

Acclaimed actor James Earl Jones: 1931-2024

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James Earl Jones, who died last month at the age of 93, was acclaimed for his many decades of work on stage, screen and television, and was rightly considered one of the greatest American actors of the last century.

Jones, of mixed African-Native American-Irish ancestry, was born in the Jim Crow era, in the tiny hamlet of Arktabutla in northwest Mississippi, not far from the Arkansas border. His father left the family very soon after, and he was raised from the age of 5 by his maternal grandparents, who moved to northern Michigan. Traumatized by the dramatic changes in his life, he developed a stutter that rendered him virtually mute between the ages of 6 and 14. With the help of a high school English teacher, he overcame the stutter, although traces of it remained and sometimes surfaced. He went on to attend the University of Michigan. After arriving in New York as he entered his mid-20s, he set out on an acting career.

Over a career lasting 60 years, Jones won an Emmy Award for work in television, a Grammy for spoken word performance and three Tony Awards for his efforts on stage, including for *The Great White Hope* in 1968 and *Fences* in 1987. Among the other major prizes bestowed on this African American actor was an honorary Academy Award in 2011. He also received one of the annual Kennedy Center honors, in 2002. If Jones' talents were rarely utilized to full advantage, that was not his fault, but rather the result of the crisis and decline of culture in the last half-century. This remarkable actor became a victim in particular of the deterioration in American filmmaking in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Jones spoke of himself as an actor who happened to be African American, not as a black actor. While he was of course aware of racism, he refused to be defined by it. As the record shows, and as we will discuss, he had no interest in the kind of identity politics that has come to dominate artistic life in recent years.

Legacy and fame are not always identical, and this is especially the case when it comes to film and theater, considering the blockbusters, action adventure films and Broadway mega-musicals of recent decades. Jones achieved fame as the voice of Darth Vader in the many *Star Wars* films, and also as the voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King*. His legacy rests on far more than these roles, however, though they made his name well known to many millions.

Jones began work on stage in the late 1950s. He received some attention for his role in the long-running Off-Broadway production of *The Blacks*, Jean Genet's provocative play on race relations, beginning in 1961. Throughout the 1960s and the early '70s he worked with Joseph Papp as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Papp, with a history of left-wing politics, had founded this company some years earlier, aiming at bringing Shakespeare to wide audiences, through free performances. Jones had prominent roles in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, among other productions of Shakespeare plays. His performance as *Othello*, in 1964, was especially acclaimed, and it transferred to Broadway. He was later featured in other *Othello* productions, including a return to Broadway in 1982.

It was *The Great White Hope*, the 1967 play by Howard Sackler, that brought Jones much wider recognition. He played Jack Jefferson, a character clearly modeled on Jack Johnson, the famous black boxer who

faced racism and lost his title in 1915 to Jess Willard, the "great white hope." The play premiered in Washington D.C. and soon moved to Broadway, where it won both a Tony award and a Pulitzer, with Jones winning the Tony for Best Actor in a Play.

Remaining very active in the theater over the next two decades, Jones' played important roles in classics such as *The Iceman Cometh*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In 1987-88 he won a second Tony in *Fences*, for his portrayal of Troy Maxson, the disappointed former Negro Leagues ballplayer who has been unable to make the major leagues because of the color barrier, and was presently working for the sanitation department. *Fences*, one of the 10 "Pittsburgh" plays by August Wilson tracing the experience of African Americans through the 20th century, was turned into a 2016 film featuring Denzel Washington.

James Earl Jones' career on the stage was paralleled to some degree by his growing number of film roles. These began with a small part in Stanley Kubrick's famed anti-war satire, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). In 1970, he repeated his leading role in *The Great White Hope* when it was transferred to the screen (directed by former blacklist victim Martin Ritt). Some of the more noteworthy of his many films over the next two decades include *Claudine* (1974—directed by another blacklist victim, John Berry), which follows the struggle of garbage collector "Roop" Marshall and Claudine Price to establish a relationship amidst the restrictions of welfare and other difficulties typical of those facing working class families; *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (John Badham, 1977), a comedy about a group of ex-Negro League ballplayers in the period of segregation; and *Matewan* (1987), the admirable film by John Sayles about the bitter strike of coal miners in southern West Virginia in 1920, a struggle drowned in blood by company and state terror.

