

American actor Robert Redford (1936-2025)

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Robert Redford, actor, independent filmmaker and environmentalist, died a week ago at his home in Sundance, Utah, at the age of 89. As a performer in the theater, film and television, his credits extended from the late 1950s to the current decade.

Redford knew immense film stardom from 1969 to the mid-1980s. It is generally recognized that he was the most popular movie actor in the US and in every part of the world where American films dominated, during the early and mid-1970s, due to the collective impact of films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Downhill Racer* (1969), *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), *The Candidate* (1972), *The Way We Were* (1973), *The Sting* (1973), *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and *All the President's Men* (1976).

Movie exhibitors in the US voted Robert Redford as Hollywood's top box-office star in 1974, 1975 and 1976. In 1974, he became the first performer in nearly three decades to have three films among the year's top 10 grossing titles. His popularity was not a fluke. Redford brought charm, calm intelligence, wry humor and sophistication to his best work. His was an appealing personality and presence, not simply based on his handsome face. Audiences at the time were aware of and appreciated his generally anti-establishment stance on the politics of the day, and this quality he also brought as well as he could to various film roles.

Redford directed 10 films or film segments. His most highly awarded effort was *Ordinary People* (1980), about an upper middle class family responding to the accidental death of one son and the suicide attempt of another. However, Redford's *Quiz Show* (1994), about the ruthless pursuit of success at any cost and American cultural deterioration in the 1950s, remains his most significant contribution. His last directing stint, interestingly enough, was a portion of *Cathedrals of Culture* (2014), in which he paid tribute to the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, designed by architect Louis Kahn. Redford had contracted a mild case of polio as a child and understandably held Salk, who developed one of the first successful polio vaccines, in the highest possible regard.

In 1980, dissatisfied with the Hollywood mainstream, Redford founded the Sundance Institute, and the first Sundance Film Festival, dedicated to independent filmmaking, was held in 1985. It continues annually to this day. Numerous well-known directors got their start or became known to the wider public through screenings there, beginning in particular with Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* in 1989.

Redford had good looks, a winning smile and a patrician air, but his life, thinking and feelings were more complicated than one might suppose. He once commented, as cited by biographers Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell, "All my life I've been dogged with guilt because I feel there is this difference between the way I look and the way I feel inside."

On numerous occasions over the decades, Redford made known his unhappiness with the American film industry's commercialism and banality. In a 1970 interview with the *Guardian*'s film critic Derek Malcolm, at the time of *Downhill Racer*, for example, the actor noted that

"I am not," he says determinedly, "a Hollywood man. Do you

remember that guy who walks in and out of William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, saying 'There's no foundation, no foundation—all down the line'? Well, that's what I feel about Hollywood. You can't run an art form like a business any more, and they're still trying to. Films to them are just like vacuum cleaners or refrigerators. The approach sickens me."

In 2010, he remarked to a *Euronews* interviewer that he had been

pretty independent my whole life and that's just the way it is. ... Look, independence is not going to be for everybody. It's a very difficult role to play in a world that's controlled by corporations. Corporations have a very strong formula for money in return on their investment and all that. So, sometimes experimentation or independence is seen in a negative way. It's seen as too risky, so therefore you're going to have a struggle.

Redford told the Associated Press in 2018 that he had created the Sundance festival to support

independent artists who weren't given a chance to be heard. ... The industry was pretty well controlled by the mainstream, which I was a part of. But I saw other stories out there that weren't having a chance to be told and I thought, "Well, maybe I can commit my energies to giving those people a chance." As I look back on it, I feel very good about that.

Intentions are one thing, of course, results are another. The social and cultural circumstances in postwar America in which Redford grew up and matured created limitations and threw up barriers that were difficult to overcome. What does genuine "independence" in or from the Hollywood film industry entail?

Redford was born in August 1936 during the Depression, in Santa Monica, California, in humble conditions. His father was a milkman, working long hours, when Redford was born, although he later became an accountant for Standard Oil. Redford's father had come from New England; his mother from Texas.

According to biographer Michael Feeney Callan, Redford

was a first-generation Californian, born in Los Angeles as the citrus era ebbed and Hollywood hit flood tide. In the mid-1930s realities clashed as the Dust Bowl casualties came west, only to be stopped at the gates of the city by local police patrols while Angelenos hosted Greta Garbo and Gary Cooper. The Redfords were within the city limits, but poor; neighborhood friends hanged

themselves in the Depression.

Callan argues that

The story that fed both branches of the family, the Redfords and the Harts [Redford's mother's family], was one of rebels and outcasts. The factions arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and clung to the East Coast and the ideals of pluralism and liberal democracy that had been established there. Freedom was the quest of both families.

There were hints of radicalism in the family. Support for Irish Republicanism in one quarter, and then a schoolteacher aunt with whom Redford's father lived when he first moved to California "who embraced communism" or, according to others, the anarchism of Emma Goldman.

Redford's childhood seems to have been unsettled.

I went through a difficult childhood and created trouble and was in trouble and so forth, and I was kicked out of school, and that was okay with me, because what I really wanted was to go another place.

After high school and one year in university, Redford headed for Europe in 1956. He aspired to be a painter at the time.

