filmmaker's approach in previous efforts, Kehr argued, where "all kinds of things" could enter the system, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, "violence and cruelty are the system: the way the killer holds his victim is the same way the director holds his audience, through threats and intimidation."

It is difficult to come all the way back from such a point (although Demme rejected directing any sequels), especially under unfavorable social and intellectual circumstances. Later in 1991, the USSR collapsed, thanks to the final betrayal of Soviet Stalinism, and the world's population was treated to endless claims about the end of socialism, the end of class struggle, the end of the working class, the end even of social reform or progress of any kind. This stream of ideological poison, in complex ways, had its impact.

Demme directed the sincere and humane *Philadelphia* (1993), the first major film in defense of AIDS victims, with Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, which generated four Academy Award nominations (and one victory, for Hanks). But after that, one of Demme's greatest critical and commercial successes, his opportunities to direct dwindled away over the next two decades. To his credit, Demme was never able to accommodate himself to any of the trends, bombast, juvenilia or pyromania, which generally prevailed.

His remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), which obliquely referenced the "war on terror," we suggested at the time, was "an honorable effort," but lacked fire. We argued that Demme had responded "in a thoroughly creditable fashion to the threat posed by the Bush administration and the decay of American democracy in general. But his history and outlook prevent him from imparting to the material the necessary element of protest and depth of conviction that would have made it fully come to life."

A generally lively film, with some lovely musical interludes, *Rachel Getting Married* (2008) has something fairly trite at its core—an old tragedy explains a New England's family's dysfunction and occasional misery. Bill Irwin, Rosemarie DeWitt and Anne Hathaway do well. Demme also directed Wallace Shawn, who had long worked on the play, in an intelligent version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Master Builder* (2013), available on YouTube. Unhappily, his final effort, *Ricki and the Flash* (2015), was a negligible work.

Demme fell victim to the stagnant times and the iron grip of a handful of global conglomerates over the film and entertainment industry. He explained in numerous interviews, without a trace of self-pity, the difficulties he faced raising financing for the type of dramas he wished to direct.

In 2014, speaking of the six years since his last feature film, Demme explained, "I wanted to do another feature film, because that's how a director earns their living. You can go right through whatever you've got in the bank if you do too many of these wonderful little labors of love back-to-back. It's hard to get financing for the kinds of story-driven, character-driven pictures that I'd like to make. I had some very frustrating experiences over the course of that time getting involved with producers I didn't know, and working with wonderful writers on scripts that were marvelous and gathering together a terrific cast, only to discover that the

way these projects were going to get financed—because they were non-studio films—was to take the package to the foreign investment world, and whatever advances come in from future foreign sales, that’s your budget.”

On another occasion, he observed, “In the olden days we were talking to the people at the studio and if they loved the script but didn’t know how to sell it that’s when we jumped in our cars, went roaring over, to convince them and capitalize on their enthusiasm, to try and get them to share the dream. It’s not done like that anymore. Studios pass: Okay, we need to depend on foreign sales. They pre-sell the foreign sales on the basis of a script, not a movie. The little tiny commitments come in from all the countries, Okay that’s going to be your budget. Then out of the money that comes from these foreign sales, the foreign sales agents take a huge cut of that off the top, so if they can get, let’s say, six million dollars to make your movie, now you’ve got four million dollars because the foreign sales agent has taken the rest. It is something that has happened to me a couple of times. It illustrates the wall you can hit.”

In any event, at his very best, Jonathan Demme captured something painfully-amusingly truthful about American life and life in general. He brought unusual honesty, lack of cynicism and confidence in people to his filmmaking.



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