

Louis Gossett Jr, first Black man to win best supporting actor Oscar, dies at 87

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Online Desk: Louis Gossett Jr, the first Black man to win an Academy Award as best supporting actor, has died aged 87, a family statement confirmed on Friday without revealing the cause of death.

The Oscar-winning actor's roles ranged from an enslaved man in the TV mini-series "Roots" to a no-nonsense drill sergeant in "An Officer and a Gentlemen." In "Sadat," he had the title role, playing the Egyptian leader who made peace with Israel.

Gossett, who was also a producer, director, social activist and the founder of the Eracism Foundation to combat racism, died at a rehabilitation center in Santa Monica, California, the Washington Post reported.

"It is with our heartfelt regret to confirm our beloved father passed away this morning. We would like to thank everyone for their condolences at this time. Please respect the family's privacy during this difficult time," the actor's family said in its brief statement.

The tall, imposing actor made history in 1983 when he became only the second Black man, after actor Sidney Poitier 19 years earlier, to win an Oscar. Gossett took home the award for best supporting actor as Sergeant Emil Foley in the romantic drama "An Officer and a Gentleman."

"More than anything, it was a huge affirmation of my position as a Black actor," Gossett said about the award in his memoir, "An Actor and a Gentleman."

In the 2010 book Gossett wrote candidly about the racism he had encountered early in Hollywood, including being handcuffed to a tree after he was stopped for walking in Beverly Hills at night.

He also recounted the difficulty he faced getting jobs, the unequal pay compared to white actors and the bitterness and resentment that led to battles with drugs and alcohol that he ultimately won.

Gossett's long and distinguished career began in the 1950s in the theater and spanned television and films. He was nominated for eight Emmys and won in 1977 in the groundbreaking TV production "Roots," which depicted the brutality of slavery.

"I knew it was historical for African-American actors – that finally on prime-time TV our story was going to be told. We didn't think anybody was going to watch it," Gossett said in an interview with AARP in 2013.

But tens of millions of people did. Based on Alex Haley's novel "Roots: The Saga of an American Family," the eight-part series was a huge success. It won nine Emmy awards and had higher ratings than any previous entertainment program in history, according to the Museum of Broadcast Communications.

TEENAGER ON BROADWAY

Louis Cameron Gossett Jr. was born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 27, 1936, the only child of working-class parents.

Always athletic, he excelled in sports. When he was sidelined with an injury, he took an acting class and impressed his teacher, who encouraged him to try out for a stage play. Gossett was chosen for the part over 400 others and made his Broadway debut while still a teenager in 1953 in "Take a Giant Step."

He attended New York University and with his 6-foot 4-inch frame seemed destined for a basketball career after graduation. He was invited to the New York Knicks' rookie camp but decided to pursue acting.

His first big break came in 1959 when he was cast in the original Broadway production of "A Raisin in the Sun" with Poitier and Ruby Dee. Gossett reprised the role in the 1961 film version of Lorraine Hansberry's story about segregation.

During the 1960s and 70s he worked in television and starred as a drug dealer in the 1977 film "The Deep" with Nick Nolte and Jacqueline Bisset before being cast in "An Officer and a Gentleman."

The minute he read the script he said he knew the part was his shot at fame. The critics agreed.

"Mr. Gossett, always a good supporting player, is this time a star," The New York Times said in its review of the film.

The following year Gossett starred as slain Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in "Sadat," for which he received his fifth Emmy nomination.

"If you get a hit with one type of role, then you should try a different type next. It's about always stretching your instruments, constantly growing, constantly sharpening," Gossett said in an interview with Canadian Business in 2015.

Two years after winning praise as Sadat, Gossett opted to play a lizard-like alien in the 1985 sci-fi thriller "Enemy Mine" with Dennis Quaid.

"Nobody wanted it because you couldn't see your face or your eyes. Five and a half to six hours in makeup, that's a challenge," he told the Washington Times in 2017.

Gossett starred in the 1986 action film "Iron Eagle" and its sequel and earned a new generation of fans with the sci-fi TV drama "Stargate SG-1" in 2005 and as Halle Berry's father in "Extant."

The actor, who worked in TV and films into his 80s and branched into producing and directing, was married three times and had two sons.

After being diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2010 he went public with his illness to encourage other African-American men to get tested and treated.

With his Eracism Foundation Gossett dedicated himself to mentoring young people and to helping to create a society where racism does not exist.

"We're not going to get to this 'promised land' until we regard one another as part of the whole family," he told ABC news in 2016, "Black, Latino as one family. That's America." Gossett is survived by two sons, Satie and Sharron.