

Film, TV Legend James Garner Dies At 86

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News

Posted by : Randy

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Few actors could register disbelief, exasperation or annoyance with more comic subtlety.



James Garner had a way of widening his eyes while the corner of his mouth sagged ever so slightly. Maybe he would swallow once to further make his point.

This portrait of fleeting disquiet could be understood, and identified with, by every member of the audience. Never mind Garner was tall, brawny and, well, movie-star handsome. The persona he perfected was never less than manly, good with his dukes and charming to the ladies, but his heroics were kept human-scale thanks to his gift for the comic turn. He remained one of the people.

He burst on the scene with this disarming style in the 1950s TV Western "Maverick," which led to a stellar career in TV and films such as "The Rockford Files" and his Oscar-nominated "Murphy's Romance."

The 86-year-old Garner, who was found dead of natural causes at his Los Angeles home on Saturday, was adept at drama and action. But he was best known for his low-key, wisecracking style, especially on his hit TV series, "Maverick" and "The Rockford Files."

His quick-witted avoidance of conflict offered a refreshing new take on the American hero, contrasting with the blunt toughness of John Wayne and the laconic trigger-happiness of Clint Eastwood.

Garner displayed real-life bravery. He served in the Korean War and received two Purple Hearts for combat wounds, as he recounted in his memoir.

There's no better display of Garner's everyman majesty than the NBC series "The Rockford Files" (1974-80). He played an L.A. private eye and wrongly jailed ex-con who seemed to rarely get paid, or even get thanks, for the cases he took, while helplessly getting drawn into trouble to help someone who was neither a client nor maybe even a friend. He lived in a trailer with an answering machine that, in the show's opening titles, always took a message that had nothing to do with a paying job, but more often was a complaining call from a cranky creditor.

Through it all, Jim Rockford, however down on his luck, persevered hopefully. He wore the veneer of a cynic, but led with his heart. Putting all that on screen was Garner's magic.

Well into his 70s, the handsome Oklahoman remained active in both TV and film. In 2002, he was Sandra Bullock's father in the film "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood." The following year, he joined the cast of "8 Simple Rules ... For Dating My Teenage Daughter," playing the grandfather on the sitcom - and helping ground it with his reassuring presence - after star John Ritter, who played the father, died during the show's second season.

He even scored in commercials. During the late 1970s, he was paired with actress Mariette Hartley in a popular series of ads for Polaroid cameras. Their on-screen banter felt so authentic that many

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viewers mistakenly believed they were husband and wife.

When Garner received the Screen Actors Guild's lifetime achievement award in 2005, he quipped, "I'm not at all sure how I got here." But in his 2011 memoir, "The Garner Files," he provided some amusing and enlightening clues, including his penchant for bluntly expressed opinions and a practice for decking people who said something nasty to his face - including an obnoxious fan and an abusive stepmother.

And when he suspected his studio of cheating him on residual payments - a not-unheard-of condition in Hollywood - Garner spoke out loudly and fought back with lawsuits.

They all deserved it, Garner declared in his book.

It was in 1957 when the ABC network, desperate to compete on ratings-rich Sunday night, scheduled "Maverick" against CBS's powerhouse "The Ed Sullivan Show" and NBC's "The Steve Allen Show." To everyone's surprise - except Garner's- "Maverick" soon outpolled them both.

At a time when the networks were awash with hard-eyed, traditional Western heroes, Bret Maverick provided a breath of fresh air. With his sardonic tone and his eagerness to talk his way out of a squabble rather than pull out his six-shooter, the con-artist Westerner seemed to scoff at the genre's values.

After a couple of years, Garner felt the series was losing its creative edge, and he found a legal loophole to escape his contract in 1960.

His first film after "Maverick" established him as a movie actor. It was "The Children's Hour," William Wyler's remake of Lillian Hellman's lesbian drama that co-starred Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine.

He followed in a successful comedy with Kim Novak, "Boys Night Out," and then established his box-office appeal with the 1963 blockbuster war drama "The Great Escape" and two smash comedies with Doris Day - "The Thrill of It All" and "Move Over Darling."

Throughout his film career, Garner demonstrated his versatility in comedies ("The Art of Love," "A Man Could Get Killed," "Skin Game"), suspense ("36 Hours," "They Only Kill Their Masters," "Marlowe"), and Westerns ("Duel at Diablo," "Hour of the Gun," "Support Your Local Gunfighter").

In the 1966 racing film "Grand Prix" he starred as an American driver in the Formula One series. Garner, who loved auto racing, formed and owned the American International Racers auto racing team from 1967 through 1969, and drove the pace car at the Indianapolis 500 in 1975, 1977 and 1985.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when most stars his age were considered over the hill, Garner's career remained strong. He played a supporting role as a marshal in the 1994 "Maverick," a big-screen return to the TV series with Mel Gibson in Garner's old title role. His only Oscar nomination came for the 1985 "Murphy's Romance," a comedy about a small-town love relationship in which he co-starred with Sally Field.

He starred in a musical, "Victor/Victoria" (1982), and a romantic drama, "The Notebook" (2004).

His favorite film, though, was the cynical 1964 war drama "The Americanization of Emily," which co-starred Julie Andrews.

Unlike most film stars, Garner made repeated returns to television. The show he often cited as his favorite, "Nichols" (1971-72), and "Bret Maverick" (1981-82) were short-lived, but "The Rockford

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Files" proved a solid hit, bringing him an Emmy.

Among his notable TV movies: "Barbarians at the Gate" (as tycoon F. Ross Johnson), "Breathing Lessons," "The Promise," "My Name Is Bill W.," "The Streets of Laredo" and "One Special Night."

He said he learned about acting while playing a non-speaking role as a Navy juror in the 1954 Broadway hit play "The Caine Mutiny Court Martial," starring Henry Fonda and Lloyd Nolan.

"I had no lines, and I had trouble staying awake," Garner recalled.

After "Caine Mutiny," Garner found work in Hollywood as a bit player in the "Cheyenne" TV series. Warner Bros. gave him a screen test and signed him to a seven-year contract starting at \$200 a week.

The studio cast him in supporting roles in three minor films, followed by the important break as Marlon Brando's sidekick in "Sayonara." When Charlton Heston declined a war movie, "Darby's Rangers," because of a money dispute, Garner assumed the role.

"Maverick," which co-starred Jack Kelly as brother Bart Maverick, made its debut on Sept. 22, 1957, launching him as a star.

Garner was born James Scott Bumgarner (some references say Baumgarner) in Norman, Oklahoma. His mother died when he was 5, and friends and relatives cared for him and his two brothers for a time while his father was in California.

In 1956, Garner married TV actress Lois Clarke, who survives him. She had a daughter Kimberly from a previous marriage, and the Garners had another daughter, Gretta Scott.

In the late 1990s, the Garners built a 12,000-square-foot house on a 400-acre ranch north of Santa Barbara, California.

"My wife and I felt ... we'd just watch the sunset from the front porch," Garner said in 2000. "But then the phone started ringing with all these wonderful offers, and we decided, 'Heck, let's stay in the business for a while.'"