

In Memoriam: Philip Seymour Hoffman

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The first time I remember seeing Philip Seymour Hoffman on a movie screen, he was lugging a television set in a fit of Marxist rage. As Sean, Hope Davis's pretentious, hypocritical "activist" ex in **"Next Stop Wonderland"** (1998), Hoffman hunches his shoulders, rants without really looking at his target, and lives in a world of theoretical interaction that never quite matches the reality he thinks he's shaping. Hoffman is only in a handful of scenes, but he steals the movie; his energy is powered by unspoken personal resentments that make him almost vibrate. You can imagine a rich backstory to Sean, so precisely does Hoffman calibrate every gesture and intonation, and you sometimes don't know whether to laugh at him or pity him. "Who is this guy?," I thought, when I wasn't belly-laughing or covering my face in horror at his foolishness.



"Scent of a Woman" (Martin Brest, 1992)

I say "remember seeing" above, because a quick glance at [Philip Seymour Hoffman's IMDb page](#) reveals I'd seen him in roles in all kinds of films and television shows: "**Nobody's Fool**" (1994), "**Scent of a Woman**" (1992), "**Twister**" (1996), and even "**Law & Order**" (is there any New York-based actor who wasn't on that show?). Maybe it was that combination of certainty and schlubiness that made him register, though—Hoffman's best performances often negotiated the line between unearned confidence and terrified vulnerability, allowing us to not just see but *feel* the intertwined pain and bluster of a belief system coming undone.



"The Talented Mr. Ripley" (Anthony Minghella, 1999)

Think of his Freddie in Anthony Minghella's "**The Talented Mr. Ripley**" (1999), so steeped in class privilege that he thinks nothing of verbally poking and mocking Matt Damon's title character, certain of the interloper's fraudulence. He's right, of course, but Hoffman is so fearless about Freddie's condescension that the audience grows to hate him far more than anti-hero Tom Ripley; at the same time, Hoffman is so skillful in showing how Freddie negotiates his coded sexuality in the late 1950s that he allows us to see the character's real fear of being displaced in Dickie Greenleaf's affections, a fear that his whole world might be slipping away.



"Magnolia" (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)

Or watch him in **"Magnolia"** (1999), as Phil, the nurse trying to track down Tom Cruise's misanthropic Frank before the latter's father dies of cancer: Hoffman is alone on-screen, aside from the voice coming out of the phone, but he creates a whole world in just over a minute. Phil is desperate to maintain his professionalism, and time is of the essence, but Hoffman's shift in tone and body when the man on the other end speaks of his own family's cancer is a moment of grace breaking through: Phil can't help but break and ask the man how he's doing, can't help but offer empathy. It leads to a lovely soliloquy about the movies that feels less like a meta moment than an earned and necessary act of imagination.



"Along Came Polly" (John Hamburg, 2004)

Empathy and imagination in the face of tragedy sums up so much of Hoffman's oeuvre, as well as the very moving outpouring of shock, sadness, and remembrance from critics and fans on Twitter: "He was in that?" and "Oh, I loved him in that!" and "Where do you begin?" were common refrains. Perhaps one place to begin is to remember how often Hoffman brought his skill to mainstream pop movies: It's easy to remember him in his dazzling, Oscar-winning role as Truman Capote, or to think of him as P.T. Anderson's muse, or the most interesting indie actor of his generation (and he was certainly all of those things). But we shouldn't overlook how often he elevated simply good, mediocre, or even awful films with his presence. In **"Along Came Polly"** (2004), an otherwise forgettable rom-com, he is hilarious as Sandy, an actor oblivious to his own corrosive vanity, and able to do terrifying things with his body sweat during basketball scrimmages; his turn as a villain in **"Mission: Impossible III"** (2006) is simultaneously campy and intense, and provides a solid emotional center for the film's enjoyably absurd action ballets; and his CIA agent in **"Charlie Wilson's War"** (2007) is both the movie's cynical voice and its secretly optimistic heart: Watching Hoffman dance on that line is the movie's best commentary about spycraft's blend of performativity and genuine passion. Everyone else in the film wants to believe in the Hollywood ending they've crafted, but only Hoffman keeps glancing behind the "Mission Accomplished" banner.



"The Master" (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012)

Giving us a glimpse behind the mythology, while still maintaining a belief in it, also powered Hoffman's two best roles, as the rock critic Lester Bangs in Cameron Crowe's **"Almost Famous"** (2000), and the brilliant, manipulative Lancaster Dodd in **"The Master"** (2012). In the latter, Hoffman is hypnotically still—you can feel his rage and moral certainty, but his level of control contrasts beautifully with Joaquin Phoenix's more kinetic style. Even his breath control is striking (Hoffman, in another era, would have been as big a radio star as Orson Welles). The honeyed, sing-song rhythms of Dodd's voice are so perfectly formed that it's impossible to know where the line between his public persona and his real personality lies (or if he even knows anymore). We're seduced, and it's Dodd's calm, his charm, his seemingly firm sense of personal solidity that makes the second half of the film, when Dodd's wall breaks down, so startling and tragic.



"Almost Famous" (Cameron Crowe, 2000)

Lester Bangs also has a persona, as the "truth-telling" rock critic, but he's far too sincere to ever maintain it for long. Watching Hoffman play the legendary writer in "Almost Famous" feels like watching an actor's workshop unfold in the middle of a narrative film: We're watching Bangs as the thought is formalized, spat out, and rejected by his body (speech is such a physical act for him that shaking his head when talking is like crossing a line out on a page). But rather than being affected or obvious, Hoffman's choices feel like an act of trust, an invitation to watch the process without a veil. Two scenes define his character—one, in a diner in San Francisco, when Bangs meets William (Crowe's autobiographical stand-in) and discourses on the ideologies of rock criticism, and the other a late-night phone call between the two characters, after William has returned from being on tour with the band Stillwater. The former is grand public performance, full of broad gesture and declamatory style, as Bangs deconstructs "the industry of cool" he fears is sucking up the music he loves; it's a moment designed to impress and frighten young William. The latter is tender and intimate, a love scene between two friends, and is shot so intimately from behind that we don't even see Bangs's face until halfway through it. It's when he admits what we already know—that he is uncool, sad, as vulnerable and uncertain as his young acolyte. As if signing the scene with his own actorly persona, Hoffman's Bangs wryly notes, "We are uncool...Most of the great art in the world is about that very problem." In the movie's best line, Bangs then offers this glimmer of hope: "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you are uncool." Hoffman offered that blend of cool/uncool time and again, and in doing so, did the greatest thing an artist can: He reminded everyone struggling with uncertainty that they weren't alone, that a moment of loss could also be a moment of grace. And that everyone, at some point, struggles with the question, where do we begin? Then, we begin.