

## Sydney Pollack retrospective

*first published in 2008*

Last week, when asked to name Hollywood's two most under-rated actors, I suggested Jennifer Aniston and Sydney Pollack.

While Aniston seems to have trouble finding a script that will allow her to shine to the extent that she did in 2002's hugely touching *The Good Girl*, she has, one might imagine, a few more decades in which to keep trying.

Little did I suspect, however, that Pollack's final performance was not just in the can but already being projected (Paul Weiland's *Made of Honor*).

Pollack's evergreen vigor defied both his age and the increasing smallness of the cameos he took. To the very end he continued to loom large as an artistic colossus, an American renaissance man who, whether as actor, director or producer, displayed a prodigious talent that outstripped most of those who devoted their lives to just one of these professions.

Few Hollywood producers displayed such refined tastes. Pollack had a hand in such minor intellectual masterpieces as 2002's Graham Greene adaptation *The Quiet American*, Ang Lee's *Sense & Sensibility* and Richard Eyre's *Iris*.

As a director he was more of a populist, although it could be said he began to lose his ability to pick a winner in the last decade of his life. But it's a rare director catholic enough to take on *Tootsie* and *Out Of Africa* back to back. Additionally, along with Oliver Stone (and, arguably, Paul Thomas Anderson) he can be applauded as one of the few directors capable of wringing a decent performance out of Tom Cruise, as demonstrated by 1993's flawed but fun *The Firm*. His greatest triumph, however, was *Three Days Of The Condor*, perhaps the best of that brilliant bunch of 1970s paranoia films that included *Marathon Man*, *The Parallax View* and *The Conversation*.

But it is as an actor that he gave me the most joy. He was an absolute natural who benefited greatly from both his rumpled, complex yet friendly face and his almost unique ability to give a performance of beguiling looseness. So spontaneous was his style that one could never quite believe Pollack was acting. The only actor who comes close to him for sheer on-screen relaxation is Philip Seymour Hoffman – interestingly another performer with far-from-classical features. Pollack wasn't a conscious scene-stealer, but the trouble was just he made everyone around him look like they were trying too hard. It's to his credit as an individual that he could consistently do this yet remain so greatly loved by his colleagues.

It was always a treat when he would pop up unexpectedly here and there with a sporty little cameo. On seeing him one experienced the warm rush that comes from spotting an old and much-missed friend at a party.

For me, his best performance was in Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives* (1992), in which he played a New York lawyer who leaves his wife for a young personal

trainer. In what is unquestionably one of the greatest scenes in the Woody Allen canon, the nubile instructor proves less edifying company outside the bedroom ('It's *Lear*; King *Lear*. Shakespeare didn't write about a King Leo...'), and Pollack's character has to literally drag her from a party at which she's making a misjudged attempt to impress his friends by, as he puts it, 'jerking off about tofu and crystals'.

Huge both in energy and enthusiasm, Sydney Pollack was exactly the kind of man Hollywood needs more of. Today, however, it has one less.

Kieron Barry