

My Drift

Title: Gene Hackman

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Just in case you were wondering why you have not seen Gene Hackman in any movies lately, I'm here to report that Gene is alive and living in Santa Fe, New Mexico with his second wife Betsy Arakawa. Hackman retired from acting in 2004 after a 48-year career (1956 to 2004). He has been a Novelist since 1999 writing several books.



Betsy Arakawa and Hackman

Hackman's movie career parallels that of Clint Eastwood who I wrote about in my last article. Both were born in 1930 and both have acted in a variety of roles in numerous movies. Although Clint is a little more famous than Gene, Hackman has acted in more movies than Eastwood (71 to 66). They acted together in the Unforgiven (1992) and Absolute Power (1997). Many of Hackman's movies had him acting in a supporting role.



Hackman and Eastwood in Absolute Power

Early Life

Actor and writer Gene Hackman was born on January 30, 1930, in San Bernardino, California. An Academy Award-winning actor, Hackman played nearly every type of role imaginable, from politicians to super cops to military leaders to criminal masterminds. As a child, he moved to Illinois with his parents where his father worked as a newspaper press operator. His father abandoned the family when Hackman was in his early teens.

When he was 16 years old, Hackman dropped out of high school to join the U.S. Marine Corps. He lied about his age in order to enlist. During his time in the service, Hackman worked as a radio operator and finished his high school education. After being discharged in 1951, Hackman tried to find his way, living in Illinois and New York while working a variety of jobs. He studied journalism and TV production for a time as well.

Hackman eventually decided on acting and studied at the Pasadena Playhouse Theatre in the 1950s. Dustin Hoffman was one of his fellow students, and the two became friends and shared the dubious distinction of being voted "least likely to succeed" by their peers. Around this time, in 1956, Hackman married Faye Maltese. (They divorced in 1986)

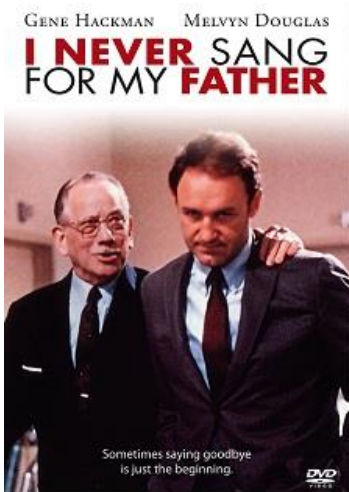
Big Break

Returning to New York, Hackman landed his first off-Broadway role in Chaparral in 1958. He became friends with actor Robert Duvall and even had Dustin Hoffman as a roommate for a time. Struggling for several years, Hackman landed his first film role -- a bit part as a cop -- in 1961's Mad Dog Coll. He made his Broadway debut two years later in Children from Their Games, which was quickly followed a role in A Rainy Day in Newark. Hackman was also part of the original cast of Any Wednesday, which debuted in 1964. After seeing him on Broadway, director Robert Rossen cast Hackman in the drama Lilith (1964) with Warren Beatty.



Gene Hackman, Warren Beatty, and Faye Dunaway in Bonnie and Clyde

Beatty proved instrumental in Hackman's big career breakthrough. He helped Hackman land a supporting role in Bonnie and Clyde (1967), which starred Beatty and Faye Dunaway as the infamous criminal couple. Hackman played Clyde's brother, Buck Burrow, who joins his sibling and his lady on their bank robbery spree. The role brought Hackman plenty of critical attention and his first Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor.



Three years later, Hackman garnered another Best Supporting Actor nod from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his work on I Never Sang for My Father (1970). In the film, he played a professor trying to forge a relationship with his estranged father (played by Melvyn Douglas) after his mother's death.

Next up was the flick that solidified his status as a bona fide screen star, The French Connection (1971). Hackman played the ultimate tough cop -- Detective Popeye Doyle -- in this hit thriller directed by William Friedkin and went on to win the Academy Award for Best Actor.



Hackman as Detective Popeye Doyle in The French Connection

The French Connection, now 47 years old, based on a true story, and starring Gene Hackman as detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle, a driven New York cop who wears a hat that makes him look like some sort of hip jazz musician and whose intuitive street sense allows him to nose out the secret players in a colossal heroin import operation, bringing the drugs into New York from Marseille.

