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Heath Ledger dies: America cries

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HEATH LEDGER, THE Australian actor nominated for an Academy Award in 2005 passed away on January 22 at his apartment in New York City. The coroner's office confirmed that his death was the result of an accidental prescription drug overdose. Millions of people around the world mourned his passing.

John Belushi. Jimi Hendrix. Chris Farley. Jim Morrison. And now, **Heath Ledger**. With his untimely death on January 22, 2008, Ledger joined an unfortunately long list of young stars who died of accidental drug overdoses.

Perhaps best known for his roles in *The Patriot*, *Brokeback Mountain* (for which he received an Oscar nomination), and *10 Things I Hate About You*, Ledger was often regarded as an excellent character actor who could be relied on to enhance the production of any movie through his excellent delivery and personification.

What makes Ledger's death headline news, besides his celebrity status, is the suddenness with which it occurred. As far as the public knew, Ledger had very few, if any, risk factors. Unlike some celebrities, he was a law abiding resident who had little to no history of prior illegal drug use.

Loss of legend, Ledger

On January 22, Ledger was found unconscious in his SoHo apartment at around 2:45 p.m. by a masseuse with whom he was scheduled to have an appointment. After failing to wake Ledger, the masseuse dialed 911, and an emergency medical team arrived in short order. However, they were unable to revive him, and Ledger was pronounced dead at the scene at about 3:30 p.m.

The first autopsy on Ledger's body on January 23 was inconclusive; a second autopsy performed on February 6 was required to determine the cause of death, which was "the result of acute intoxication by the combined effects of oxycodone, hydrocodone, diazepam, temazepam, alprazolam and doxylamine."

The second autopsy findings confirmed that Ledger's death was an accident, "resulting from the abuse of prescription medications."

The autopsy further concluded the tragic nature of Ledger's untimely departure, who evidently fell victim to the very medications he was prescribed to treat his depression and insomnia.

Lifetime of success

Ledger first hit the scene in 1999 in the teen comedy *10 Things I Hate About You*. His critically acclaimed performance—not to mention his good looks and irresistible charm—landed him future roles in such films as *The Patriot* and *A Knight's Tale*.

It was in 2005 that Ledger reached the apex of his success in the Academy Award winning romantic drama *Brokeback Mountain*, for which Ledger was nominated for an Academy Award (Best Actor).

At the time of his death, Ledger had just finished filming *The Dark Knight*, an upcoming Batman movie set to be released in 2008. Ledger's role is that of the villain, The Joker. Ledger's death will affect the marketing campaign for the film, but should not affect the film itself.

Ledger was also working on *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, a Terry Gilliam film originally slated for release in 2009. The film has had its production halted in the wake of Ledger's death, as he had not yet finished filming. Gilliam has said he is determined to "salvage" the production of the film, possibly by using computer-generated imagery to alter Ledger's character's appearance.

Aftermath of truly tragic death

Few people have any doubts as to the impact that Ledger left on American cinema and pop culture as a whole, and what he could have done had he not passed away unexpectedly. The Australian actor was only 28 when he died, and is survived by his father, Kim, his mother, Sally, his sister, Kate, and his ex-fiancée, actress Michelle Williams, and their daughter, Matilda Rose Ledger.

LIFE of LEDGER

Heath Ledger's career has been short-lived, but memorable. Here is a small tribute to his major cinematic accomplishments



10 Things I Hate About You 1999
also in 1999: Two Hands



The Patriot 2000



A Knight's Tale 2001
also in 2001: Monster's Ball



Ned Kelly 2003
also in 2003: The Order



Brokeback Mountain 2005
also in 2005: Lords of Dogtown, Casanova, The Brother's Grimm



Candy 2006



I'm Not There 2007



Batman: The Dark Knight 2008

Famous fatalities: users, abusers' lives end in tragic overdoses

1962

Marilyn Monroe:

A renowned actress, model, and American sex symbol, Monroe died of barbiturate poisoning at the age of 36 from a sleeping pill overdose. To this day, no one knows whether her death was suicide or homicide.

1971

Elvis Presley:

The "King of Rock 'n' Roll" was an American singer and actor. His addiction to prescription drugs led to his death of a heart attack brought on by long-term drug use at the age of 42.

1986

Leonard Bias:

Less than 48 hours after he was selected to play for the Celtics in the NBA draft, Bias died of a cardiac arrhythmia from a cocaine overdose at the age of 22. He was the second draft pick and had a promising career ahead of him.

1997

Chris Farley:

Farley was a beloved actor and comedian. He appeared in several films and was a cast member on SNL. He struggled with both drug and alcohol abuse, and died at the age of 33 as a result of a drug overdose.

1970

Jimi Hendrix:

Hendrix was a legendary singer, songwriter and guitarist. His experimentation with drugs and alcohol resulted in his death due to asphyxiation by his own vomit at age 27. A Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, this brilliant artist will be missed.

1982

John Belushi:

Belushi was an actor, comedian, and musician. He struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, and eventually died at 33 of a drug overdose. He lives on, however, in *The Blues Brothers*, *National Lampoon's Animal House*, and classic SNL re-runs.

1992

John "Rambo" Kordic:

Kordic was an astounding hockey player who was infamous for his bad temper. He struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, and died at the age of 27 due to heart failure during a fight he instigated while on a cocaine binge.

2007

Anna Nicole Smith:

Smith was known for her work as an actress, model, and Playmate status. She died at the age of 39 from an overdose of chloral hydrate and other prescription drugs.