

# Reel to Real

Movies and movie makers.



## Star of the Month – Dustin Hoffman

*Born August 8, 1937*



A central figure of the late 1960s through the 1980s, Dustin Hoffman never dreamt of becoming a movie star. But through his variety of difficult roles, Hoffman has made a name for himself and impressed audiences with each performance. We know him as “Tootsie,” “Rain Man,” and “The Graduate,” now let’s learn more about the man himself!



**Print a copy** of the "Star of the Month" sign/poster and other pictures of Dustin Hoffman.

### The Ultimate Underachiever

Lillian and Harry Hoffman’s second son, Dustin Lee Hoffman, was born in Los Angeles, California, on August 8, 1937. Harry, a first generation Russian Jew, worked at Columbia Pictures as a prop supervisor and set designer. He went on to become a furniture designer and opened up his own store, Harry Hoffman Furniture Company. Lillian was a jazz pianist. She encouraged her young son, Dustin, to play the piano at the age of five. A very poor student, Dustin frustrated his parents and teachers through his school years. He dreamt of becoming a jazz musician as a teenager and studied with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music. Dustin gave up on his musical aspirations, however, when he realized he had limited talent as a piano player.



In 1955, Dustin graduated from Los Angeles High School and enrolled at Santa Monica City College. Within the first year, he was in danger of flunking out and a friend suggested enrolling in an acting class as a way to boost his grades. While taking what he believed to be an “unflunkable” class, Dustin became absorbed in the art of acting. For the first time, he discovered something that could hold his attention, unlike playing the piano or doing schoolwork.

Dustin enrolled in acting classes at the prestigious Pasadena Playhouse theater school the following year. It was there that he met fellow struggling actor Gene Hackman. Gene flunked out of

the Pasadena Playhouse within months of attending the school. He moved to New York City with his new wife and Dustin followed. The three briefly shared a one-bedroom apartment where the kitchen floor served as Dustin's bed. Eventually, the newlyweds wanted their privacy and their kitchen floor back. Gene introduced his friend, Robert Duvall, to Dustin and suggested that they become roommates. The three future movie stars started what would become a life-long friendship.

Hoffman never expected to have a successful acting career. Movie stardom wasn't even a goal since he thought only leading men like Tab Hunter or Rock Hudson could fill that role. Hoffman struggled as a starving artist and worked odd jobs as an attendant in a mental hospital, phone book typist, and toy demonstrator at Macy's. For nearly a decade of auditions and rejections, an occasional Off-Broadway role would come along. Otherwise, Hoffman spent his spare time reading Beat ("beatnik") poetry or playing poker with Hackman and Duvall. They often spent time on Gene's rooftop playing bongos, something their idol, Marlon Brando, was known to do around the city.

### **The New Antihero**

Like Marlon Brando, Hoffman was interested in Method acting (where the actor relates to the character by drawing from something experienced in their own life). He studied with the famous Method acting teacher Lee Strasberg at the Actor's Studio and continued with stage work. After a small part on Broadway, Hoffman immersed himself into the theater culture, landing positions as an assistant director and manager of Broadway productions.

During the late 1960s, Hollywood was having a sort of renaissance. It became known as "New Hollywood" where the standard, handsome actor such as Tab Hunter was replaced with a relatable, non-traditional leading man that fit with the counterculture's anti-establishment beliefs. Those who would have previously been supporting character actors were now considered leading men in the changing times. An underachiever at heart, Dustin Hoffman was the perfect poster child for the late 1960s. The new generation sought out character-based films that they could relate to. They were exploring the "American Dream" and the complications of this ideology. All of this could be found in Hoffman's career-making film, *The Graduate* (1967).

#### **Points to Ponder**

- What do you think of Hoffman's failures in school? Do you consider an acting class to be "unflunkable"?
- Hoffman found acting to be the one thing he could focus on. Was there one thing you had a passion for and could put all your attention into?
- What do you think about Dustin Hoffman as a leading man? What actor do you think of first when you hear the term "leading man"?
- What do you think of the "antihero" uprising of the late 1960s? Can you think of other actors who might fit this role during the time? (Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson, etc.)

## ***The Graduate***

*The Graduate* was based on a novel, which originally described the protagonist, Benjamin Braddock, as a tall, blonde, athletic New Englander - everything opposite of Dustin Hoffman. Many actors were considered for the role, including Robert Redford. Director Mike Nichols was looking for a genuine underdog when casting the role of Benjamin. Nichols rejected Redford and when explaining that he didn't have the qualities for the role asked, "Have you ever struck out with a girl?" Redford responded, "What do you mean?" Nichols was then confident with his decision, "That's precisely my point."



The role went to Hoffman who, with a lifetime of awkwardness, provided exactly what Nichols and soon-to-be fans of *The Graduate* were looking for. Although Hoffman was 30 years old when he played Ben, the young counterculture of the time identified with the melancholy character: a lost, directionless young man puzzled about life and his parents' generation. The role led to Hoffman's first Oscar nomination, and he portrayed the character so convincingly that Benjamin Braddock became a symbol of the generation.

