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Ed Asner, Emmy-Winning ‘Lou Grant’ Star, Dies at 91

By Carmel Dagan, Richard Natale



Seven-time Emmy-winning actor [Ed Asner](#), who starred as [Lou Grant](#) on both sitcom “[The Mary Tyler Moore Show](#)” and hourlong drama “Lou Grant” before a late-career rejuvenation through his poignant voicework in 2009 animated film “Up,” has died. He was 91.

His publicist confirmed the news to *Variety*, writing that he died on Sunday surrounded by family. Asner’s official Twitter account posted a message from his family, saying “Goodnight dad. We love you.”

We are sorry to say that our beloved patriarch passed away this morning peacefully. Words cannot express the sadness we feel. With a kiss on your head- Goodnight dad. We love you.

— Ed Asner (@TheOnlyEdAsner) [August 29, 2021](#)

Asner had worked for many years as a character actor in series television and movies before hitting paydirt and stardom as the tough-talking TV newsroom head Lou Grant on “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” which brought him three supporting actor Emmys. When the sitcom called it quits, he returned as the same character in a harder-hitting hourlong series, which earned him two leading actor Emmys and a total of five noms. The actor picked up two additional Emmys for his work on the miniseries “Rich Man, Poor Man” and “Roots,” and won a total of seven.

More recently he appeared on “Grace & Frankie,” “Cobra Kai” and provided voices for “American Dad!”

The avuncular but hard-nosed Asner also served as a controversial president of the Screen Actors Guild. During his time in office, which started in 1981, he was criticized for making political statements about U.S. involvement in El Salvador. His outspokenness may have cost him his \$60,000-per-episode salary on newspaper-centered series “Lou Grant,” which CBS controversially cancelled after five seasons, as well as other lucrative offers. He nonetheless continued to criticize the industry’s labor standards and fight for unionism.

Asner also fought a tempestuous battle for the commingling of SAG and the Screen Extras Guild to which there was opposition from within the ranks, most loudly vocalized by actor Charlton Heston, which brought the two thespians to the brink of libel action.

Asner had rarely been active in politics or union activities, but he was vocal during the crippling 1980 SAG strike, the results of which prompted him to run for the office, which he won the next year. His battles included improving the employment and compensation conditions for actors as well as uniting SAG and SEG, which eventually came to pass; he also championed a SAG-AFTRA merger, but changed his view by 2012, when members approved the combination after Asner and other union activists failed to persuade a judge to grant a court order preventing the vote.

But he drew fire with his public pronouncements against U.S. involvement in El Salvador, which many saw as an abuse of his SAG office. While he was president an award to a former SAG president, Ronald Reagan, was rescinded because of the now U.S. president’s dissolution of the air traffic controllers’ union — although Asner himself did not vote on it. He also protested South Africa’s apartheid policies while in office.

Such controversies drew fire from Heston, an avid Reaganite, and a duel began that almost wound up in court. Asner was elected to another two-year term in 1983, winning by a landslide, after

which he stepped down in 1985, throwing his support to Patty Duke. He continued to defend his political activism, calling it not a “luxury, but a necessity,” throughout his life.

He remained active in TV movies and miniseries beginning in the mid-'70s, winning Emmys for such blockbusters as “Rich Man, Poor Man” and “Roots.” He also starred in such praised telepics as “A Small Killing,” and “A Case of Libel.” He also made the occasional movie during the '70s and '80s such as “Skin Game,” “Fort Apache the Bronx,” “Daniel” and, later, “JFK.”

His 1987 series on ABC, “Bronx Zoo,” was short lived and, at the time, Asner gave voice to concerns that his left-leaning politics were out of favor and possibly costing him work, telling *Variety* that he knew of a couple of cases in which he'd lost work “but I'm sure that was the tip of the iceberg.” He noted that ABC tested another Asner series, “Off the Rack,” by asking viewers, “What do you know of Ed Asner's politics and how would it affect your liking the show?” Almost unanimously respondents said they knew nothing of Asner's beliefs nor did they care.

Asner worked steadily on the bigscreen during the 1990s and 2000s with credits including “Academy Boyz,” “Hard Rain,” “The Bachelor,” “Above Suspicion,” “Elf” and Enchanted Cottage.”

