

Film Feature: HollywoodChicago.com Remembers Jonathan Demme

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 2, 2017 - 8:50am

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CHICAGO – The impact that director Jonathan Demme had on the last couple generations of cinema will live beyond his passing last week, at the age of 73. The Oscar-winning filmmaker also made an impact with the film writers of HollywoodChicago.com – Jon Espino, Patrick McDonald and Spike Walters.



Director Jonathan Demme on the Set of 'The Silence of the Lambs'

Photo credit: 20 Century Fox Home Entertainment

The director was described as “the last of the great humanists” in the [HollywoodChicago.com obituary](#) [21], and followed through on that description with an incredible run of films in the 1980s and ‘90s, which included “Melvin and Howard” (1980), “Something Wild” (1986), “Swimming to Cambodia” (1987), “Married to the Mob” (1988), “The Silence of the Lambs” (1991) and “Philadelphia” (1993). He also created one of the greatest rock documentaries ever, “Stop Making Sense” (1984, featuring the Talking Heads) and worked extensively with Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young on other rock docs. He even directed an episode of the TV classic “Columbo” in 1978, among his other TV achievements.

Jon Espino, Patrick McDonald and Spike Walters have their own favorite Jonathan Demme films, and offer mini-essays on their favorite Demme films and the legacy of the late director, in remembrance and perspective.

**THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS (1991) by Jon Lennon Espino**

Anthony Hopkins Under the Mask in 'The Silence of the Lambs'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

It takes a very special skillset to be a great director. There will always be those people in the industry that have seen directors at work and then proceed to try their hand at it, thinking they know exactly what to do. Sure, they can create competent films, but the qualities of being a legendary filmmaker aren't ones that can be taught or learned, as made apparent by Jonathan Demme and his masterwork "The Silence of the Lambs." Demme not only shows an amazing mastery of creating crippling suspense, but also a calculated approach when it comes to developing a slow, creeping sense of overwhelming terror with nothing but chilling dialogue and character interactions.

The sign of a great director only begins with a visual eye and attention to detail. Demme skillfully used his surroundings and expert framing to create shots that powerfully create a sense of foreboding and impending doom. Demme's greatest asset and the skill he will be remembered for the most is his ability to bring out amazing performances from his actors. He has worked with some of the biggest talent in the world, each who have proven themselves as great actors, but when they are paired with Demme, everything is taken to a new level. "The Silence of the Lambs" succeeds in no small part to Demme's complete and utter understanding of his actors. He shows us a side of them we've usually never seen before because he sees a part of them that I doubt even the actors knew was there. Demme uses these character interactions so insidiously that before you realize it, you're already completely immersed in the film, trapped like a prisoner in a mind game. This level of talent can't be taught, which makes Jonathan Demme's loss all the harder. There will never be another Demme, and the silence his absence creates will continue to leave a void, like a great director should.

BEST DEMME-ISM: In "Silence," the interactions between Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins are the most powerful forces in the film. They are subtle and controlled, but their intensity is white hot and enough to overwhelm your senses in a way you would never expect.

**SOMETHING WILD (1986) by Patrick McDonald**



Melanie Griffith and Jeff Daniels in 'Something Wild'

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

“Something Wild” has a personal tone for me, most likely because of my circumstances in 1986. Having just started working in an office, I related to the Jeff Daniel’s character Charlie, the starchy bank office employee who is apprehended by the charms of the free spirit Lulu, portrayed by Melanie Griffith. The film shows them, and eventually Lulu’s ex-husband Ray (Ray Liotta, in his full “Liotta” mode), as both heroes and villains in different scenarios. What struck me at the time was while we desperately want different personas to influence our lives, getting out of those comfort zones have consequences. The freedom that Lulu gives Charlie on their road trip devolves into the confrontation with Ray, and the discovery of a schizophrenic personality for the so-called independent spirit. There is authenticity and expression in the flamboyant story, with a decision at the end that will define the characters for the rest of their lives. This was Jonathan Demme at his most free.

BEST DEMME-ISM: Definitely the performance of Melanie Griffith. Her precarious career was still yielding dividends, and under Demme’s guidance she was able to create a vulnerability and undercurrent to Lulu that resonates throughout the entire film.



STOP MAKING SENSE (1984) by Spike Walters

In addition to being an Oscar winning director, Jonathan Demme innately understood what makes musicians tick. He also managed to capture the essence of what made a particular musician or band popular and translate that to the screen. Next to maybe Martin Scorsese, that made him one of the best directors of music documentaries. He worked with everyone from Neil Young to Justin Timberlake, but he was skilled enough to make a masterpiece on his first try with “Stop Making Sense.” The Talking Heads and frontman David Byrne found themselves a loyal following and decades of radio airplay by taking rock music conventions and subtly undercutting them. Demme captured how the band took music that sounded at first faintly familiar and then turned conventions on their “heads.”

BEST DEMME-ISM: The best example is the famous floppy suit, where David Byrne is flailing around in a man’s suit five sizes too large for him. He has the talent – and the wild-eyed artistry of a rock star – but in this sequence Demme and Byrne playfully throw conventional images amiss, and create a quirky sequence all their own.

Jonathan Demme, 1944-2017



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