Hoffman refused to sign a multi-picture deal with the studio when he made *The Graduate*. Because of this, he was paid very little but had more control over his career. However, even after his success, he was sent back to the unemployment line. Even though potential movie deals rushed in, they were all variations of Benjamin from *The Graduate* and Hoffman turned them down. He made his return to Broadway until his next great role as the sickly conman Enrico "Ratso" Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969).

## **The Antihero Graduates**

Hoffman followed the Oscar-nominated role as "Ratso" with hits from the 1970s including the satirical western *Little Big Man* (playing Jack Crabb, a man who lives to be 121 years old), the biopic *Lenny* (as comedian Lenny Bruce), Watergate docudrama *All the President's Men* (as Washington Post reporter Carl Bernstein), and drama *Kramer vs. Kramer*. His role as Ted Kramer, a man whose wife divorces him and leaves him to take care of their young son, won Hoffman his first Oscar. This role was difficult for Hoffman as he was also struggling with the disintegration of his own 11-year marriage.



In the '80s, Dustin pleased audiences with memorable roles in the light-hearted comedy *Tootsie* (1982) and the drama *Rain Man* (1988). *Tootsie* explored the changing gender roles in the 1980s. Hoffman had a hand in developing the story of an unemployed actor (something he knew a lot about!) who gets a role on a soap opera by masquerading as a woman. In preparation for *Rain Man*, Hoffman spent over a year preparing for his role of autistic savant Raymond Babbitt. He and co-star Tom Cruise became friends with their real-life counterparts to create as much realism for their roles as possible. Hoffman also drew on his previous experiences of working at a mental institution. He ad-libbed through much of the movie, and his homework paid off when he earned his second Academy Award.

In the early '90s, Hoffman's work resulted in several box office flops. He resurged with the thriller *Outbreak* (1995) and political farce *Wag the Dog* (1997), but felt that he had lost his spark. After the American Film Institute presented Hoffman with a televised Lifetime Achievement Award, he dropped out of acting for three years to reflect on his career. With three decades of acting behind him, he toyed with the idea of writing or directing. Perhaps Hoffman needed this time to rejuvenate. He came back to reach new audiences with the "existential" comedy *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), quirky *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), family-friendly *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), and the romantic comedy *Last Chance Harvey* (2008). With a career that got a start due to insecurities, it is now clear that Hoffman had a path all along.

For a complete list of Hoffman's films, check [HERE](#).

### Point to Ponder

- It seems that there's a "Hoffman character" for everybody. Which is your favorite?
- Do you prefer a light-hearted comedy like *Tootsie* or a drama like *Kramer vs. Kramer*?

### More About Hoffman

- Hoffman has kept his personal life fairly private. He was married to ballerina Anne Byrne Hoffman from 1969 to 1980. They had 2 daughters. He has been married to lawyer Lisa Gottsegen from 1980 to present. They have 4 children.
- There have been many tabloid rumors portraying Dustin Hoffman as an egomaniac and difficult actor to work with. He has said this reputation stems from his perfectionism and his serious regard for the art of acting. He has compared acting to brain surgery, saying he would want a surgeon to be a difficult perfectionist if given the choice. Hoffman has also commented, "don't believe everything you read," although he admits he is guilty of doing the same.

### Awards and Honors

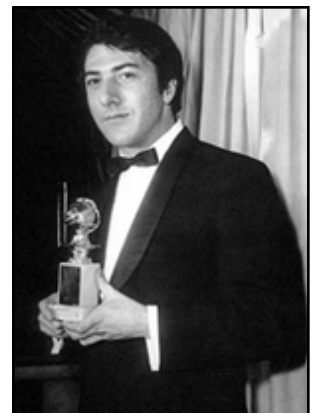
Hoffman has been nominated for 7 Academy Awards. He won for *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Rain Man* (1988). Check [HERE](#) for more listings.

### Hoffman Quotes

"I became an actor because I believed I was a failure. In acting, because so few of us ever get work, I could feel proud and fail with dignity."

"I got into acting so that I could meet girls. Pretty girls came later. First, I wanted to start off with someone with two legs, who'd smile at me and look soft."

"I grew up thinking a movie star had to be like Rock Hudson or Tab Hunter, certainly nobody in any way like me."



“Money is another pressure. I'm not complaining, I'm just saying that there's a certain luxury in having no money. I spent ten years in New York not having it, not worrying about it. Suddenly you have it, then you worry, where is it going? Am I doing the right thing with it?”

“I love acting, and I'm not going to determine what I do based on what I fear other people might think. I do what I want to do.”

“I envy people who can just look at a sunset. I wonder how you can shoot it. There is nothing more grotesque to me than a vacation.”

“Life stinks, but that doesn't mean you don't enjoy it.”

[on he and Gene Hackman as young stage actors and roommates in New York]:  
“Psychologically, Gene/myself, we did not think about making it in the terms that people think about. We fully expected to be failures for our entire life. Meaning that we would always be scrambling to get a part. We were actors. We had no pretensions. There was more dignity in being unsuccessful.”

### Activity Ideas:

1. Watch a Dustin Hoffman movie this month. Print up a special SIGN to announce the show time.
2. Try solving this Dustin Hoffman word search.
3. For more about Dustin Hoffman as Hollywood's “antihero,” pick up this book.

