

Jonathan Demme Has Died At 73; Director Extraordinaire Won Oscar For 'Silence Of The Lambs'



Associated Press

[Jonathan Demme](#), the Oscar winning director, producer and screenwriter, has died at age 73. I am still trying to get the cause of death and will build on the post today. This is a terribly sad day for Hollywood and especially New York, where Demme lived and where his production banner Clinica Estetico was for so long a catalyst for many memorable films. His death comes as an episode he directed of the new series *Shots Fired* airs this evening.

I've learned the cause of death was complications from esophagus cancer. Demme and his wife Joanne Howard have three children — the youngest is Jos, with Brooklyn in the middle and Ramona the oldest, who's married to James Molloy. They were all with Demme when he died this morning at 3:30 AM in his Manhattan apartment. The family will organize a private family funeral with a memorial possible, but the family is dealing with so much right now, those details will be forthcoming. In lieu of flowers, the family is requesting that donations be made to Jonathan's cherished charity [Americans For Immigrant Justice](#), which is based in Miami.

Born in Baldwin, Long Island, Demme has had one of the great filmmaking careers of his era, rising to prominence in the 1980s with his comedy films *Melvin and Howard* (1980), *Swing Shift* (1984), *Something Wild* (1986) and *Married to the Mob* (1988). He won his Oscar for directing [The Silence of the Lambs](#) (1991) and later helmed the acclaimed films [Philadelphia](#) (1993) and *Rachel Getting Married* (2008), along with many seminal documentaries such as the *Talking Heads* concert film *Stop Making Sense*, and *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*.

Like more than a few iconic directors Demme cracked into features making exploitation films for Roger Corman, directing such films as *Caged Heat*, *Crazy Mama* and *Fighting Mad* for Corman's New World Pictures. His first breakthrough was *Melvin and Howard*, not a box office hit but a film that was critically acclaimed. He established his eclectic, energetic style with *Stop Making Sense*, followed by the manic *Something Wild*, the Spalding Gray monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* and the New York comedy *Married to the Mob*. Demme followed that with *The Silence of the Lambs*, one of the last films for Orion which was released in February and was the rare film to win all five major categories — Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay for Ted Tally, Best Actor for Anthony Hopkins & Best Actress for Jodie Foster — even though the studio didn't have a ton of money to spend on a campaign, and horror is almost always overlooked by the Academy. Demme followed with *Philadelphia*, an early film that focused on the hypocrisy and prejudice surrounding the AIDS crisis, which won the Best Actor Oscar for Tom Hanks, who starred alongside Denzel Washington.

Demme's subsequent films ranged from the adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to the *Manchurian Candidate* remake, to the Jimmy Carter book tour docu *Man From Plains*, and the prestige hit *Rachel Getting Married*. He also had a reputation in the New York film community as a gentleman with empathy, which is why I expect an avalanche outpouring from colleagues who worked so closely with him.

We had heard that Demme was battling cancer for some time. My last encounter with him came when he was so gracious in a piece that looked back on the making of *The Silence of the Lambs* to commemorate its 25th anniversary. I will rerun that article today, as a tribute to one of my favorite filmmakers I've had the pleasure of meeting in New York.