US actor Ray Liotta dead at 67: Known for *Something Wild*, *Field of Dreams*, *Goodfellas*

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29 May 2022

The talented American actor Ray Liotta died in his sleep May 26 at 67. He was in the Dominican Republic to shoot *Dangerous Waters*. Liotta is perhaps best known for *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1986), *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989) and *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990). In all, he appeared in more than 80 feature films, along with various television series.

The future actor was born in Newark, New Jersey. As Liotta often explained to interviewers, he was placed in an orphanage by his birth mother and adopted at the age of six months by city clerk Mary and auto-parts store owner Alfred Liotta. He grew up in Union, New Jersey and attended Union High School.

After featuring on a television soap opera for several years, Liotta moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s. His first significant film role came in Demme's *Something Wild*, about a previously straitlaced investment banker (Jeff Daniels) who becomes infatuated with an alluring but irresponsible young woman (Melanie Griffith) and lands in various difficulties. Liotta plays the woman's violent, ex-convict husband. His volatile performance, much praised, led to the actor becoming associated with semi-psychotic types.

Something Wild contains a number of sharply focused and often amusing performances, but as a whole the film hovers on the brink of "conformist non-conformism." It takes its point of view from the banker and, like other works of its time, identifies a "dark" undercurrent in American society, which threatens middle class stability, largely with criminal lowlifes and psychotics.

To avoid becoming stuck in such roles, Liotta appeared next in 1988's *Dominick and Eugene* (directed by Robert M. Young, the writer and producer of the ground-breaking *Nothing But a Man*, 1964) as a man with a twin brother (Tom Hulce) who has a learning disability. In *Field of Dreams*, a sentimental-fantasy film about baseball, Liotta played Shoeless Joe Jackson. Burt Lancaster made his final appearance in the film.

Goodfellas is the film, for better or worse, with which Liotta is most identified. In Scorsese's gangster chronicle, Liotta is Henry Hill, son of an Irish-American father and Italian immigrant mother, who admires the local hoods in his Brooklyn neighborhood growing up in the 1950s and eventually becomes one.

As narrator of the film, Liotta as Hill provides the opening commentary that reveals so much about Scorsese and American filmmaking of the past several decades. Hill explains that "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. To me, being a gangster was better than being president of the United States … To me, it meant being somebody, in a neighborhood full of nobodies."

As we noted in a review of *The Irishman* (2019), another of Scorsese's crime films, "This unsavory, juvenile fantasy, which the real-life Hill realized, apparently holds some appeal for Scorsese himself. The filmmaker seems fascinated, like many petty-bourgeois intellectuals, with 'strong men,' men with guns or clubs in their hands able to do 'whatever they want.' … Decades in which the 'nobodies,' i.e., the working class majority of the population, have been politically, socially and economically suppressed and excluded … have had their impact on Scorsese and other artists. They see the active or energetic element in society, malevolent or otherwise, as lying elsewhere."

None of this of course was Liotta's fault, but it has to be said that he came to prominence during the worst period of American filmmaking in its history.

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Over the next decade, Liotta appeared in numerous films, often demonstrating his particular ability to summon up explosive emotions, usefully in a few cases, pointlessly in others. Those included *Article 99* (Howard Deutch, 1992), *Unlawful Entry* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992), *Unforgettable* (John Dahl, 1996), *Cop Land* (James Mangold, 1997), *Forever Mine* (Paul Schrader, 1999), *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001), *Blow* (Ted Demme, 2001), *Narc* (Joe Carnahan, 2002) and *John Q* (Nick Cassavetes, 2002).

Liotta deplored his own typecasting, although he was obviously powerless in the end to do much about it. He once told an interviewer from *Cinemablend*, "I'm not like the people that I play at all. The people I grew up with kind of laugh, that I play these tough guys."

"It's a catch-22," Liotta commented to *Esquire*, "not just for me but for the majority of actors out there. They do a lot of different roles, but they get pigeonholed in certain things. Playing pretend is a great way to make a living, but this business sucks." What was his specific problem with the "business"?, he was asked. "Just the way they cast people. It's not a meritocracy. It's not how well you do. It's how well the movie does. Which makes sense—they're putting millions and millions on the line—but they lack the right imagination." He told the same publication on another occasion, "The business part of the business I just hate. I can't imagine an actor who likes it, or a director or anybody."

If anything, the films in which Liotta performed in the 2010s were even weaker, with a number indicating the baleful influence of Quentin Tarantino and similar figures. *Revolver* (2005), directed by Guy Ritchie, and *Killing Them Softly* (2012), directed by Andrew Dominik, perhaps fall into that category, among others. Again, Liotta often found himself trapped as a certain type. *The Place Beyond the Pines* (Derek Cianfrance, 2012) and *Marriage Story* (Noah Baumbach, 2019), in both of which Liotta had small parts, are not especially insightful, but possessed a certain seriousness. Somewhat more insightful and serious still was Michael Cuesta's *Kill the Messenger* (2014), about Gary Webb, the journalist who uncovered ties between the Central Intelligence Agency and massive drug peddling by the right-wing, mercenary Nicaraguan Contras.

Since Liotta's death, fellow actors and friends have paid tribute to his personal qualities, including his honesty and decency. These qualities extended into his public pronouncements. As the years passed, Liotta became ever more forthright about his dislike for the general state of contemporary filmmaking.

Speaking of the Hollywood blockbuster phenomenon in 2018, Liotta commented that the actors "who are doing the superhero movies are the ones getting the leads in independent movies. Maybe if you get into a horror movie it helps. But right now it's the superhero guys. But I'm just curious of the shelf life on that. They just beat those movies to death. And you can't blame the studios, because from their point of view they don't give a f--- if the movie is good or bad: They need to answer to their shareholders." (*Business Insider*)

In 2021, in a profile, the *Irish Times* noted that Liotta had "frequently decried the film industry's obsession with opening weekends and numbers. 'It's not what I signed up for,' he says. 'It's been like that since *Jaws*,' he says. 'And it's killing the acting profession. I think of all the great actors in the early '70s who made me want to act. Would they have found work in most of the films they're making now? I doubt it. Everything is different now."

Both Liotta's intensity and intelligence will be missed.

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