

Actor Gene Hackman (1930-2025): A great American realist

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American actor Gene Hackman, one of the finest performers of his generation, died in February at the age of 95. According to news reports on Friday, Santa Fe, New Mexico officials have determined that Hackman's second wife, classical pianist Betsy Arakawa, 65, died of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome at their home in mid-February and her actor-husband passed away several days later from cardiovascular disease. The investigation into all the circumstances of their deaths continues.

Gene Hackman worked in approximately 80 feature films over a period of four decades, retiring in the mid-2000s. He brought an acute, artistically informed urgency and honesty to his roles that often transcended the conceptions and methods of the filmmaker in question. He was frequently the most important artist on the given movie set.

Hackman once told an interviewer, "You cannot play a lie. You must play some kind of truth, and if you make the right choice, the audience will read it right." (*Film Comment*, December 1988, "Gene Hackman—The last honest man in Hollywood")

Director Arthur Penn, with whom Hackman worked on three occasions, observed that he was "an extraordinarily truthful actor, and he has the skill to tap into hidden emotions that many of us cover over or hide—and it's not just skill but courage."

The future actor was born in San Bernardino, California in 1930, where his parents had moved in with his mother's family, according to the *Pasadena Star-News*, "to save money during the Depression. With Gene's birth, the household expanded to nine people."

His immediate family moved around a good deal, however, and Hackman grew up in Danville, in east central Illinois. His father worked as a pressman for a local newspaper (his uncle and grandfather had been reporters). His mother, born in Sarnia, Ontario to an English mother, worked as a waitress and often took her son to the movies. He admired stars like James Cagney and Errol Flynn.

Hackman's father abandoned the family when the boy was 13, waving goodbye to his son as he drove away in his car. Three years later, Hackman himself "ran off," lying about his age and joining the Marines. After his discharge from the military, the GI Bill subsidized brief stints at the School of Radio Technique and the Art Students League in New York City.

He then made his way to California, where he trained at the Pasadena Playhouse. Hackman returned to New York in 1956 with ambitions of becoming a theater actor. He "suffered for his art" for several years, along with friends and colleagues Dustin Hoffman and Robert Duvall. He earned a reputation as a talented, versatile actor in a number of New York productions.

Hackman performed in various television series in the late 1950s and early 1960s, making his first credited feature film appearance in 1964 in Robert Rossen's *Lilith*, featuring Warren Beatty and Jean Seberg. He came to prominence in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), playing the brother of gangster Clyde Barrow (Beatty again) and dying memorably at the hands of law enforcement. His performance as tough-

guy New York City policeman Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle in *The French Connection* (directed by William Friedkin, 1971) confirmed his position as a leading figure in American films.

His most fruitful years coincided with the most important era in recent Hollywood history, the mid-1970s. With their various strengths and weaknesses, the films he made over several years—*The French Connection*, *Scarecrow* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1973), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974), *Zandy's Bride* (Jan Troell, 1974), *French Connection II* (John Frankenheimer, 1974) and *Night Moves* (Penn, 1975)—allowed him to create some of his finest, most complex characters.

In June 1975, critic Andrew Sarris noted that *Night Moves* and *French Connection II* were helped considerably by having

as their protagonist Gene Hackman, who is just about the best actor in pictures right now, and indisputably the most intense. In *Night Moves* he combines solidity, subtlety, and sensitivity as a knight in the dark, doomed to be checkmated by his own disarticulated desires.

Following his lucrative appearance as Lex Luthor in *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) and *Superman II* (1980, whose scenes he filmed in 1977-78), and disgusted with the film industry and himself for having accepted parts in too many films for too little reason, Hackman retired from movie acting. He noted at the time that he been "swept along" by the "fantasy" of stardom and that "You can't live a myth."

He explained that "having been poor, you do all the classic poor things... You get nine of everything. I've had all the airplanes, all the cars, all the houses, and now I've worked my way up to a house on a twenty-two acre estate with three floors, twenty rooms, an elevator, and nine bathrooms—it's a palace. And now I just want to get out" (cited by biographer Allan Hunter).

Hackman described the phase between winning an Academy Award for *The French Connection* in 1972 and his decision to withdraw from Hollywood five or so years later as "a long nightmarish blank when I couldn't have told you from one day to the next what I was doing or what I was going to do. I just knew there was a lot of money to be made and I didn't have to think too much about it."

He added that he had "lost enthusiasm for the business, not for acting. The business is ugly. There's so much money involved. It's corrupt. As an artist, you want to open up. As a businessman you have to keep your guard up."