During the same period he regularly popped up on TV. For CBS he recurred on “Hearts Afire” and short-lived series “The Trials of Rosie O'Neill” (drawing a supporting actor Emmy nomination for the latter), was a regular on brief Tom Selleck sitcom “The Closer” in 1998 and appeared as Pop in a 1993 production of “Gypsy” that starred Bette Midler. He also starred in a short-lived ABC sitcom, “Thunder Alley,” reprised the role of Lou Grant in an uncredited role on “Roseanne” and guested on “Dharma and Greg,” “Mad About You,” “The X-Files” and “Curb Your Enthusiasm.”

He also recurred as a judge on “The Practice” and as the chairman of the network's parent company on “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip” and had a story arc on “ER” as a curmudgeonly old doctor who runs a storefront clinic.

In 2002 he starred as the pontiff in a movie for Italian television, “Pope John XXIII.”

He received an Emmy nom for supporting actor in a miniseries or movie in 2007 for Hallmark telepic “The Christmas Card” and an Emmy nom for guest actor in a drama series in 2009 for a spot on “CSI: NY.”

In 2011, the actor played Warren Buffett in the HBO telepic “Too Big Too Fail” and recurred on the CMT sitcom “Working Class.”

Asner also spent a great deal of time doing voice work for animated series including “Fish Police,” “Batman,” “Captain Planet and the Planeteers” (he drew a Daytime Emmy nomination), “Gargoyles,” “Freakazoid,” “Spider-Man” (another Daytime Emmy nom), “WordGirl” (a third Daytime Emmy nom) and “The Boondocks” — preparation, perhaps, for his fine voice work on 2009's “Up,” which won two Oscars, including for best animated feature.

The success of that film spurred interest in Asner, who was a very busy actor in the succeeding years, with roles on “Law & Order: SVU,” “The Middle,” “Hawaii Five-0,” “The Sarah Silverman Program,” “Hot in Cleveland” and “Royal Pains,” to name a few. He also recurred on the brief 2011 CMT laffer “Working Class” and on A&E’s “The Glades” and did voice work on “The Cleveland Show.”

The actor appeared on “The Tonight Show With Jay Leno” in a recurring segment entitled “Does This Impress Ed Asner?”

The youngest of five children, Edward Asner was born in Kansas City. At Wyandotte High School he was all-city tackle and an editor of the school paper.

He spent two years at the U. of Chicago, followed by a stint in the Army. When he returned to Chicago he joined Paul Sills in the Playwrights Theater Group, which became the Compass Players and the Second City Group. He acted in 26 plays with the group over the next two years.

Asner left the troupe in 1955 to move to New York, where he played Peachum in “The Threepenny Opera” at the Theatre de Lys for three years at \$65 a week while keeping himself solvent doing odd jobs. He made his Broadway debut in the short-lived “Face of a Hero,” starring Jack Lemmon, and continued to work onstage at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford and the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Central Park productions before striking out for L.A.

He moved in 1961 to Los Angeles, where he worked on TV series such as “Naked City,” “Slattery’s People,” “The Fugitive” and “Ironside,” settling in to life as a character actor. His film work was also character driven in such films as “Kid Galahad,” “The Satan Bug,” “The Slender Thread,” “El Dorado,” “Gunn” and “Change of Habit” in the 1960s.

A 1970 pilot, “Doug Selby D.A.,” didn’t go anywhere but brought him to the attention of Grant Tinker, who cast him as Lou Grant on “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” one of his first attempts at comedy. The program ran for seven high-rated seasons and ran in syndication for decades.

Asner received SAG’s Life Achievement Award in 2002, two years after winning the guild’s Ralph Morgan Award. In 2003, he was inducted into the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Hall of Fame.

In 2013, Asner again took on a prominent role on a SAG-AFTRA controversy, serving as the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit alleging extensive mishandling of \$130 million in unpaid residuals and foreign royalties. The suit was dismissed in early 2014 but the federal judge in the case indicated that the plaintiffs might be able to file again.

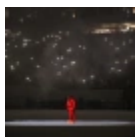
Asner was twice married, the second time to producer Cindy Gilmore, and twice divorced. He is survived by four children.

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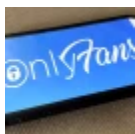
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