

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Miroslav Zajic/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images

A pretty face helped make Robert Redford a star. Talent and dedication kept him one



Published: September 17, 2025 10.29am AEST

Daryl Sparkes

Senior Lecturer, Media Studies and Production, University of Southern Queensland

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.axw3k9ntv>

<https://theconversation.com/a-pretty-face-helped-make-robert-redford-a-star-talent-and-dedication-kept-him-one-265426>

Hollywood is the place where having a great face will get you far. Think Errol Flynn, James Dean, George Clooney, Brad Pitt – a handsome appearance opens acting doors.

Those good looks, the magical smile, the natural charm all became synonymous with Robert Redford, who has died aged 89.

But good looks can only get you so far. You still need the acting chops as well as the strength of character to make a real impression in the world of cinema, and in the world itself.

Redford had this all in spades.

The young actor

After a rough start in life, including the death of his mother and dropping out of college, Redford began acting at 23 on Broadway and in small roles in quality television productions such as *The Untouchables* (1963), *Maverick* (1960), *Dr Kildare* (1962) and *The Twilight Zone* (1962), to name a few, which all honed his screen presence.

He made his feature film debut with a minor role in *Tall Story* (1960), alongside Jane Fonda (also her debut). This started a lifelong friendship between the two. They would act on several productions together, and Fonda admitted she was in love with Redford her whole life.



Robert Redford and Jane Fonda receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement Award during the 2017 Venice International Film Festival. EPA/CLAUDIO ONORATI

His talent was soon recognised. He was nominated for his first Emmy in 1962 for his supporting role in the TV movie *The Voice of Charlie Pont*.

After this, Redford soon became an in-demand actor. Larger roles in film and TV soon came his way, many as a romantic character.

Films such as *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965), *This Property is Condemned* (1966) and *Barefoot in the Park* (1967) portrayed Redford as the lover/husband to strong female characters, the first two with Natalie Wood, the third, again, with Fonda.

The birth of an icon

His good looks sometimes grated on Redford, which led him to refuse a role in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) and being turned down for the lead in *The Graduate* (1967). He went in search of more diverse roles.

This led to a film that didn't just make Redford a star, but a Hollywood icon.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) was one of the greatest actor partnerships in Hollywood history. Paul Newman was a much bigger star than Redford at the time of the movie's release, but arguably it propelled Redford's star beyond anyone else at that time.

Redford portrayed Sundance with sly wit, simmering masculinity, sardonic smartness and, well, just outright sexiness. Suddenly both teenage boys and girls had his poster on their bedroom wall. The world fell in love with him.



Movie Poster Image Art/Getty Images

Redford was on a roll. Over the next half-decade came hit after hit, including *The Candidate* (1972), *The Way We Were* (1973) with Barbara Streisand, *The Sting* (1972) again with Newman, and *The Great Gatsby* (1974), to name but a few. Redford was cemented as the lead man du jour.

The saying “lightning never strikes twice” never reckoned on Redford. In 1976 he took on his next highly iconic role alongside Dustin Hoffman in *All the President’s Men*.

It could be said that Hoffman, well regarded as the actor’s actor, was eclipsed by Redford in his role as Watergate journalist Bob Woodward. To me it was a travesty that Redford (or Hoffman, for that matter) was not nominated for Oscars in these roles.

All The President's Men (1976) Official Trailer - Robert Redford, ...



By now Redford wasn't just seen as the "pretty boy" but as a serious actor who took on more and more dramatic roles in *The Electric Horseman* (1979), *Brubaker* (1980), *Out of Africa* (1985) and *Indecent Proposal* (1998).

Being on screen for over five decades, younger audiences possibly wondered who the grizzled old man playing agent Alexander Pierce in two Marvel movies in 2014 and 2019 was.

A lasting legacy

Beginning in the 70s, Redford increasingly yearned to also be behind the camera.

As early as 1969 he took on the executive producer role in *Downhill Racer*.



Robert Redford with the Oscar he won for best director for *Ordinary People* in 1981. AP Photo

Into the 80s he began directing. His feature directorial debut, *Ordinary People* (1980), won him his one and only Oscar (although he was given an honorary one in 2002).

He would go on to direct and produce notable films such as *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), *A River Runs Through It* (1992) and *Quiz Show* (1994), among others.

He was still working as an executive producer up until recently on the TV series *Dark Wind* (2022–25).

Away from the cameras, Redford was widely known as a philanthropist, environmentalist and a strong supporter of American First Nations and LGBTQI+ rights.

Publicly, though, Redford will probably be most remembered for the Sundance Institute and the film festival that sprang from it.



Redford at the Sundance Film Festival in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1994. Tom Smart/Liaison

The largest independent festival in the United States, it gave a leg up to hundreds of up-and-coming independent filmmakers over the years including Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, Jane Schoenbrun, Kevin Smith and Paul Thomas Anderson.

When we look back on his body of work, though, one thing becomes plainly obvious.

While Redford may have used his looks to initially open the Hollywood doors to success and fame, it was his talent and dedication to his craft that kept those doors open.

A versatile actor, director and producer who gave back to the industry just as much, if not more, than he took. For this, Redford was much, much more than a pretty face.