

Won Oscar as bigoted sheriff in 'Heat of the Night'

Steiger, Rod

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OF ALL the Method actors who evolved from the Actors Studio and its tentacles, Rod Steiger, who died on July 9th aged 77, was arguably the most intense. "It encompasses anything that gets you involved personally in a part so that you can communicate in human terms with the audience." He spent his adult life in search of that involvement through an art form which he saw as a means not simply of creative expression, but of personal salvation.

During a formidable career that encompassed the New York stage, some 250 live television dramas within five years and well over 100 feature and television films, Rod Steiger notched up numerous awards – an Oscar, two BAFTAs as best foreign actor, recognition and prizes at international festivals, and, in 1997, a star placed in the Walk of Fame.

Three years previously, he had been nominated as "worst supporting actor" for his role in *The Specialist* – a far cry from his Oscar nomination for *On the Waterfront* (1954). Contrary to popular belief, Rod Steiger's stunning performance as Marlon Brando's older brother was not his film debut. That had been a small part in *Teresa* (1951).

Born on April 14th, 1925, in Westhampton, New York, his parents had a song-and-dance act, but his father left his wife and son to the mercy of the Depression, and Rodney Steiger had the ignominious task – aged about eight – of extracting his drunken mother from her haunts and joining bread queues.

His schooling was often interrupted, and he emerged a physically mature 16-year-old. When the US entered the war he lied about his age and served four years as a torpedo man, seeing active service in the Pacific. After a medical discharge, he returned to Newark, New Jersey, doing menial jobs, and looking after his mother.

Like many of his contemporaries (Tony Curtis among them), Rod Steiger was saved a life of tedium by the GI Bill of Rights, which entitled him to several years of adult education, plus enough money to live on. He chose drama, and, for the first two years in New York, was coached (with Walter Matthau) by Erwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research. He also studied singing and, in the

late 1940s, moved to the Actors Studio, joining some of the greatest emerging talents of the period.

He worked in the theatre, and in television dramas – averaging one a week. In 1951, he made his big screen debut, and, the following year, married the first of four wives, actor Sally Gracie. In 1953, he became a New York television star with his performance in *Marty* – the hour-long play by Paddy Chayevsky. Then Elia Kazan, remembering him from the Actors Studio, cast him opposite a fellow Method actor in *On the Waterfront*. The taxi scene between Rod Steiger and Brando became part of cinema history.

He revelled in strong, "real" characters, playing Napoleon Bonaparte, Al Capone, Pontius Pilate, W.C. Fields and Mussolini (twice). His performance as the vicious Stanley Hoff, in *The Big Knife* (1955), with his white, close-cropped hair and cumbersome hearing aid, remains one of the most memorably over-the-top performances in post-war cinema. It found an echo in his corrupt boxing promoter in Humphrey Bogart's final film, *The Harder They Fall* (1956).

After a couple of pot-boilers, Rod Steiger took the part of O'Meara, an Irish-American soldier who fires the last shot in the American Civil War and later joins the Sioux. His melancholy performance put him at odds with maverick director Samuel Fuller, and although *Run of the Arrow* (1957) has attained cult status, Rod Steiger hated it.

He was happier with the adaptation of a Graham Greene short story, *Across the Bridge* (1957), playing a German millionaire on the run in Mexico. This was a performance of compassion and strength. In another neglected film, *The Mark* (1961), he played a psychiatrist involved with a sexual psychopath.

Even these sturdy films failed to ignite Rod Steiger's career, and he made numerous TV programmes, including *Cry Terror*, *Seven Thieves*, *13 West Street* and *Convicts Four*. He worked in Italy, but only one film, *Hands Across the City* (1963), by realist director Francesco Rosi, was of note.

But as the decade went on, he hit a roll, beginning with the film he considered his best work, *The Pawnbroker* (1964). Rod Steiger's



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harrowingly intense portrayal of a guilt-ridden Holocaust survivor gained him the BAFTA as best foreign actor and an Oscar nomination. He was disappointed not to get the statuette, but moved on to an outrageous role as Mr Toy-boy, in a version of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* (1965), Komarovsky in *Dr Zhivago* (1965), and then as Willy Loman, in a TV version of *Death of a Salesman* (1966).

In 1967, he took, moulded and made his own the role of the bigoted sheriff in Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night*. He and Sidney Poitier, as the black cop he learns to respect, were evenly matched, but it was Rod Steiger who scooped the Oscar. He followed it with *The Sergeant*, playing a soldier infatuated with an enlisted man, then the multi-character comedy thriller *No Way to Treat a Lady* (both 1968).

During a 1959 Broadway adaptation of Kurrosawa's film *Rashomon*, Rod Steiger co-starred with – and married – Claire Bloom. Towards the end of their 10-year marriage, they co-starred in two flops, *The Illustrated Man* and *Three Into Two Won't Go* (both 1969).

As American cinema continued its steady decline, so did Rod Steiger's career, although he worked steadily, playing Napoleon in *Waterloo*, an Irish munitions expert in *A Fistful*

of Dynamite (both 1971) and Mussolini in *The Last Days* (1974). Even worse were a Chabrol film, *Innocents With Dirty Hands*, the misguided *Hennessy* (both 1975) and the ludicrous *Amityville Horror* (1979). By then, he had made 60 features, and was to notch up many more over the next 20 plus years.

He had been briefly married for the third time, to Sherry Nelson, between 1973 and 1979, and suffered clinical depression for eight years, never fully recovering. However, a fourth marriage, to Paula Ellis from 1986 until 1997, produced a son, Michael, and a return to some kind of normality.

By the mid-1990s, aged 70, Rod Steiger had settled for being a jobbing actor. There had been a few halfway-decent roles along the way in *Lucky Star* (1980), *The Chosen* (1981), as a guest in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), as the bookstore owner in the television mini-series *Tales of the City* (1993), and as General Decker in *Mars Attacks* (1996), alongside much dross.

Last year, he married Joan Benedict. She survives him, as do his daughter by Claire Bloom and son.

Rodney Stephen Steiger: born 1925; died, July 2002