

# Actor Robert Duvall (1931-2026): A realist who went beyond his own conceptions

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American actor Robert Duvall died February 15 at his farm in Middleburg, Virginia at the age of 95. Simplifying matters somewhat, Duvall began acting in the theater in the 1950s, pursued a career in television in the 1960s and achieved his greatest prominence in films in the 1970s and beyond. His last film role was in *The Pale Blue Eye*, released in 2022, when he was over 90.

The immensely gifted Duvall is best remembered by wider audiences for performances in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962—a brief but memorable role), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974), *Network* (1976), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Great Santini* (1979), *Tender Mercies* (1983), *Lonesome Dove* (1989), *The Apostle* (1997) and *A Civil Action* (1998). But he undoubtedly gave his all in dozens of other films and television episodes, as well as appearances on stage.

Robert Duvall was born in San Diego in 1931. His father was an officer in the US Navy, eventually retiring as an admiral. Robert was raised in part in Annapolis, Maryland, the home of the Naval Academy. The family name came down from French Huguenots. His mother claimed to have been related to Robert E. Lee.

The Duvall family, because of the military connection, moved around. Robert attended schools in Severna Park, Maryland, St. Louis and the small town of Elsah, Illinois (across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, population approximately 520). He was raised in the Christian Science religion. Christian Science adherents subscribe to an intense form of philosophical idealism, contending that reality is entirely spiritual and the material world is an illusion. Disease is considered a mental error rather than a physical disorder, and believers are not treated by medicine but by prayer and special “healers.”

Duvall also attended a small college influenced by Christian Science, Principia, also in Elsah. He graduated in 1953, and then served in the US Army in 1953-54, in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War and in the midst of the Cold War with its state religion of anti-communism.

These facts are worth noting, because of some of the sharp and surprising contradictions in Duvall’s life and career. Duvall never publicly rejected the military, its values or “the American way of life.” He viewed himself as politically conservative and was a Republican Party supporter and significant financial supporter—at least until the last few years of his life. As of 2014, he declared the party “a mess.”

(Duvall was personally invited to George W. Bush’s inauguration in 2001. In 2007, he announced his support for Rudy Giuliani’s bid for the Republican presidential nomination, but he appeared onstage at a 2008 rally for the party’s eventual candidates, John McCain and Sarah Palin. He endorsed Mitt Romney in 2012.)

Very soon after leaving the military, Duvall found his way to New York City and by the winter of 1955 he was studying with famed acting teacher Sanford Meisner on the GI Bill. Gene Hackman and James Caan were among his fellow acting students. Duvall later roomed with Dustin Hoffman. As Duvall once explained, for all of them at the time, Marlon

Brando was the idol, the hero.

In other words, Duvall moved from a military-Christian atmosphere, presumably saturated with anti-communism and American patriotism, at least officially, to bohemian New York where he was now rubbing shoulders with leftists and “free spirited” artists of various sorts and descriptions.

Meisner, to whom Duvall paid tribute throughout his career, was a graduate of and participant in the generally left-wing Group Theater in New York, which flourished during the Depression years and emphasized Naturalism and its version of the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski. Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw, Elia Kazan, John Garfield, Franchot Tone, Sidney Lumet, Will Geer, Howard da Silva and many others were associated with the Group. Meisner himself was very close to the Communist Party at the time, as were a good number of the actors, writers and directors, and directed one of the theater’s legendary successes, Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), an agitprop piece about a taxi drivers’ strike.

Duvall later starred as Eddie Carbone in the acclaimed 1965–1966 Off-Broadway revival of *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller, another left-wing artist.

How did this all figure into Duvall’s life and work? How did he rationalize working with individuals whose political ideals he publicly repudiated? It is not clear. But it seems a tension that was always present. He was pulled toward realism, which, in the end, always involves a criticism of what exists, but he claimed to be a staunch defender of all that.

Duvall’s greatest strength, by all accounts and on the basis of viewing his film work, was his attraction and indeed dedication to psychological and, in a more limited way, social truth, as he construed it. His intensity in that effort seems unquestionable. Duvall worked and studied indefatigably. He was known to “inhabit” his roles with great ferocity and single-mindedness.

He held the firm belief that “research, research, research” was essential to crafting a script, he told students at Hollins University in 2022. “Immerse yourself in the subject matter and then put forth something that you love. I haven’t written that many screenplays, but sometimes I just sit down and start writing and just see where it goes. I go from A to B to C to D and just follow the logic of the script.” Duvall directed himself in *The Apostle*, about a rural evangelical preacher, based on his own script.

As an actor, Duvall noted that when he read a script, “I look for whether I can take what’s in ink and turn it into organized behavior. ‘From ink to behavior’ is what I call it. You let your imagination take over and encompass you and propel your ideas into results.”

To what extent did Duvall’s limited or retrograde ideas about society, including postwar American society, influence his acting work?

