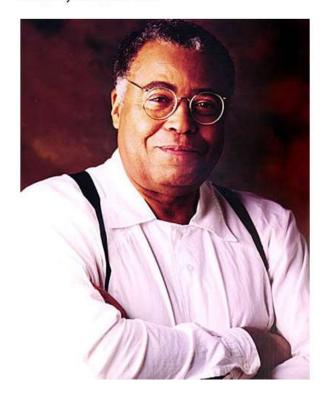
James Earl Jones Jones, James Earl



Record Information

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Date: b. 1931-

Description:

Actor James Earl Jones was born in 1931, in Arkabutla, Mississippi, the son of a semiprofessional boxer and farmer. Known for his distinctive speaking voice, Jones made his Broadway debut in 1957. He performed with the New York Shakespeare Festival in plays such as Othello and King Lear, among many others. After his role in the play The Great White Hope (1968), he moved on to be one of the first African Americans to be cast as a regular on a soap opera, earning a part on The Guiding Light. In 1977 Jones was the voice of Darth Vader in the Star Wars saga and in 1994, he was the voice of Mufasa in the Disney cartoon The Lion King. Jones has also used his successful career as a commercial actor to support charitable causes. Through his role as a spokesperson for the Bell Atlantic Yellow Pages,

One of the most distinguished living African-American actors, James Earl Jones is as well known for his rich, rumbling baritone as his imposing physical presence.

He was born on January 17, 1931, in Arkabutla, Mississippi. His father, Robert Earl Jones, was a prizefighter who turned to acting. His mother, Ruth, was a maid and former schoolteacher. Robert Jones left his family not long after Jones's birth, and the child was adopted and raised on a Michigan farm by his maternal grandparents. Jones developed a strong stutter as a youth and, out of embarrassment, rarely talked until he was 15. A high school English teacher took an interest in him when he learned that Jones wrote poetry. He helped him overcome his stutter and win a scholarship to the University of Michigan, where he went in 1949. Jones started as a premed student and then switched to drama. He graduated magna cum laude in 1953 and served a stint in the army.

After his service time, Jones moved to New York City to pursue an acting career and for a time was reunited with his father, another struggling actor. Together they waxed floors for money to live on while auditioning for plays. Jones began getting small parts in Off-Broadway shows but did not land his first role on Broadway until 1957. His career got a big boost when he was invited to join the New York Shakespeare Festival, which performed Shakespeare's plays each summer in Central Park. Jones was impressive in such leading Shakespearean roles as Othello, King Lear, and Oberon, the

king of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. During this time he made his film debut as a member of the flying squad that dropped a nuclear bomb on Russia in Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Two years later he made his television debut on the daytime soap opera *As The World Turns*. That same year Jones became a Broadway star when he was cast as a troubled black heavyweight boxer based on fighter Jack Johnson in the drama *The Great White Hope* (1966). His powerful performance earned him a Tony Award for best actor in a play. He later earned an Academy Award nomination for best actor when he reprised the role in the 1970 film version.

Jones gave strong performances in a handful of films in the 1970s. He played an eccentric psychiatrist in *The End of the Road* (1972), the first black president in *The Man* (1972) written by Rod Serling, and a black baseball player in *The Bingo Long Travelling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976). Jones gave a riveting performance as the great actor and human rights activist Paul Robeson in a controversial, one-man show on Broadway. He portrayed writer Alex Haley in television's *Roots: The Next Generation* (1979), the sequel to the blockbuster miniseries *Roots*, based on Haley's best-selling book.

Jones's most popular and probably best-known film role is one in which he was never seen. He was the threatening, mysterious voice of arch villain Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (1977) and its two sequels. The actor made a triumphant return to Broadway in 1985 as a defiant former baseball player in August Wilson's play *Fences*, which earned him his second Tony as best actor. He played another former baseball player and reclusive writer in the fantasy film *Field of Dreams* (1989), generally considered one of his finest screen roles.

In the 1990s, Jones, who had played an African chieftain on the 1960s TV series *Tarzan*, returned to series television as the excon and former cop Gabriel Bird in the dramatic series *Gabriel's Fire*. Despite generally good reviews, the series, retitled *Pros and Cons* in its second season, did not last. He has won three Emmys for his television work and has been nominated six other times most recently in 2004. Jones has found few good screen roles in recent years but has played many solid supporting roles. He was Admiral James Greer, Harrison Ford's mentor in *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), who reappears in *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), all based on the techno-thrillers of novelist Tom Clancy. Younger viewers may know Jones best for his popular television commercials for American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) and other companies, where his rich voice has been a strong selling tool.

In 2010, Jones starred in a Broadway production of *Driving Miss Daisy* at the Golden Theater. He played the same role in 2011 in the London West End production. In 2012, his appearance in Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* on Broadway earned him a Tony nomination for Best Performance in a Lead Role in a Play.

James Earl Jones received a Life Achievement Award from the Screen Actors Guild in January 2009. On November 12, 2011, Jones was awarded an Honorary Academy

Award. Regarding acting he has said, "It's important to say something that's from your heart."

References and Further Information

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