

Two Politicians, A Negotiator, & A Widower



Charles Durning as "Les" alongside Dustin Hoffman as "Michael/Dorothy" in Sydney Pollack's Tootsie

Four Charles Durning Greats By Jarrod Emerson

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What do a dishwasher, a ballroom dance instructor, a cab driver, a burlesque-show usher, and a decorated WWII Veteran all have in common? I know this sounds like a Quentin Tarantino tagline, but the correct answer would be the late, great Charles Durning. You might think, "Big deal!", but here's the catch: *none* of these were parts he played on celluloid or on stage. Instead, these occupations were but a few of the many real-life shoes Durning filled on his way to becoming one of America's greatest character actors.

I cannot help but wonder if dabbling in such vastly different occupations over multiple decades might be analogous to continuing education as a method actor. It's as if he had a million roles already nailed by the time Hollywood and Broadway finally started paying attention. Once they did, Durning accumulated a diverse resume. With his distinctive voice and portly build, Durning could play realism with intensity, a down-to-earth character with tenderness, or even depict a satirical caricature. One could spend endless hours trying to catalogue the man's good roles, but that's the sort of thing I do so you don't have to. That being said, here are four Durning films that I feel display his range of talent:



Dog Day Afternoon 1975, Directed by Sydney Lumet, ★★★★★ On a hot, late-summer afternoon, "Sonny" (Al Pacino) and his accomplices "Sal" (John Cazele), and

“Stevie” (Gary Springer), enter a bank just before closing time in Brooklyn, with the intent to leave with all its cash. Nothing goes as planned. First, Stevie panics and bolts. Sonny and Sal then discover that the vault has already been emptied by the daily cash pick up. In lieu of cash, Sonny grabs a bunch of traveller’s checks, and then attempts to cover his tracks by burning the bank’s register. Unfortunately, this act produces quite a bit of smoke, attracting the attention of someone across the street. It’s not long before the NYPD, led by “Sgt. Moretti” (Charles Durning), two Federal Agents (James Broderick & Lance Henriksen) and a swarm of camera crews are on the scene. Negotiations follow as Sonny and Sal hold the bank employees hostage. Not only will Sonny make the evening news, but he will also bare his soul to the witnessing crowds and authorities.

Sidney Lumet, with his knack for staunch realism, wisely took this fictionalized version of a true-life robbery (made famous by an article in Life Magazine entitled: *The Boys In The Bank*) in direction of real-time. Discounting Elton John’s *Amoreena* in the opening credits – which turns out to be playing on the radio in Sonny’s car – there is absolutely no musical score. Adding to the realism is cinematographer Victor J. Kemper’s use of documentary-like, hand-held shots, which provide a haunting effect. Most importantly, Frank Pierson’s Oscar-winning screenplay gives us a large collection of well-developed characters that, unlike the film’s famous poster, are anything but black and white. Of course, it may have helped to have one of the greatest casts Lumet ever assembled to bring these people to life.

While the Academy-Award nominated performances of Al Pacino and Chris Sarandon garnered most of *Dog Day Afternoon’s* praise, I found Durning’s contribution to be somewhat overlooked. The hard-edged, gritty performance Durning gives as Sergeant Moretti is anything but that of a run-of-the-mill cop. True, Moretti is not the star of the picture; we never come to learn anything personal about him, and the federal authorities ultimately take over the situation for the climax. However, Moretti has believability – and more dimension – than the customary hostage negotiator routinely seen in today’s siege flicks. After all, it is Moretti who spends the bulk of the picture face to face with Sonny on the front lines. Also, I think Durning makes this role memorable by lacing his performance with subtle character moments. Even though Moretti has no problems vocalizing his frustration with the Feds (who are constantly looking over his shoulder), it is his non-verbal expressions that really make us *feel* for him in this situation – knowing that he cannot simply take Sonny down with so many lives on the line.

With all of these touches, Durning makes it clear that while Moretti is damn good at his job, he’s not immune to the immense stress of the situation. He’s not a super heroic cop, but a hard-working man trying his best to keep the situation under control. He and Pacino play very well off one another, giving us a fun and gripping authority/outlaw arc.