I wanted to go to a place that I felt had some history and had a sense of community with some artists, and that was France, Paris. (Euronews)

And

Expressionism was the big scene in the United States, but I preferred the Europeans like Utrillo, Modigliani, and especially Gauguin, and the postimpressionists, who were immensely exciting for me. (Callan)

Callan adds that, while in Paris, brimming with energy,

Redford joined with student radicals organizing street demonstrations against the [1956] Soviet suppression in Hungary. Curiosity put him in the middle of the action, though his political education was very much a work in progress. In a police baton charge in the university district, he was clubbed and injured.

It would be interesting to know who these "student radicals" protesting Stalinist repression were.

Back in the US, Redford began taking classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York in October 1957. He made his first appearance on the professional stage in 1959, at the age of 22. He began to work in television on popular series such as *Maverick*, *Perry Mason*, *Naked City*, *Route 66*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and the *Twilight Zone* in

the early 1960s. Redford made his feature film debut in 1962 in *War Hunt*, about the Korean War. His first notable film appearance came in *Inside Daisy Clover* (Robert Mulligan), with his friend Natalie Wood, focused on the destructive power of show business, in 1965.

Redford worked with a number of directors over the following decade and a half, some from Old Hollywood, some from the New and some who represented a compromise or a transition between the two generations. He performed in seven films directed by Sydney Pollack (*This Property is Condemned*, *Jeremiah Johnson*, *The Way We Were*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *The Electric Horseman*, *Out of Africa*, *Havana*), three by George Roy Hill (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Sting*, *The Great Waldo Pepper*) and two by Michael Ritchie (*Downhill Racer*, *The Candidate*). He was also directed by Arthur Penn, Abe Polonsky, Peter Yates, Jack Clayton, Alan Pakula, Stuart Rosenberg and Barry Levinson.

Again, an actor, even an enormously successful one, working in the American film industry is not free to do whatever he or she likes. There are external and *internal* constraints. His frequent collaboration with Pollack is worth noting. As we commented in an obituary of the latter, Pollack

can be viewed as a multitalented figure ... whose career spanned—and survived—a number of different stages in the history of the film industry...

Less charitably, one could argue that Pollack survived in a relatively bleak film and political landscape because his lack of a clearly defined artistic personality or social outlook kept him afloat while stronger and more committed personalities went under. His very ability to adjust successfully, as the radical 1970s gave way to the Carter, Reagan and Bush years, suggests a malleability that is not entirely to his credit.

Redford was a critic of American society, of its domination by huge corporations, of its imperiling of the environment, of its treatment of Native Americans and Latinos (*The Milagro Beanfield War*). Specifically, as we noted, he deplored the often conformist and formulaic character of Hollywood moviemaking. At various times, he waxed enthusiastic about European and French New Wave cinema and the work of figures like Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman.

From the mid-1960s, as we wrote in the Pollack death notice, postwar stability had shown

signs of extreme stress and strain: the Kennedy assassination; the exposure of deep and enduring poverty in Appalachia; the radicalization of the civil rights movement; the riots in Harlem and Watts; the murder of Malcolm X; the emergence of a student protest movement, especially in opposition to the US military intervention in Southeast Asia.

In a film industry purged of left-wing elements, however, searching social criticism that could have helped make sense of these developments was in short supply. Various brands of Democratic Party liberalism were the best that was readily available to Pollack and others.

This largely holds true for Redford. There is an anti-establishment streak in his film work, in *Butch Cassidy*, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (from blacklist victim Polonsky), *The Candidate*, *Jeremiah Johnson*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *All the President's Men* and, more vaguely, in *The Sting*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Way We Were* and others. Redford stands out most

forcefully in *All the President's Men*, about the Nixon-Watergate scandal, and *Three Days of the Condor*, in which a “rogue” CIA operation to seize Middle Eastern oil fields plays a central role, as well as in his later direction of *Quiz Show*.

Critic and historian Michael Allen asserts that

Redford was a politically committed person in his private life, with focused interests in the environment, the history and current condition of Native Americans, and the moral and political integrity of America itself.

A number of his films, Allen writes, were

concerned with his reaction to specific political issues, most notably the corruption of the American government, culminating in the disgrace of Nixon's fall due to the Watergate cover-up scandal.

There is no reason to doubt Redford's sincerity or anger about facets of American life, but the reality is that his political outlook never extended beyond liberalism and support, even if critical and conditional, for the Democratic Party. In a criticism of his *Lions for Lambs* (2007), about the consequences of the “war on terror” and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the WSWS observed that the film

adds up to liberal perplexity and a careful refusal to expose the real roots of the militarism of the Bush Administration. The film consists largely of dialogue concerning the US quagmire in the Middle East, yet the word “oil” is never mentioned.

Greatness in art is not something that can be picked out of a hat, it depends on a host of social, artistic and intellectual factors. Within the limitations imposed by the era and the social milieu, Redford's contributions to American filmmaking were real, as a charismatic leading man, a director, a sponsor of independent filmmaking.

When asked in 2010, do you see yourself now as an artist or a businessman?, Redford answered with alacrity and some apparent alarm,

Not a businessman. Not a businessman. It's like the word brand. When someone says “Boy, you have a great brand,” it makes me nervous. It makes me uncomfortable, because for me the word “brand” was what you stamp on cattle, and I didn't respond to that word, you know, I didn't think of that. I understand it, but it felt strange to me to hear that word. “Business” has always been not the most comfortable for me because I think more as an artist.



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