For about two decades after *Fences*, Jones took a break from theater and its more taxing schedule, concentrating on film and television roles. He had married for a second time, in 1982, and soon after became a father. Over the next period, he appeared in a large number of films, most of them reflecting the decline in Hollywood movies in these years. There were several based on Tom Clancy's Cold War pro-CIA novels. Jones later characterized these parts as cameo roles. Other films featuring Jones during these years included Kevin Costner's baseball fantasy, *Field of Dreams* (1989), and *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995), based on Alan Paton's novel of apartheid South Africa.

Beginning in 2005, when Jones was in his mid-70s, he returned to the theater. He appeared mostly in crowd-pleaser revivals over the next decade, including *On Golden Pond* (2005), Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2008), *Driving Miss Daisy* (2010), *The Best Man* (2012), *You Can't Take It With You* (2014) and *The Gin Game* (2015). His co-stars included some of the most well-known actresses, including Vanessa Redgrave in *Driving Miss Daisy* on Broadway, Phylicia Rashad in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Leslie Uggams in *On Golden Pond*, Angela Lansbury and Candice Bergen in *The Best Man*, and Cicely Tyson in *The Gin Game*.

Jones had a reputation of being a somewhat conservative political figure, although, in fact, his views were more complex. He joined the ROTC program as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan during the Korean War, and was commissioned as an officer after graduating. In

1992, he received a National Medal of Arts from George H.W. Bush, and the Kennedy Center honor was bestowed during the administration of George W. Bush. Jones generally stayed away from speaking publicly on political issues. In his 1993 memoir, *Voices and Silences*, written with Penelope Niven, he distinguishes between “black militants” and “black moderates such as myself.”

There is much more to this story. His memoir discusses many important subjects, including his relationship with his father, Robert Earl Jones. The media tributes and obituaries of Jones generally ignored this significant biographical information.

James Earl Jones did not meet his father until he was past 20, but they eventually forged a close relationship. In his memoir Jones discusses this, as well as his father’s life and career. Robert Earl Jones, born in 1910, was only 20 when his son was born. He later went on to have a fairly active acting career, although his film career was interrupted for about a decade by the McCarthy-era blacklist, during which he was victimized for his publicly left-wing views. One of his early films was *Strange Fruit* (1945), based on a play by Lillian Smith, which was in turn said to be inspired by the song written by Abel Meeropol and made famous by Billie Holiday.

One of the more important films in which Robert Earl Jones appeared after the blacklist was *One Potato, Two Potato* (1964), a look at interracial romance. This was unusual at that time, three years before the US Supreme Court outlawed bans on interracial marriage. Robert Earl Jones, who lived to the age of 96, knew Langston Hughes and other figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Paul Robeson, the legendary African American singer-actor hounded by the authorities because of his radicalism and sympathy for the USSR, was a close friend.

James Earl Jones was on record as regarding politics and acting as two separate spheres. As noted above, he was not known for any outspoken social and political views. He met Robeson on several occasions, however. Already famous, he made an appearance at the 75th birthday tribute given to Robeson at Carnegie Hall in New York. A few years later, he created the role of Robeson in the eponymous play, written by Philip Hayes Dean. This play, later shown on public television, is available on YouTube.

One of the most significant passages in Jones’ memoir deserves to be quoted at some length, for the light it sheds on the actor’s broader social views, at least in relation to the theater.

I was also getting an education in Shakespeare then thanks to regular work in Joe Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival. By 1963, I had worked in nine productions with him. The Festival gave young actors a steady continuum of work. It was Joe’s dream to have a company return each year to work together, shape new productions together. Joe’s lofty dream of Shakespeare in the Park could not offer major actors salaries that would tempt them to stay. Joe realized that very early, but for those of us not pinned down by heavy responsibilities, he offered a place where we could work each summer.