An actor is not in charge of many aspects of a film’s production. He or she works primarily to see that his or her contribution is valuable and rings true. Hollywood history is full of character actors in particular who

held terrible views (much worse than Duvall's!), including Victor McLaglen, Ward Bond and Walter Brennan. These individuals were able, despite their overall conceptions about life, to indelibly depict certain specific human characteristics and situations.

In regard to artists in general, there is always a gap between their subjective intentions and the ideas or feelings objectively expressed in their work. At times, that gap can take on substantial dimensions, especially under conditions of the profit-driven, corporate-controlled film industry, where the aims of a given production may be quite limited, but the artistic and intellectual talent involved leads the work logically in quite unexpected directions.

The irony in Duvall's case is that the performer, one of the more conservative lead actors in the film industry in the last number of decades, thanks to his sincerity and devotion to realism, specialized in depicting more often than not relatively detestable representatives of various American institutions. He went beyond his own conceptions in the interests of picturing life as it actually is.

In Arthur Penn's *The Chase* (1966), Duvall plays a loathsome banker in a Texas town who helps lead a mob, quasi-vigilante style. His Tom Hagen in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, the adopted son of Mafia boss Vito Corleone (Brando), is a calculating and loyal *consigliere* (adviser) and lawyer for the Corleone crime family. Although not a thug with his fists or a gun, he is ruthless through his expertise in corruption, bribery and legal maneuvering.

In Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, about the Vietnam War, Duvall portrays the psychopathic Lt. Colonel Kilgore who infamously sniffs the air and declaims:

Smell that? You smell that? ... Napalm, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. I love the smell of napalm in the morning. You know, one time we had a hill bombed, for 12 hours. When it was all over, I walked up. We didn't find one of 'em, not one stinkin' dink body. The smell, you know that gasoline smell? The whole hill. Smelled like ... victory. Someday this war's gonna end.

In *The Great Santini* and *M\*A\*S\*H*, Duvall again presents unflattering pictures of the US military. Duvall is appalling, dead-eyed television executive Frank Hackett in Lumet's *Network*, who prioritizes ratings over ethics, notoriously declaring his own network to be a "whorehouse." Hackett plays a pivotal role in exploiting the mental breakdown of Howard Beale (Peter Finch) for financial gain. In Steve Zaillian's *A Civil Action*, once again, Duvall plays one of the principal villains of the piece, lawyer Jerome Facher, the legal mouthpiece for giant, criminal polluters.

The *New York Times*' Manohla Dargis accurately describes "the way [Duvall's] skin seemed to stretch tightly, almost wincingly, across his facial bones." That almost wincing stretching seems to speak to the tensions in Duvall's life and beliefs. He could denounce "bleeding-heart left-wing, extreme left-wing [liberals]," but the truth he brought to audiences about American life was generally rather melancholic, even grim and sobering. There is relatively little joy in his presentations, as compared, for example, even with those of his contemporaries Hackman or Hoffman, whom one tends to think of with more sympathy and warmth. Duvall brings business sharks, criminals, martinets and warmongers to mind for the most part.

Only in the mythological-sentimental American past (or present), where he could play a dogged cowboy or down-and-out country music singer, is there much joy. For someone who declared himself a great believer in the American system, not much in Duvall's work provided an endorsement

The contradiction might be summed up by placing these two facts side by side.

Judith Slawson, in her biography of the actor, mentions that while working on *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976), in which he played Sherlock Holmes' colleague Dr. Watson, Duvall "could admire [co-star] Vanessa Redgrave's acting but have no patience for her Trotskyite politics" and her "spouting" of "leftist dogmas" (whether all that language is Duvall's or the biographer's is not entirely clear).

Fascinatingly, on the other hand, in a 1997 interview in *Film Comment*, Duvall was asked, "What directors have influenced you?" By this, the interviewer presumably meant filmmakers Duvall had worked with. However, this was his surprising reply:

When people ask me that, they say, "You worked with Ron Howard, you worked with this other person..." And I'll say, "Well, Ken Loach." That kind of stops them in their tracks, which I kind of like to do. That movie of his, *Kes* [1969]—it was like, when it came out, I was a little confused. It wasn't a documentary, I knew it was fiction, but...

And further:

I tried to get him [Loach] to come direct *Tender Mercies*, but he didn't want to, which I can understand. He liked my Gypsy film [*Angelo, My Love*, 1983, written and directed by Duvall] very much, which I sent to him. I met him once for coffee, and we talked a few times on the phone.

The British socialist Loach is understandably and creditably appealing to Duvall as an artist. The naturalistic, unglamorous, everyday obviously mean a great deal to both of them, with whatever reservations one might have about their respective efforts. Did it occur to Duvall, did he realize (perhaps he did) that Loach, at the time he directed *Kes*, was very much engaged in "Trotskyite politics," supporting the same political tendency, the Socialist Labour League, that Redgrave would subsequently join, and "spouting ... leftist dogmas" to anyone who would listen?

Duvall was a genuine realist in his acting and artistry, a relentless pursuer of the truth, within definite limits, as he saw it.



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