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June 22, 2013

Gandolfini: Rest in Peace

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What made James Gandolfini so fascinating as an actor was how nuanced he was. I have read many essays on the psychoanalytic, religious, social, moral, and other meanings of “The Sopranos,” and repeatedly I have heard Tony Soprano, Gandolfini’s great creation, described as a sociopath. He is not. He is just a crime boss. We see him kill people, or order them killed, but usually, by his code—which everyone in the organization understands—those jobs are a business matter. (For example, the person has “flipped,” become an F.B.I. informant.) The really terrible scenes are those in which Tony doesn’t kill anyone, and is not bound by the code, but yet—in a way that we can’t excuse by romantic notions about gangsters—seems to enjoy an atmosphere of violence. In one short, shocking scene, Tony, with his new enforcer, the well-named Furio, pulls up in front of a massage parlor that has failed to pay its protection money. Furio gets out of the S.U.V. with a baseball bat and goes into the place. We start to hear screams. Cut to the car, where we see Tony, with a cigar in his mouth, smiling. He likes those sounds. They are the sounds of his power.



Elsewhere, though, when he is with his daughter, Meadow, we can see his face constrict as his love for this child (I think he would have preferred to love his son, A.J., but A.J. is an utter loser) comes up against his annoyance with her sass. When he is with his monstrous mother—she put a contract out on him—his body pulls itself in, protects itself. He learns good lessons from his psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, but they can communicate only by lies, or circumlocutions. (He can’t tell her about his crimes. By law, she would have to go to the police.) When he is in her office, sometimes his legs cross with a pretended ease. Sometimes his feet are smack on the floor, as if he might get up and leave. Sometimes he does leave.

As David Remnick has written in an earlier post, Gandolfini was not an especially versatile actor. When, after “The

Sopranos,” he played a character something like Tony Soprano, a person in charge (“The Taking of Pelham 123,” “In the Loop,” “Zero Dark Thirty”), he was still wonderful. Likewise in the recent “Killing Them Softly,” where he portrayed an over-the-hill hit man. Brad Pitt, the enforcer here, was going to have to kill him, and we knew it, but what a swan song Gandolfini delivered: proud, incautious, drunk in the morning. Yet in a play, Yasmina Reza’s “God of Carnage,” that he landed in soon after “The Sopranos” ended, his character was a person altogether different, a respectable Brooklynite, and his performance was just okay. Someone else could have done the role just as well, or close. (It was a joy to see him again, though.) I think that he was like famous movie villains or famous glamour girls. In his chosen specialty, he could do everything—every subdivision, every sidelight. But he couldn’t stray far beyond his boundaries.

The role of Tony may help to account for the fact that Gandolfini died so young. He was what they call a “bleeder.” Brett Martin, in his forthcoming book “Difficult Men”—on the enormous changes that “The Sopranos” wrought in TV drama—says that after a day’s filming, Edie Falco, who played Tony’s wife, would go back to her trailer and play with her dog. As for Gandolfini,

Crew members grew accustomed to hearing grunts and curses coming from the trailer as he worked up the emotional pitch of a scene by, say, destroying a boom box radio.... The heavy bathrobe that became Tony’s signature, transforming him into a kind of domestic bear, was murder under the lights in midsummer, but Gandolfini insisted on wearing it between takes. Other times, though, simulated misery became indistinguishable from the real thing—on set and off. In papers related to a divorce filing at the end of 2002, Gandolfini’s wife described increasingly serious issues with drugs and alcohol, as well as arguments during which the actor would repeatedly punch himself in the face out of frustration.

Martin says that Gandolfini often took unannounced days off, which, with the location rented and the actors standing around doing nothing, was murderously expensive for the show.

In the eight and a half years (1999-2007) that “The Sopranos” lasted, Gandolfini aged dramatically. If you look at the photos of him accepting his first Emmy Award in 2000—he later received six more nominations and got two more awards—you see him grinning, fit, and with a pretty complete head of hair. (On the show, he could run like a gazelle.) By the end of the series, he has a lot less hair and a lot more weight. I once took a bus tour of the locations in New Jersey (Satriale’s, the Bing, etc.) where “The Sopranos” was filmed. The tour ended at Holsten’s Ice Cream Parlor, in Bloomfield, where the frightening last scene takes place. Our tour guide told us that in Holsten’s, the tables in the booths are screwed to the floor. For the “Sopranos” scene they had to unscrew a table and move it over so that Gandolfini could sit there comfortably.

I once said to a friend that Gandolfini would never get another role like that. My friend said, “He doesn’t need one. He got that one.” Still, I wish that he had had just one more.

Actors Michael Imperioli, James Gandolfini, and Tony Sirico. Photograph by Anthony Nese/Time Life Pictures/Getty.

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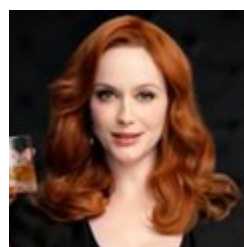
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