

# An actor of the anti-establishment, Donald Sutherland, dies aged 88

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Canadian actor Donald Sutherland, one of the most significant figures of his radicalized generation, died in Miami on June 20. Sutherland remains best known for roles in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *Kelly's Heroes* (1970), along with *Klute* (1971), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *1900* (1976), *Fellini's Casanova* (1976) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978). More recently, he played a significant part in *The Hunger Games* series. In all, he made some 200 film and television appearances.

Born in Saint John, New Brunswick, Sutherland attended university in Toronto before leaving for England in 1957, where he began studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. He dropped out after a year and moved to Scotland, where he worked with the Perth Repertory Theatre for 18 months. He once told the BBC that the biggest change he had noticed over his career was that actors were now making “a lot of money.”

“I don't think anybody of my generation became an actor to make money. It never occurred to me. I made £8 a week here [on stage in London]. When I starred in a play at the Royal Court, I made £17 a week, that was in 1964,” he said.

Sutherland began playing small roles on British television in the early 1960s, in addition to parts in a few horror films (*The Castle of the Living Dead*, 1964, and *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors*, 1965) and thrillers.

The actor's breakthrough came in Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen*. When another performer refused one of the director's requests, according to Sutherland later, Aldrich yelled at him, “You with the big ears—you do it! ... He didn't even know my name.” The film, about a penal military unit of 12 anti-social convicts who train as commandos for a suicide mission during World War II, struck a chord with audiences and became one of the most successful films at the box office in 1967.

In Robert Altman's *M\*A\*S\*H*, the anti-military theme is even more explicit. Sutherland and Elliot Gould featured in leading roles in the film about a mobile army surgical hospital, set during the Korean War, but obviously referring to the increasingly unpopular Vietnam conflict. From beginning to end, the film ridicules the military brass and patriotic-“gung ho” attitudes.

In *Kelly's Heroes* (Brian Hutton, 1970), with Clint Eastwood, Sutherland played one of his numerous “oddball” roles in the comedy heist film about a unit of American soldiers who plan to rob a French bank of its Nazi gold bars.

Sutherland was not an obvious leading man of the conventional Hollywood variety. “With his long face, droopy eyes, protruding ears and wolfish smile,” notes the *New York Times*, “the 6-foot-4 Mr. Sutherland was never anyone's idea of a movie heartthrob.”

Sutherland was notable for his awkwardness, his physical vulnerability, even his diffidence. Jean Walton, in *Hollywood Reborn*, overstates the issue but legitimately points out that in the 1970s

almost all of his background profiles and interviews include an account of his bodily awkwardness, stemming from a painful self-consciousness at being too tall as a youth, of having “Dumbo” ears, of each day meeting a face in the mirror that even his mother had to admit was not “good-looking” but was at least “full of character.”

However, to his considerable credit, Sutherland won the affection and appreciation of audiences through the obviously intense intelligence and sincerity of his performances. In a comment to the *Hollywood Reporter*, actress Helen Mirren termed Sutherland “one of the smartest actors I ever worked with ... He had a wonderful enquiring brain, and a great knowledge on a wide variety of subjects,” she said. “He combined this great intelligence with a deep sensitivity, and with a seriousness about his profession as an actor.”

Two things are striking about Sutherland's career in the 1970s and 1980s at least: first, that he sought out what he hoped would be intriguing and unusual material, often with an anti-authoritarian undercurrent; and, second, that there was such material to choose from at the time.

For example: in 1966, a British television adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (with Vanessa Redgrave); in 1968, Philip Saville's television version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, with Christopher Plummer and Orson Welles; in 1970, Bud Yorkin's foolish (occasionally amusing) *Start the Revolution Without Me*, a parody of various depictions of the French Revolution, with Gene Wilder, Billie Whitelaw and Welles again (as narrator); in 1970-71, Paul Mazursky's *Alex in Wonderland*, Alan Arkin's *Little Murders* and Dalton Trumbo's anti-war *Johnny Got His Gun*. (He would later participate in *Trumbo*, the 2007 documentary about the blacklisted screenwriter, as one of the narrators.)

In Alan J. Pakula's *Klute*, with his partner at the time, Jane Fonda, Sutherland gave one of his finest performances, as a small-town private detective drawn into the high-priced depravity of New York corporate perversity and violence.

Sutherland and Fonda were reunited, not so successfully in *Steelyard Blues* (Alan Myerson, 1973), about a group of people who don't fit in to American society. Sutherland is a former convict with a love of demolition derbies. *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg) is a murky psychological thriller, with Julie Christie. An overrated film, but Sutherland and Christie stand out.

At times, Sutherland made mistakes. He featured in a Canadian film, *Alien Thunder* (1974), presumably because of its critical attitude toward the RCMP, but later described the direction of Claude Fournier as “wretched.” *S\*P\*Y\*S* (Irvin Kershner, 1974) was an obvious effort, also with Elliot Gould, to capitalize on the success of *M\*A\*S\*H*, and badly misfired. *The Day of the Locust* is a semi-hysterical film adaptation of Nathaniel West's 1935 novel, directed by John Schlesinger, which tries

far too hard in its indictment of Hollywood in the 1930s.

For Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci, when he still had something to say, Sutherland played a ghastly, homicidal Italian fascist in the epic *1900*. And for fellow Italian Federico Fellini, Sutherland appeared in the title role in the outlandish *Fellini's Casanova*, as the notorious 18th-century adventurer and lover. He starred in John Sturges' war film *The Eagle Has Landed* in 1976.

Sutherland is horrifyingly memorable in the remade *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman), as one of the last of the human victims to be replaced by alien duplicates. He played a leading role in Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* (1980), about the psychological disintegration of an affluent Chicago suburban family.

Sutherland was obviously left-wing in his thinking in the 1970s. He told an interviewer from *Show* magazine in 1971 that

a revolution in this country . . . can only happen if the great number of people are educated to want it. Given the institutions that we have at the moment, our ecological or population problems will not be altered, because that does not serve the interests of the institutions. What we are going to have to do is break down the base of those institutions so that they, in fact, serve the people . . . it's a question of changing the indoctrination of the people. I don't mean that one should pursue that in a slow, liberal manner: I think it's got to come much faster, much more radically.

According to Walton in *Hollywood Reborn*, "When asked about his political views in this period, he characteristically criticized the Vietnam War, domestic and foreign policy in the United States, racism, poverty, and indeed, a host of problems attributable to a capitalist system in general." He was then married to actress and activist Shirley Douglas (1934-2020), the daughter of Tommy Douglas, the first leader of Canada's New Democratic Party. In 1969, the FBI attempted to frame up Shirley Douglas in a case involving her support for the Black Panthers.

Asked about taking a stand as a Canadian on US involvement in Vietnam, Sutherland responded quite legitimately:

It was not just America's war. . . . It was an international war. There were Canadian troops fighting there . . . the kind of napalm that you cannot put out, it burns and doesn't stop burning until it gets to the bone. That was developed in Canada. The Vietnamese have a tradition of family and children and the concept of wounding children was developed in Canada at the University of Montreal. I've had an obligation.

Sutherland, along with Jane Fonda, Peter Boyle and others, took part in the F.T.A., a tour aimed to encourage anti-war sentiment among US troops.

Walton describes their activities:

F.T.A., an acronym borrowed from G.I. newsletters, was understood among disaffected military grunts to signify "Fuck the Army," although it was jokingly euphemized as "Free the Army" (or as the Free Theater Association). Formed by Fonda, Sutherland, and other like-minded performers in 1971 as an alternative to Bob Hope's official patriotic entertainment for the troops, F.T.A. was an "anti-military, anti-war revue," a kind of "political vaudeville" show composed of two hours of "songs,

sketches, dances, readings and visual gags whose specific message is 'You, the enlisted man, can end this war by simply refusing to fight'" . . . It is not surprising that the troupe was trailed by FBI and CIA agents wherever they went, and that they were banned from appearing on military bases and met with visa problems upon landing in the airport in Japan . . .

A documentary film of the tour, *F.T.A.*, directed by Francine Parker, is now available on various streaming platforms, after apparently being difficult to see for years. One of its most interesting aspects is the extensive coverage—through numerous interviews—of opposition among US soldiers to the Vietnam war.

Vivian Gornick wrote that

Onstage, with a couple of days' growth of beard, his hair shortish but shaggy, Sutherland closed the show with his impassioned recital of a passage from Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got his Gun*, in which he somberly re-creates the image of the armless, legless, featureless protagonist on his hospital bed, longing to be a symbol for the horror of war so that others would refuse to let it happen in the future.

Documents declassified in 2017 revealed that Sutherland was on the National Security Agency watchlist between 1971 and 1973 at the request of the CIA because of his opposition to the Vietnam War. He was also a vocal critic of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Sutherland's roles became generally less challenging and subversive in the 1980s, 1990s and beyond, because the film world as a whole became less challenging and subversive. Still, he appeared in the sharp picture of Catholic high school repression in *Heaven Help Us* (1985); in one of the products of a new field, music videos, Kate Bush's *Cloudbusting* (also 1985), conceived by Terry Gilliam; in *A Dry White Season* (Euzhan Palcy, 1989), with Marlon Brando; in *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (Phillip Borsos, 1990), about the left-wing Canadian physician who served as a combat surgeon during the Chinese civil war; and in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991).

Unlike Fonda, who has done everything in her power to make the public forget her onetime radical days and views, Sutherland retained a general hostility to capitalism until his death.

In 2013, as part of the publicity for *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross), in which the actor plays a fascist dictator, he spoke to the *Guardian*. The article began:

Donald Sutherland wants to stir revolt. A real revolt. A youth-led uprising against injustice that will overturn the US as we know it and usher in a kinder, better way. "I hope that they will take action because it's getting drastic in this country." Drone strikes. Corporate tax dodging. Racism. The Keystone oil pipeline. Denying food stamps to "starving Americans." It's all going to pot. "It's not right. It's not right."

He told another interviewer, in regard to *The Hunger Games*:

And if there's any question as to what it's an allegory for, I will tell you. It is the powers that be in the United States of America. It's profiteers. War is for profit, it's not to save the world for

democracy, or king and country. Bullshit. It's for the profit of the top ten percent.”



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