

Obituaries

HUME CRONYN 1911-2003

'A lovely part is a part I can hide behind'

Unassuming Canadian-born actor rose to become a legend of the stage and screen, in tandem with his wife and frequent partner, Jessica Tandy

BY MARILYN BERGER

Hume Cronyn, the Canadian who rose to become one of the foremost character actors of the American stage and screen for more than 60 years, died on Sunday at his home in Fairfield, Conn. He was 91.

Mr. Cronyn, a compact, restless man who was once an amateur boxer and remained a featherweight 127 pounds all his life, was at home in everything from Shakespeare and Chekhov to Albee and Beckett. Among his notable Broadway successes were *A Delicate Balance*, *The Gin Game* and *Coward in Two Keys*.

He was nominated for an Oscar for the 1944 film *Seventh Cross* with Spencer Tracy. More than 40 years later, when he was in his 70s, he won fresh recognition on film as Joe Finley, one of a group of elderly people who seek eternal youth in the popular movies *Cocoon* and *Cocoon: The Return*.

His performances earned him four Tony nominations, and he won in 1964 as Polonius in Richard Burton's *Hamlet*. In 1984, he and his wife and frequent acting partner, Jessica Tandy, received the first Tony for lifetime achievement. Ms. Tandy died later that year.

Early in Mr. Cronyn's career in New York, a casting director at the Theater Guild suggested he go into summer stock, but he said she told him, "You may have a difficult time because you don't look like anything."

He said, "I tell this story to students because I hope it is encouraging." For a young actor, he said, the best hope is that he will walk into an office and somebody will say, "Ah, you're a lawyer, or a newsboy, or anything, I didn't look like anything and in the long run it turned out to be the biggest advantage I had."

Reviewing *Triple Play*, in 1959, Brooks Atkinson, critic for the New York Times, wrote: "Give Mr. Cronyn a wig, mustache and glasses, and he is about the best character actor in the business."

Mr. Cronyn said he followed one rule as an actor: "If you're doing the devil, look for the angel in him. If you're doing the angel, look for the devil in him." He said he saw few parallels between his own life and the lives he depicted. He said, "My idea of a lovely part is a part I can hide behind."

He did some of his best "hiding" with Ms. Tandy, to whom he was married for 52 years. Their first Broadway production together, *The Fourposter*, in 1951, helped make them the best-known acting duo since Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, though there were marked differences.

Where the Lunts were legends on Broadway and in regional theatres for sophisticated drawing-room comedy, the Cronyns were known for the classics — as well as well as the experimental, including the avant-garde plays of Samuel Beckett.

Mr. Cronyn said he was always flattered by the comparison with

the Lunts and had "extravagant admiration" for them. "But," he said, "the Lunts were fashionable people who played brilliantly in high comedy. We are totally different personalities. We are bread and cheese to their *mille-feuilles*."

Mr. Cronyn remembered reading for the Lunts in 1938.

"I'll never forget how much I wanted to be a member of their company," he said. "I auditioned for *The Sea Gull*. When they cast someone else, I went right to Grand Central Station, took the train to Boston, and on eight hours' notice went into a ridiculous play called *There's Always a Breeze*. It was a total failure."

Forty years later, when the Cronyns took the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Gin Game* to theatres across North America, Lynn Fontanne, then 90 years old, went backstage in Milwaukee, Wis., to congratulate them on their performance. When Mr. Cronyn reminded Ms. Fontanne of his failed tryout she said, "You know, Mr. Cronyn, Alfred made a mistake."

The Cronyn family thought it was Hume who made the mistake when he left a life of privilege in Canada for the uncertainties of the theatre, where he said he "grabbed" at work — "in church basements, the YMCA, wherever" — and did lots of flops: "Failure is the norm; it's success that is the exception." He emerged from this self-inflicted hazing process as one of the pre-eminent character actors of his time with a flair for writing and directing.

Mr. Cronyn's mother was a descendant of the wealthy Labatt brewery family; his father, also named Hume, was a Canadian financier and a member of the House of Commons, who expected his youngest son to be a lawyer. The younger Hume, born on July 18, 1911, in London, Ont., was sent to private schools where he said he was miserable.

"I was the smallest boy and subject to chronic bullying," he said. "That's why I learned to box. It was not out of an aggressive nature but I had to defend myself."

In 1932, he chose to leave McGill University in Montreal after his sophomore year to attend the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts despite the fact that during that same year he was nominated for the Canadian Olympic boxing team.

He received the prestigious Barter Theater Award in 1961 "for outstanding contribution to the theatre," and with Ms. Tandy was given the Brandeis University Creative Arts medal for a lifetime of distinguished achievement. In 1983, they shared the Common Wealth Award for distinguished service in the dramatic arts. In 1979, Mr. Cronyn and Ms. Tandy were both elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the American theatre. They also received the Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement medal in 1986.

When both of them were nominated for Tonys for *The Gin Game*,



Hume Cronyn in an MGM publicity shot: 'If you're doing the devil, look for the angel in him. If you're doing the angel, look for the devil in him.'

