



Obituary: Richard McMillan / Canadian actor made Pittsburgh his second artistic home

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Richard John Lawrence McMillan was a frequent presence on stages and in front of the camera from his native Canada to Pittsburgh, tackling roles from Hamlet to Oscar Wilde.

Mr. McMillan — Rick to his friends — died Sunday in Toronto after a long struggle with thyroid cancer. He was 66.

The actor was named the Post-Gazette Performer of the Year for the 1989-90 season, when he starred in “Hamlet” at the now defunct Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival and in “The Mystery of Edwin Drood” at the Pittsburgh Playhouse.

Post-Gazette senior theater critic Christopher Rawson recalled that he first saw Mr. McMillan as Pooch-Bah in “The Mikado” at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, in 1982, “and he was just about the funniest thing I’d ever seen on stage.”

The actor was a native of Beaverton, Ontario, about 70 miles north of Toronto, where his parents ran the Beaverton Hotel for 39 years. He arrived in what became his second artistic home courtesy of Buck Favorini for the Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival. He went on to work for City Theatre, Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theater and others.

When he auditioned for “The Mystery of Edwin Drood” at the Playhouse, future Oscar-nominee and director Rob Marshall called Mr. Rawson “to ask if this extraordinary performer was for real, and I told him how lucky he was — as Rick then showed on stage.”

Mr. McMillan, a four-time winner of a DORA — Canada’s Tony — starred in “War Horse,” “The Mikado,” “Lord of the Rings,” “The Boy in the Photograph” and as Scar in “The Lion King.” At the Stratford Festival, he starred in “King Lear” in 1985 and as Falstaff in “Henry IV, Part Two” in 2001, among other roles.

PICT co-founder Andrew Paul met Mr. McMillan in the early 1990s, when Mr. Paul played Lee Harvey Oswald opposite his John Wilkes Booth in the Stephen Sondheim musical “Assassins.”

"I was in awe of Rick and playing the climactic scene in the Schoolbook Depository every night was a highlight of my brief acting career," Mr. Paul said.

Mr. McMillan joined PICT in 2007, as Caius Cassius in "Julius Caesar" and Donald Rumsfeld in "Stuff Happens." In 2010, Mr. Paul helmed what he called "my favorite show I have ever directed," "No Man's Land," for the PICT Pinter Festival, with a cast including Sam Tsoutsouvas, David Whalen and Jarrod DiGiorgi.

The director and Mr. Whalen drove together to Toronto last summer when they received word that Mr. McMillan was in failing health.

"And I'm so glad we did," Mr. Paul said. "Rick was quite simply the finest human being I have ever come across in this business. He was gracious and kind to everyone: his colleagues, his fans, complete strangers, everyone. He was also, as we all know, an extraordinary actor, capable of real genius."

Mr. Whalen called his fellow actor "a monumental man."

"Thank God I get to honor him today at work," Mr. Whalen said from Minneapolis, where he is appearing in the Guthrie production of "King Lear."

"Rick and I did several shows together, but our friendship goes much deeper. He was truly the most gracious, generous actor and person I've ever worked with. Such a beautiful soul. I am a better man because of him."

"I will miss his loving and encouraging phone calls to me, which always began with 'Canada calling,'" said Pittsburgh actor Ken Bolden.

Mr. McMillan's final onstage appearances in Pittsburgh were three 2014 performances of A.R. Gurney's "Love Letters," opposite his wife, actress Anne Louise Bannon. He arrived here from Canada having already received a fatal prognosis.

"I'm willing to go with it, on whatever emotional journey," Mr. McMillan told the Post-Gazette. "We'll take the ride wherever it goes."

Proceeds from the event went to a fund for undergraduate theater students at the University of Pittsburgh Department of Theatre Arts, named in honor of the actor "to continue Rick's legacy and dedication to excellence."

Mr. McMillan is survived by his wife and a daughter, Maggie. Visitation is from 3 to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Heritage Funeral Centre in Toronto. The funeral Mass is at 11 a.m. Thursday at Corpus Christi Church, 1810 Queen St. E., Toronto. The family has requested that in lieu of flowers, donations be given in Mr. McMillan's name to either the Canadian Actors Fund or the Performing Arts Lodge.

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