To watch The French Connection now is to experience the shock of the old: a lost world of the city, and a lost style of film-making. For a start, there is that poster image taken from the climax of the famous subway car chase – Doyle shoots someone in the back as the man reaches the stop of a staircase, and his grimacing victim flings his arms out at the moment of death. It is a distinctive image, but eccentric, asymmetric, and utterly anti-heroic: the hero? The guy indistinctly in the background? And he's shooting someone in the back? Surely not! It's the sort of image that would never get used as a film poster today. A poster for The French Connection now would have the faces of Hackman and his partner Russo (Roy Scheider) sweatily to the fore, with a gun or two, and the automobiles in the background.



In the opening reel, the movie socks us with another scene that could never happen in the politically correct year 2018. Popeye and Russo storm into a black bar and aggressively slap around the customers, demanding answers. And when Popeye gets back to the station house, he drops the N bomb. The modern audience nervously asks itself: where is the black police chief to balance this? The black judge? Or maybe a black cop whose tough integrity and professionalism Doyle can come, finally, apologetically, to respect? Nowhere.

In one scene, Doyle and Russo take their suspect and give him a brutal working over in one of New York's vacant lots – a feature of the era – burnt out waste-grounds, sometimes large that were a key breeding grounds for crime.

A modern Hollywood action thriller like this would need to show redemption for Doyle. For example, the precise explanation for his nickname would be an opportunity for some gentle backstory comedy and meet the all-important need for him to be a sympathetic character. Not in 1971. His name is Popeye. That's it.

One of his resentful colleagues, nettled at the chief's indulgence of Doyle, furiously remarks that these hunches of Doyle's once got a good cop killed. Again – a modern audience is primed for a big revelation somewhere before the big finale. Who was this good cop? Does Doyle, for all his bluster, feel desperately guilty? Will nailing the "French Connection" bad guys make up for it and bring Doyle redemption? Well, not exactly: the final moments of *The French Connection* are a powerful, even magnificent repudiation of the modern piety of redemption and sympathy. It is a stunningly nihilist ending, one to set alongside Polanski's *Chinatown*.

I saw The French Connection 40+ years ago but now I want to see it again. I have been checking the TV Programming Guide for several weeks now and have come to the conclusion that this movie is not shown very often.

Hollywood Star

After the success of *The French Connection*, Hackman took on a variety of films. He joined such classic stars as Ernest Borgnine, Red Buttons, Roddy McDowall and Shelley Winters for the disaster-at-sea saga *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). The next year, he teamed up with Al Pacino for the drama *Scarecrow* (1973). Hackman went on to star in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), playing a surveillance expert who gets caught up in one of his projects. His portrayal of the measured and precise professional loner Harry Caul is another one of his highly praised performances.



The Poseidon Adventure



Scarecrow



The Conversation

Hackman returned as Popeye Doyle in *The French Connection II* in 1975, and that year he also starred in *Bite the Bullet*, *Night Moves*, and the notorious flop *Lucky Lady*, co-starring Liza Minnelli and Burt Reynolds.



Super Villain Lex Luthor

He scored a success with his portrayal of super villain Lex Luthor in 1978's *Superman*, which starred Christopher Reeve as the legendary man of steel. Hackman reprised his role in two sequels: *Superman II* (1980) and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987).

Reuniting with Warren Beatty, Hackman had a small role in *Reds* (1981), which was based on the true story of a politically radical journalist named John Reed. He followed that effort by playing a retired colonel who goes to Vietnam to find his son in *Uncommon Valor* (1983). He earned praise for his performance while the film itself received lackluster reviews. Hackman continued to explore different roles and types of characters for the remainder of the decade.

With *Hoosiers* (1986), failed college coach Norman Dale (Gene Hackman) gets a chance at redemption when he is hired to direct the basketball program at a high school in a tiny Indiana town. After a teacher (Barbara Hershey) persuades star player Jimmy Chitwood to quit and focus on his long-neglected studies, Dale struggles to develop a winning team in the face of community criticism for his temper and his unconventional choice of assistant coach Shooter (Dennis Hopper), a notorious alcoholic.