The films of Hume Cronyn

Shadow of a Doubt, 1943
Phantom of the Opera, 1943
The Cross of Lorraine, 1943
Lifeboat, 1944
The Seventh Cross, 1944
Main Street After Dark, 1945
The Sailor Takes a Wife, 1946
A Letter for Evie, 1946
The Green Years, 1946
Postman Always Rings Twice, 1946
Ziegfeld Follies, 1946
The Beginning of the End, 1947
Brute Force, 1947
The Bride Goes Wild, 1948
Top o' the Morning, 1949
People Will Talk, 1951
Crowded Paradise, 1956
Sunrise at Campobello, 1960
Cleopatra, 1963

Hamlet, 1964
The Arrangement, 1969
Gaily, Gaily, 1969
There Was a Crooked Man, 1970
Cocoon, 1974
The Parallax View, 1974
Honky Tonk Freeway, 1981
Rollover, 1981
The World According to Garp, 1982
Impulse, 1984
Brewster's Millions, 1985
Cocoon, 1985
Batteries Not Included, 1987
Cocoon: The Return, 1988
The Pelican Brief, 1993
Camilla, 1994
Marvin's Room, 1996

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which he also co-produced with Mike Nichols, only Ms. Tandy won. Mr. Cronyn insisted that there was never any professional jealousy. "Every triumph that Jessica has I feel in some totally illogical way is my triumph, and I hope she feels that way too." To Ms. Tandy there was nothing illogical about it. "His performance is part of mine," she said.

They became a married couple in 1942 but it wasn't until nine years later that they became a stage couple when they appeared together in *The Fourposter*. By 1986, when they were acting as husband and wife in *The Petition*, the New York Times drama critic Frank Rich was writing of "their legendary theatrical relationship," and of a Cronyn-Tandy moment as "an acting phenomenon now unique in the Broadway theatre and possibly never to come its way again." That same year, The Times's Mel Gussow called them "two actors at their summit."

For Mr. Cronyn, it was a long climb to the summit. It began on Broadway in 1934 with a bit part as a janitor in *Hippie's Holiday*, which, according to a later Playbill sketch, "is held by a few die-hards to be the worst play ever written." Early in his career, Mr. Cronyn

had the good fortune to cross paths with George Abbott. "Oh, I owe so much to that man," he said. "If you're not lucky enough to cut your teeth on Shakespeare, you should cut your teeth on farce."

He landed a role in the touring production of Mr. Abbott's *Three Men on a Horse* (1935-1936) and later succeeded Garson Kanin in *Boy Meets Girl* (1936). There were roles in 24 more productions on Broadway and on the road before he was summoned to Hollywood by Alfred Hitchcock to make his movie debut in *Shadow of a Doubt*.

As soon as he finished the Hitchcock movie, Mr. Cronyn and Ms. Tandy were married. After Ms. Tandy's death, Mr. Cronyn remarried, in 1996, to Susan Cooper, an award-winning children's-book writer and Mr. Cronyn's long-time playwright collaborator. She survives him, as do three children from his marriage to Ms. Tandy: son Christopher Cronyn and daughters Tandy Cronyn and Susan Tettemer, seven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. Also surviving are two stepchildren, Jonathan Grant and Kate Glennon. Mr. Cronyn's first marriage, to Emily Woodruff,

ended in divorce.

In all, Mr. Cronyn acted in more than 30 feature films including *The Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), opposite Fanny Brice; *The Beginning of the End* (1947), in which he played the role of J. Robert Oppenheimer; *People Will Talk* (1951), with Cary Grant, and *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960), in the role of Louis Howe.

In 1969, during the filming of *There Was a Crooked Man*, Cronyn was diagnosed as having cancer of the eye. His left eye was removed, and almost without giving it a thought, he turned immediately to his next role on the stage, as Hadrian VII. In five films in the 1980s — *Honky Tonk Freeway* (1980), *Cocoon* (1984), *Batteries Not Included* (1986) and *Cocoon: The Return* (1988) — he played opposite Ms. Tandy.

He said that he found film easier than the stage, but less satisfying. Nevertheless, he said it was necessary to accept lucrative film parts if he and Ms. Tandy were to do plays. Off Broadway at wages that barely paid for the car rental to get them to the theatre.

Although Mr. Cronyn lived in New York, the regional theatre attracted him because it was there that he could play the classics. Although in 1964 he did Polonius on Broadway in a production of *Hamlet* that broke records for the play in New York, his Richard III, Hamlet, Bottom and Shylock were performed out of town. The New York Times critic Clive Barnes wrote in 1976 that he was "a magnificent Shylock" in the Stratford Festival production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In 1994, when he and Ms. Tandy were about to receive the Tony for lifetime achievement, he reflected on his career:

"Not having been on the stage now for eight years," he said, "I'm touched that somebody should have seen fit to give us this award. I like making television shows. I like making films. But my heart belongs to theatre, which is really home and mother."

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