Often I turned down more lucrative work in the theatre so I could keep working with the New York Shakespeare Festival. Late in 1963, I gave up the chance to play my father’s son in the movie *One Potato, Two Potato* because I wanted to play in *The Winter’s Tale*. Robert Earl did not argue with me about this decision, but it did not seem to make sense to some of the other people in my life then. The film, *One Potato, Two Potato*, was one of the first serious, sensitive screen treatments of interracial marriage, was honored at Cannes. I would have played the lead opposite Barbara Barrie, with Robert Earl and Vinnette Carroll playing my parents. Bernie Hamilton played Robert Earl’s son,

and I stayed with Joe Papp. He was giving me better and more meaningful roles, and I did not want to interrupt that.

A bit later, Jones elaborates on what he admired about Papp’s work:

Joe brought Shakespeare to the Park and to the people by taking away the elitism often connected with the theatre. And the people loved it; they made it their own. The audiences were wonderful, coming back over and over again, even little children who should not have been out at night. Our audiences worked with us. Many of them had stood for hours in line in the hot sun, picnic baskets in hand. The tickets were free, first come, first served. They were getting an experience they did not have to pay for, and somehow seemed to feel more obliged to contribute to the experience. When they pay, you owe them. When they come in free, they owe you. They listened. Rarely did you hear the derisive laughter that often comes in the theatre when the audience cannot handle a certain moment of revelation or tragedy. These were genuine audiences engaged in genuine playgoing. They were fans of the whole company, not a single actor. They made us feel truly welcome, and we reciprocated.

Although he does not use the phrase “identity politics” in his memoir, it is very clear that Jones did not share the obsession with race that has unfortunately only become more entrenched in artistic circles in the ensuing decades. Interestingly, this issue was also omitted from the various mainstream media tributes to the late actor.

He wrote the following interesting passage, for instance:

When I have to state my racial identity on some legal document, I could as well sign “Negroid-Caucasoid-Mongoloid.” I possess all those genes, and I have to account for all of them in my identity. All of them define who I am. To the extent that genetic energy is spiritual, my spirit is forged from all those—the African, the Irish, the Cherokee-Choctaw.

James Earl Jones was raised, as noted above, by his maternal grandparents. He loved the people he called Mama and Papa, while his own mother, whom he saw rarely, was called by her given name, Ruth. He writes at some length, however—sharply but also objectively—about his grandmother’s social backwardness. She blamed all whites for slavery, and blacks for allegedly not fighting back.

From this childhood, Jones apparently developed a hostility, not only to racism, but to what he termed “racialism.” “My concepts of race, racialism, and racism go all the way back to my mama, Maggie, and her ways of interpreting the world, and her fierce indoctrinations,” he wrote. Jones continued:

I believe the roots of both *racism* (the prejudice of the majority—the group that has power) and *racialism* (the prejudice of the minority groups without power, who begin to act out defensively) are planted deep in the psychotic side of mythology. Racism is an offensive act, racialism a defensive act. Both are sick, in myth as well as reality.

There is more that is false than is true in this statement, because while it recognizes that race is a myth, and correctly distinguishes between racism and racialism while opposing them both, it ascribes them both to psychology, and not to material class forces. Racism is not simply “the prejudice of the majority,” however, because this majority, based on skin color, is itself an imaginary concept. The fundamental division in society is that of class, in which the true majority, the working class of all races and nationalities, faces the true minority, the ruling classes which employ racism *and* racialism to keep workers divided.

This was apparently a closed book to Jones, but he nevertheless put his finger on at least a partial definition of racism and racialism—how they differ, and also what they have in common. There is also more in his memoir of a serious and thoughtful nature, both on the subject of race, and on James Earl Jones’ life work—*theater itself*.

It bears repeating that the acting career of James Earl Jones, as laudable as it was, could have been far greater under different social conditions. If theater had followed the example set by Joe Papp, more could have been achieved. But that is only the beginning of the subject. Within these historical limits, James Earl Jones leaves behind a body of work that is admirable, an example for future generations to aspire to and learn from.



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