This movie loosely tells the true story of a small-town (Milan) Indiana high school basketball team that against all odds wins the state championship in 1954.



Hoosiers



Mississippi Burning

Being a basketball player and fan, I really enjoyed this movie. There is not another state in the country that is more passionate about basketball than Indiana.

He then played a sinister secretary of defense in *No Way Out* (1987), with Kevin Costner. Hackman delivered another strong turn in *Mississippi Burning* (1988). In this historical dramatic thriller based on a true story, he played an FBI agent investigating the murder of three civil rights workers in 1964, a performance that earned him a Best Actor Academy Award nomination. Not long afterward, Hackman experienced chest pains and underwent an angioplasty. He considered retirement for a while, but eventually returned to his craft.



Unforgiven

Working with another acclaimed film talent, Clint Eastwood, Hackman netted an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for *Unforgiven* (1992). In this western, he played a cruel sheriff pursued by Eastwood, who also won an Oscar for Best Director.

Taking on a different kind of morally questionable character, Hackman played Tom Cruise's mentor in *The Firm* (1993), a film adaptation of a John Grisham novel.

In 1995, Hackman played seasoned combat submarine captain Frank Ramsey opposite Denzel Washington's Lieutenant Commander Ron Hunter in the thrilling drama *Crimson Tide*.

That same year, he starred as John Herod, a vicious mayor of a wild frontier town opposite Sharon Stone, Russell Crowe and the then up-and-coming actor Leonardo DiCaprio in the western *The Quick and the Dead*.



Gene Hackman



Sharon Stone



A mysterious woman gunslinger known only as “The Lady” (Sharon Stone), saunters into the town of Redemption looking for revenge. Her father was killed by the town's sadistic mayor, Herod (Gene Hackman), who is in the midst of organizing a quick-draw tournament.

The lady enters, joining a cast of miscreants and outlaws for a brutal competition in which the loser dies. Among the competitors is "The Kid" (Leonardo DiCaprio), an upstart who has his own score to settle with Herod. As you probably know or guessed, at the end of the movie, it came down to The Lady against Herod. The Lady kills the evil Herod and rides out of town into the sunset.

In 1996, he starred in another John Grisham adaptation, *The Chamber*, as a convicted murderer and racist facing execution. The film struck out with critics and movie-goers alike, but Hackman had better luck that year as a conservative senator in the comedy *The Birdcage*, with Robin Williams.



The Replacements



Under Suspicion



Runaway Jury

The 2000s began with Hackman appearing as Coach Jimmy McGinty in football comedy *The Replacements*, opposite Keanu Reeves and Jack Warden. That same year also found him starring along Morgan Freeman in the crime thriller *Under Suspicion*. In 2001, Hackman headlined the ensemble cast of Wes Anderson's offbeat family comedy *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Anjelica Huston co-starred as his estranged wife and Ben Stiller, Gwyneth Paltrow and Luke Wilson played his adult children. That year, Hackman also starred in *Heartbreakers* as a wealthy widower targeted by a gold-digging mother and daughter, played by Sigourney Weaver and Jennifer Love Hewitt. In 2003, Hackman got a chance to work with old friend Dustin Hoffman in *Runaway Jury*, which also starred John Cusack. He played a jury consultant working for a gun manufacturer in a suit that Hoffman's client has brought against the company.

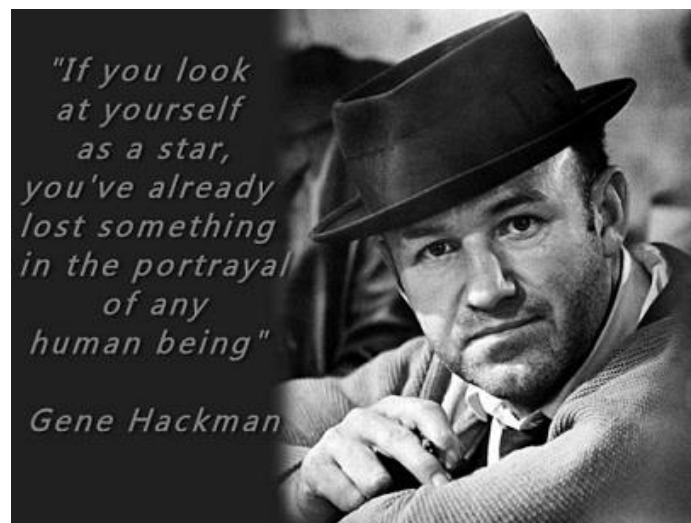
Hackman's last film project was the light-hearted comedy *Welcome to Mooseport* (2004), in which he starred as a former president who campaigns against a local (Ray Romano) to become mayor of a small town. While promoting the film, Hackman appeared on *The Larry King Show* and said that he did not have another film project lined up, adding that his film career was "probably all over."

