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Remembering Leslie Nielsen: an acting career of two halves

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The master of dead-pan delivery, Leslie Nielsen had a career spanning almost sixty years. Before he established himself as a comic actor, however, the Canadian had already carved out a successful career in a variety of serious roles. We take a look back at his remarkable career.

Leslie Nielsen is now best remembered for his roles in the 80s spoofs 'Airplane!' and the Naked Gun trilogy, but few could have predicted his comedy stardom based on the first half of his career. His turn as Commander John Adams in the science-fiction film Forbidden Planet (a key formative influence on Star Trek) in 1956 established Nielsen as a serious character actor in just his second role. [He was also considered a romantic lead](#), appearing alongside Debbie Reynolds in Tammy and the Bachelor the following year.

It was his 60s and 70s roles, however, which led to his comedy ascent as [he played authority figures such as a Captain](#) in The Poseidon Adventure (1972) and most pertinently as a police officer on both television shows The New Breed (1961-62) and The Bold Ones: The Protectors (1969-70). The po-faced sincerity with which he tackled these roles actually made him the perfect casting choice for his later spoof films because he was 'the real deal' in sending up the sort of productions he was already an established part of.

Being able to play the straight man in films defined by their silliness only added to the comedic value of the scenes. In an 80s era which was full of zany comedies, Nielsen stood alone as a stony-faced paragon of the art of deadpan comedy. The actor himself explained his gratitude to Airplane writer-directors David and Jerry Zucker 'They spotted me for being what I really was, a closet comedian. Thank God for them.' His sobriety allowed chaos to reign around him and his delivery of lines 'Can I interest you in a nightcap? – 'No thanks I don't wear them' were all the funnier for it.

His spoof movies have been hugely influential and are fundamental to the success of the Scary Movie films; Nielsen himself made cameos in both Scary Movie 3 and 4 as a nod to his importance in the genre. The Naked Gun films are celebrated to this day and still feature in other forms of media including a mobile phone app and an online slot game as part of [jackpot king on Paddy Power](#), where the focal concept is playing for two jackpots in one game. Such was the extent of Nielsen's international influence he was recruited for a Spanish production, predictably named Spanish Movie. Despite being filmed in 2009, twenty-one years after the first Naked Gun film, Nielsen was [reportedly featured prominently in the promotional material despite only having a cameo](#); a testament to his lasting impact and popularity in a film released just a year before his

death.

We often see comedic actors, like Robin Williams and Jonah Hill, make the successful transition from comedic to dramatic roles but Nielsen was one of a rare breed who achieved the reverse. In parody films he was a pioneer who has come to define an entire genre, Decades after he had established himself as a conventional leading man, Nielsen became a pioneer of parody films and came to define an entire genre.

‘Surely you can’t be serious?’

‘I am serious, and don’t call me Shirley’.

Photo by [Denise Jans](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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