After several years, Hackman eventually discovered that he missed performing, that it was the activity he did best, observing that the "only good thing about this break is that it's got me off the take-the-money-and-run bandwagon." He would not make three films a year—"there aren't

three good films to make”—and he was going to choose more carefully (cited by biographer Michael Munn).

Of course, even the most commercially successful actor remains to a considerable extent at the mercy of the artistic conditions of his or her time and the quality of the work available. If anything, the general circumstances prevailing in the last two decades of Hackman's film acting career represented a sharp decline over those holding sway in the previous 20 years.

He appeared briefly in Beatty's valuable *Reds* (1981), the historical drama about socialist journalist and Bolshevik supporter John Reed (*Ten Days That Shook the World*), playing Reed's New York City newspaper editor. With typical modesty, Hackman felt he had “disappointed” Beatty despite numerous takes, not having “solved the character well enough to get it even close.” Confronted recently with Hackman's comment, Beatty responded movingly, “Gene said that? He's wrong! He got it. ... With Hackman, you just do more takes because who knows? Let's see what might happen here. But I knew I had it. I've never worked with a better actor.”

Hackman continued to select roles as carefully as he could, even if his choices at times turned out to be misguided. Along with *Reds*, in the 1980s, Hackman appeared in the slight *All Night Long* (Jean-Claude Tramont, 1981), with Barbra Streisand, as an executive demoted to managing a drugstore in a rough neighborhood; Nicholas Roeg's *Eureka* (1983), intended to be a critique of money hunger, but which collapses under the weight of its own pretensions; Roger Spottiswoode's *Under Fire* (1983), about journalists covering the end of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua; and Schatzberg's turgid *Misunderstood* (1984), in which businessman Hackman looks after his two sons following his wife's death.

The actor took a leading role in two efforts at social realism. In *Twice in a Lifetime* (1985), based on a screenplay by British actor-writer Colin Welland (*Leeds United, Yanks, Chariots of Fire*), Hackman played a married, middle-aged steelworker who begins an affair with a barmaid (Ann-Margret) and ultimately leaves his wife for her, understandably setting off a crisis in his family. Directed by Bud Yorkin, erstwhile partner of producer Norman Lear, the film has a skilled cast, including Ellen Burstyn, Amy Madigan, Ally Sheedy and Brian Dennehy, and has the worthy ambition of portraying American working class life. But the film settles too often and too complacently for formulaic elements and lacks the overall sharpness to present the actual, increasingly devastating economic, social and psychological state of affairs existing (especially in the steel industry!) by the mid-1980s.

In *Hoosiers* (1986, directed by David Anspaugh), Hackman is a former big time college basketball coach reduced to coaching a small-town Indiana high school team that can only muster a handful of players. After a series of trials and tribulations, he leads them to the 1954 state championship. Hackman is as authentic and compelling as ever, joined by Dennis Hopper and Barbara Hershey, but the film's nostalgia, sentimentality and predictable and “inspirational” qualities can be grating.

Hackman had secondary parts in Roger Donaldson's *No Way Out* (1987), as a politician guilty of killing his mistress, and Woody Allen's unfamiliarly somber *Another Woman* (1988), in the role of the alluring, dignified man that the unhappy central character (Gena Rowlands) should have chosen years earlier.

He also appeared in various films with confused or worse political themes, including *Mississippi Burning* (1988, Alan Parker), which falsifies the FBI's role during the Civil Rights movement and presents it as the heroic defender of the victims of southern racist violence. *Uncommon Valor* (1983, Ted Kotcheff), along with [Rambo] *First Blood* (1982, also Kotcheff), helped launch the rescue-of-prisoners-left-behind-in-Southeast Asia genre, at first vaguely anti-war and “anti-government,” but later, determinedly far-right.

For *That* ~~movie~~ *his Connection*, in inhabited with tremendous ferocity, underlined contradictions in the film and social worlds. No doubt superficially realistic and harsh, the film, actually very thin as a drama, also solidified the falsehood that “cops are just like us,” “blue-collar workers” and helped usher in a new “law and order” mentality in film and television. In particular, Friedkin's film encouraged the lie that the authorities had to deepen attacks on democratic rights because of the requirements of the “war on drugs,” an echo of which we see in Donald Trump's current filthy propaganda campaign.

Hackman turned up throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s and 2000s in a series of conspiracy films, a symptom of the times, which sometimes blend into one another in one's memory. By the title alone, it is difficult to recall whether a given work contains a political, military, legal or medical plot and whether it has a generally “left” or right-wing inclination, or any significant inclination at all. *The Package* (Andrew Davis, 1989), *Class Action* (Michael Apted, 1991), *Company Business* (Nicholas Meyer, 1991), *The Firm* (Sydney Pollack, 1993), *Extreme Measures* (Michael Apted, 1996), *Absolute Power* (Clint Eastwood, 1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Behind Enemy Lines* (John Moore, 2001) and *Runaway Jury* (Gary Fleder, 2003) fall into that category to one degree or another. Some of these had more substance than others, but none left a truly enduring mark.