Tootsie 1982, Directed by Sydney Pollack, ★★★★★ New York actor “Michael Dorsey” (Dustin Hoffman) has a passion for his craft that is matched only by his enormous ego. All but blacklisted, and desperate to raise funds for his roommate’s new play, Michael auditions for – and miraculously wins – the role of “Emily Kimberly” on the legendary soap opera *Southwest General*. How did he do this? By creating a female alter-ego “Dorothy Michaels” via loads of makeup and a mighty close shave! However, life in a dress doesn’t go as smoothly as Michael imagined. As Dorothy, he must deal

with the show's arrogant, sexist director "Ron" (Dabney Coleman) and the advances of older co-star "John Van Horn" (George Gaynes). And, when he's not in character as Dorothy, Michael finds himself having to explain his frequent absences to his emotionally needy friend "Sandy" (Teri Garr). On top of that, Michael begins to fall for his beautiful co-star "Julie" (Jessica Lange – in an Academy-Award winning performance), while Julie's lonely father "Les" (Durning) becomes attracted to Michael's "Dorothy" persona! That is one nutty life!

One thing regarding *Tootsie* stumps me to this day: Why haven't more people my age seen this film? Next comes the part where I explain how *Mrs. Doubtfire* owes more than a little thanks to *Tootsie*. However, this classic comedy from Sydney Pollack is significantly smarter, mixing old-time Hollywood farce with a contemporary commentary about relationships. Michael Dorsey, easily ranking as one of Dustin Hoffman's finest roles, is forced to learn some important lessons. Initially, Michael is incredibly arrogant. Not only does he refuse to compromise with anyone professionally, but he also doesn't understand women as well as he thinks he does. For example: When Julie tells "Dorothy" a slightly drunken fantasy about what pick-up lines she really wants to hear, Michael interprets it a bit too literally thinking he has gained the ultimate "insider information". And, while his "Dorothy" persona may be financially motivated, Michael fails to see how selfish his façade as "Dorothy" truly is as he manipulates (albeit unwittingly) two vulnerable people: Julie and Les.

Which brings us to Charles Durning. Though his performance was not among the film's many Academy Award nominations, it certainly could've been. Durning's rendering of the solitary, middle-aged farmer Les reveals a tender hearted individual who falls hard for "Dorothy". He initially comes across as simple-minded, but is actually a smart, proud man who wishes to break out of his widower loneliness. In a fireside conversation with "Dorothy", Les confides his feelings about men and women, beginning his romantic advances towards her. Les' attempt to reach for Dorothy's hand or persisting in offering her another drink immediately has one feeling sorry for Les, knowing that he's a good man being deceived. Particularly funny (and somewhat heartbreaking) is a later scene where Les actually pops the question Dorothy in a nightclub. Underneath all the makeup and deception, Michael is finally beginning to realize what a mess he has created.

SPOILER AERT: IF YOU HAVE NOT SEEN THIS FILM I ADVISE YOU TO SKIP THIS PARAGRAPH

After Michael decides to out himself on a live broadcast of *Southwest General*, both to relieve the stress of the situation and admit the truth to Julie (who proceeds to slug him in the gut), he also seeks to patch things up with her father. Weeks later, Michael locates Les in his favorite bar. As he approaches Les to return his wedding ring, Les initially fails to recognize him, but after a few seconds, the combination of shock and anger Durning formulates on his face is priceless. But this is only the beginning of a great scene. As Michael explains himself, we actually see Les start to thaw and forgive. In the end, Les even shows support for Michael's love for Julie. It's a nice example of male bonding, and it shows that Les is just as understanding towards Michael as he was towards Dorothy. This role stands as one of Durning's greatest achievements.

The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas 1982, Directed by Colin Higgins, ★★☆☆☆

Victorious athletes have celebrated here. Politicians have snuck through the corridors incognito. In its bedrooms, generations of boys have become men. Yep, The Chicken Ranch has meticulously maintained a reputation as Texas' greatest whorehouse. And, since 1910, the small town of Gilbert has considered it a valuable asset. However, it is now the 1970's and eccentric (to say the least!), consumer advocate/watchdog, "Melvin P. Thorpe" (Dom DeLuise), has declared The Chicken Ranch "The Devil's Playground". Now, the ranch's current manager "Mona Stangley" (Dolly Parton) and her lover, "Sheriff Ed Earl Dodd" (Burt Reynolds) find themselves fighting to keep The Chicken Ranch open. Before long, Ed Earl is headed to Austin to take his case to the "Governor" (Durning) himself.

Ah, the everlasting moral watchdogs! Whether it's the frightening officials they strive to put/keep in office, or the supposed "wardrobe malfunctions" they maniacally fuss over, I give these people credit for *one* thing: They give artists a ton of great material! That's exactly what writers Larry L. King, Peter Masterson, and songwriter Carol Hall took and ran with to create this charming little musical. Based on a true story, the original musical production ran for well over 1,500 performances. Luckily, the film version is fun as well. Having previously dabbled in both suspense (*Foul Play*) and comedy (*Nine to Five*), the late director Colin Higgins does an overall good job with *Whorehouse*.

