

This Day in History... March 30, 1986

Death of James Cagney

Academy Award-winner James Cagney died on March 30, 1986. He was once called “maybe the greatest actor who ever appeared in front of a camera.”

The son of an Irish bartender, James Francis Cagney was born on July 17, 1899. He grew up in New York City’s rough Lower East Side. Cagney held a variety of different jobs in his youth to help the family pay bills, but he also found time for extra-curricular outlets. He learned to tap dance and box. He once considered a professional boxing career, but his father had been an amateur fighter and his mother wouldn’t allow it.



James Cagney was the fifth honoree in the Legends of Hollywood Series.

Cagney first got into acting while working as a scenery assistant for a local theatre where his brother acted. Once, when his brother was too ill to go on stage, James stood in for him and delivered a perfect performance. After that, he started auditioning for plays and enjoyed the experience.

He toured the vaudeville circuit in the 1920s, and appeared on Broadway. Things were not easy at first, and Cagney’s initial attempt to break into the movies was a flop. It wasn’t until he performed in the play *Penny Arcade* that he got a chance at the silver screen.

After seeing Cagney perform, popular singer and actor Al Jolson purchased the rights to the play. He sold them to Warner Brothers on the condition that both Cagney and his co-star Joan Blondell be cast in the same roles for the film version. Cagney’s three-week contract with Warner Bros. soon became a seven-year contract. His successful movie career was under way.



Cagney won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

With his unique blend of conceit and charm, Cagney became Hollywood’s greatest “tough guy.” In 1931, he earned fame as a wisecracking criminal in *The Public Enemy*. The scene in which Cagney shoved a grapefruit into the face of his co-star Mae Clark was one of the film’s most memorable moments.

In *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), Cagney played an arrogant gangster who was on death row for murder. He portrayed sneering, defiant criminals in many other movies including *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), and *White Heat* (1949). Cagney once remarked, “The fact that I am supposed to be a tough guy in real life doesn’t bother me in the least. It’s amusing.”

His portrayal of entertainer George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* earned Cagney an Academy Award in 1942. The film allowed him to show off his spectacular dancing abilities. In 1974, James Cagney was awarded the American Film Institute’s Life Achievement Award, an event that was reportedly attended by the most Hollywood stars in history. After 20 years in retirement, Cagney returned to the screen for a small role in *Ragtime* in 1981. He made his final appearance three years later on the TV movie *Terrible Joe Moran*. That same year he received the US Medal of Freedom.

After years of declining health, Cagney died in his New York home on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1986. Close friend President Ronald Reagan delivered the eulogy at his funeral.

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