The Royal Tenenbaums (2003), one of Wes Anderson's more intriguing (and endearing) efforts to date, was the last genuinely remarkable work with which Hackman was associated. The veteran actor, in a part written specifically for him, is Royal Tenenbaum, the head of a dysfunctional family living in an imaginary, vaguely bygone Manhattan.

Royal left his wife Etheline (Anjelica Huston) and family decades ago. As we commented on the WWSW at the time:

Now advanced in years, Royal seeks some kind of reconciliation with those he abandoned. Having been kicked out of his hotel for nonpayment, he fakes stomach cancer and talks his way back into the family home. ... Gene Hackman as Royal is a consistent delight. A more or less unrepentant sinner, Royal stole from his son Chas's safety deposit box (the latter had him disbarred as a lawyer), insists on introducing Margot, much to her obvious unhappiness, as “my adopted daughter” and generally misbehaves. In an attempt to be sympathetic to his young grandsons, who have recently lost their mother, Royal declares, “I'm very sorry for your loss. Your mother was a very attractive woman.” Hackman bestows on the line just the right proportions of sincerity, gaucheness and leering.

Hackman retired some years later on the advice of his doctor, concerned about his patient's heart. In his retirement, interestingly, he co-authored a novel about the escape of a Union soldier from the notorious Andersonville Confederate prison during the Civil War.

Hackman was a great actor. Various factors made that possible. He knew something of life, including its economic and psychological difficulties, growing up in modest and unstable circumstances. He knew something of the world, having been stationed with the Marines in pre-revolutionary China. “He was sent first to Qingdao, then Shanghai in the middle of the Chinese Civil War with the mission of destroying Japanese military equipment to keep it out of the hands of the communists,” according to military.com. When Mao's forces took power, US forces withdrew from Chinese soil and Hackman spent the rest of his time in the military in Japan and Hawaii.

Whatever his political views, Hackman always felt at odds with the establishment, suggesting his success owed something to his

“proletarian,” “everyman” carriage and demeanor. He never had “leading man” good looks, which apparently only added fuel to his internal fire. Hackman had, as a British Film Institute obituary put it, a “slightly lopsided physiognomy—all broad, solid planes resolving into a sceptical and tender trickster grin—[which] helped him render complex and contradictory emotions tactile in real time.”

He studied acting and other actors in a serious manner. He also rejected what had become the shibboleth of much of American film acting, that intuition and the unconscious were everything and rationality a subordinate element. He told *Film Comment* in 1988 that most actors

feel they should deal with what’s inside. That the intellectual side of acting shouldn’t exist, that it should all be right-brain function [intuition, emotion]. But I’m a great believer in using both sides of the brain in approaching any art... painting or music... because the left-brain gives you the classical sense.

He went on:

I do the same thing now as when I was just starting, I ask myself a few questions: How is this character like me? How is he unlike me? In the difference between these two, what is important? What choices can I make which will further the author’s intent? I ask myself where, when, why—real simple questions. I do an atmospheric kind of thing by dealing with objects such as where I’ve been when I come into a room, where I’m going when I leave it.

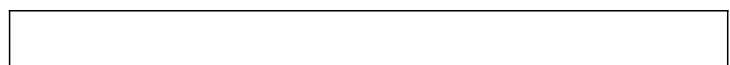
At the same time,

I started realizing that what I was saying to the other actor was very important, not only to them but to me as well. I don’t mean that I personally felt important. But at that moment of interaction there was a very concentrated sense of energy, and of connection, that felt great. I didn’t know if it was acting... I didn’t know what it was but it was thrilling. And I didn’t want to touch it, to examine it too closely—just to do it.

Artistic genius, including the actor’s, insisted Soviet critic Aleksandr Voronsky, involves, among other things, the “ability to re-embodiment himself, to become thoroughly accustomed to another person, to think his thoughts and experience his feelings.”

Hackman was a great realist, determined to artistically mirror, which always involves transformation, alteration and rearrangement, the actuality and personalities of his time and society. He left behind indelible discoveries along those lines.

Such activity requires immense thought and feeling, internal battles, principles and convictions, along with a deep concern and care for other human beings. As Voronsky argued a century ago, the artist must possess “strong feelings towards those he is portraying in his works. No matter how diverse and abundant the thoughts and feelings of the artist, it is impossible for him to transform himself with a feeling of cool indifference.” Everything important in Hackman rejected “cool indifference” and encouraged engagement in and curiosity about life.





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