Though a musical, the film does not rely merely on catchy melodies or raunchy dances (of which there are plenty). Fortunately, it gives the audience a little character development to enjoy as well. Burt Reynolds and Dolly Parton (who contributed some additional songs) share an amusing, believable clandestine romance, while the cuddly Jim Nabors works as Reynolds loyal sidekick "Deputy Fred". In a role that rivals his *Blazing Saddles* cameo, the late Dom DeLuise is hilarious as the humorously creepy Thorpe, who sports a girdle, shoulder pads – and a sock stuffed down his pantleg! Watching the comic feud escalate between him and Reynolds – especially in musical form – is great fun.

But what of our man Durning? Admittedly it's quite a way into the film when he finally emerges as the unnamed Governor, but I assure you it's well worth the wait. By this point the storm of controversy Thorpe has brewing around The Chicken Ranch has gained enough momentum for some input from the Governor. Knowing this may be his last chance to save the ranch, Ed Earl seeks an audience with the Governor and pleads his case face-to-face. Durning could not be more different here than from either the hard-edged negotiator from *Dog Day Afternoon* or the kindly widower from *Tootsie*. His character "The Governor" is both morally ambiguous and politically ambitious as he stubbornly refuses to give direct answers to questions from inquisitive journalists regarding The Chicken Ranch. I loved how the character of The Governor is introduced through the fun little song *The Sidestep*, in which he explains his whole shtick of being elusive, and the enjoyment he gets out of it. Durning's time as a dance instructor clearly paid off, as he holds nothing back in his number. It's great to see Durning have so much fun with one of his most humorous roles, and this time it landed him his first Academy-Award nomination.

O Brother Where Art Thou 2000, directed by Joel & Ethan Coen, ★★★★★☆ In 1937, “Ulysses Everett McGill” (George Clooney), “Pete Hogwallop” (John Turturro) and “Delmar O’Donnell” (Tim Blake Nelson) escape a Mississippi chain gang to retrieve 1.2 million in loot from the armored car job Everett was supposedly imprisoned for. While their mission is simple, the journey is anything but. Evading the authorities, led by the sinister “Sheriff Cooley” (Daniel von Barga), the trio crosses paths with a whole barrage of eccentric personalities including a mysterious “Blind Seer” (Lee Weaver), legendary bank robber “George ‘Babyface’ Nelson” (Michael Badalucco), three singing “Sirens”, and thuggish, one-eyed “Big Dan Teague” (John Goodman), among many others. Wait, did I mention the hit single they record on a whim? Or, the fierce gubernatorial race they find themselves entangled in? In the end, it turns out that what Everett *really* wants is to reconnect with his demanding ex-wife “Penny” (Holly Hunter) – before she remarries. Some Odyssey, eh?

Whether or not you’re familiar with the Greek epic *The Odyssey*, this bluegrass-laced, quirky retelling by the Coen Brothers is a good place to start. Like his literary counterpart “Odysseus”, Everett’s main motivation behind his journey home is to reunite with his estranged family. And, while most of the obstacles his comrades and he face are reincarnations of various *Odyssey* characters, there are a number of original characters thrown in as well. So, where does Durning fit in to *this* madness? Well, Durning plays the sitting Mississippi governor “Menelaus “Pappy” O’Daniel”, who is facing a tough re-election campaign against flashy challenger “Homer Stokes” (Wayne Duvall).

Durning as yet another governor, and one that ends up dancing? Nay, do not let the similarities fool you! O’Daniel is *nothing* like the Durning’s slick, dancing caricature from *Whorehouse*. No indeed, O’Daniel is a grouchy old curmudgeon; angry that his re-election campaign is slow to get off the ground. Because his campaign lacks the originality of his opponents, O’Daniel is frustrated – and woe to those who frustrate him! Both his son and his campaign managers are little more than “yes” men, spending their time nodding and repeating O’Daniel’s frustrated remarks. This often results in a tantrum of sheer infuriation from the gruff politician. “Great”, you reply, “What does this impatient old man have do with the adventures of Everett and company?” Well, like any good story, *O Brother Where Art Thou* skillfully weaves everything together with a purpose. This Governor just may have a surprise or two up his sleeve for our heroes. While Durning’s Pappy O’Daniel’s role may look like the other governor on paper, that’s where the similarities end.

MY BOTTOM LINE:

Within these four films you will find Durning showcasing some of his best work, never once repeating himself! However, this is barely the tip of the iceberg! Check out IMDB to see this man’s lengthy filmography. There you’ll find dozens more films to witness how gifted a performer he was.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is: there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!