Off Camera - Novelist

While his acting gigs were winding down, Hackman began a thriving second career as a novelist. He co-wrote four books with Daniel Lenihan: *Wake of the Perdido Star* (1999), *Justice for None* (2004), *Vermillion* (2004) and *Escape from Andersonville* (2008). He went on to deliver two solo efforts, *Payback at Morning Peak* (2011) and *Pursuit* (2013).

Quotes

Gene Hackman was not big quote guy but the following one reveals his true character and his views on acting:



Interest Facts

Fact 1

Gene Hackman was originally the first choice to play character Mike Brady on the popular television series "The Brady Bunch."

Fact 2

Gene Hackman was originally considered to play the part of Hannibal Lector in "The Silence of the Lambs." The part instead went to Anthony Hopkins.

Fact 3

During his years of acting, he has appeared in three films that were based on books written by author John Grisham. These films are “The Firm”, “The Chamber” and “Runaway Jury.”

Fact 4

There are three Steven Spielberg films that Gene Hackman turned the lead role down. These are “Jaws,” “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

Fact 5

Gene Hackman has played a fictional President of the United States in three films.

Fact 6

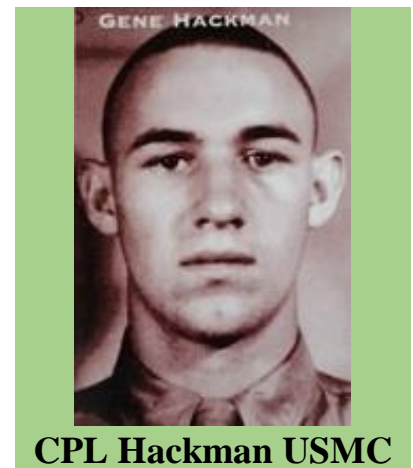
One of the most sustaining actors of all time, he averaged two films a year in his 70s, having starred in six in 2001 alone.

Fact 7

In a career spanning five decades, Hackman has been nominated for five Academy Awards, winning two for best actor in The French Connection and best supporting actor in Unforgiven. In addition, Hackman has won three Golden Globes and two BAFTAs. (Just in case you don’t know what BAFTA stands for like me, I looked it up - British Academy of Film and Television Arts)

Fact 8

He served four and a half years in the United States Marine Corps (1947-1951) as a field radio operator. He was stationed in China (Qingdao and later in Shanghai). When the Communist Revolution conquered the mainland in 1949, Hackman was assigned to Hawaii and Japan.



Fact 9

Gene Hackman, Dustin Hoffman, and Robert Duvall were all struggling California born actors and close friends, sharing apartments in various places while living in New York City in the 1960s. The three former roommates have since earned 19 Academy Award nominations for acting, with five wins.

Fact 10

Thankfully, Gene Hackman has not died, contrary to rumors on social media. The actor is alive and well! The hoax was sparked by a Grantland article entitled, “The Greatest Living Actor at 88: Gene Hackman is Gone but Still in Charge.” The word “gone” was later replaced with the word “retired.” But that didn’t stop some avid tweeters from running wild with it.

This is the first time Hackman has appeared in the news since he hit a homeless man in Santa Fe in October 2012. According to the Oscar winner, he hit the man after the vagrant got angry when Hackman refused to give him any money. It was later determined that Hackman had acted in self-defense.

Conclusion

Here is my take on Gene Hackman. He was a great actor but never wanted to be a “star” or be in the limelight. Acting was his job and he did it well. Gene Hackman was just a regular good guy who lived most of his life as quietly as possible.

P.S. I don’t give the homeless money either!!

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