

James Earl Jones

A Familiar Voice

BY EMILY BROOKE

James Earl Jones—that unmistakable voice—resonant, distinguished, melodious, and poignant all at once. Over the past 50 years, the actor’s humble career beginnings have swelled into a list of theater, television, movie, and commercial credits that reads like an epic. But, despite his thriving professional life, Jones is a country man at heart, residing on 67 acres in Dutchess County.

Along with his much younger wife, Ceci, a slender 5’3” blond with clear blue eyes—accentuated by the periwinkle sweater she has paired with slim fitting blue jeans—Jones arrives at my home (they don’t allow press to their house) only 15 minutes late, after an apologetic call to say they were stuck in traffic. This courtesy, the first indication of the couple’s categorically unpretentious, un-Hollywood way of life, sets the tone for what feels more like a reunion with old friends than a celebrity interview.

Jones, who won his first Tony Award for his portrayal of heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, in *The Great White Hope*, also garnered an Academy Award nomination for his appearance in the film version. He received his second Tony for his riveting performance in August Wilson’s *Fences*.

James Earl’s Pearls

Best President

Abraham Lincoln

Vacation Spot

Alaska

Favorite Sports Teams

Jets, Mets, Nets

Comfort Food

Strawberry shortcake

Bedside Reading

Scripts

Music To His Ears

Classical and Joe Cocker-type rock ‘n’ roll.

New Year’s Resolution

Quit smoking and lose fifteen pounds.

Best Purchase

The land we’re living on.

Dining Out

McKinney & Doyle in Pawling; Capriccio and The Arch, both in Brewster

Fitness Regimen

Treadmill, Pilates, free weights.

Biggest Splurge

An \$8000 koi fish.

Favorite Flower

Violet

To Play Him In A Movie

Colin Powell. He said he’s got dibs.

His film credits include *Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Coming to America* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *Patriot Games* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995), *A Family Thing* (1996), and *Finder’s Fee* (2000).

Jones has won four Emmy awards (including one Daytime Emmy). He has appeared on the small screen in several episodes of *Homicide: Life on the Street*, in the HBO movies *Rebound* and *The 2nd Civil War*, in the CBS Movie of the Week *Timepiece*, the Showtime movies *Alone* and *Summer’s End*, and as Alex Haley in *Roots: The Next Generation*.

His most fêted role—the ominous voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* films (it was not actually his body under the costume)—contradicts his gentle and accessible real-life persona, undoubtedly a result of his modest upbringing.

Born on January 17, 1931, Jones was raised by his maternal grandparents on a 40-acre farm in Arkabutla Township, Mississippi and then in Manistee County, Michigan. His parents divorced and his father, Robert Earl, left when he was an infant. The two did not meet again until Jones was 21 years old. His mother, Ruth, drifted in and out of his life, marrying twice more but never finding happiness. “I felt sometimes as a child that I had killed my mother. Sometimes I felt that she had killed me by leaving me behind,” says Jones, hands folded in his lap. “I rejoiced in her visits, yet her impending departure brought me to grief.”

When Jones was six years old, due to a severe stutter, the same voice that has afforded him worldwide recognition on stage and screen fell absent and left in its wake an eight-year silence that has shaped the man he is today.

“My conviction grows that language is not natural to man,” says the 6’2” actor, whose majestic presence belies his familiar demeanor. “Because of my stuttering, I came at language standing on my head, turning language inside out, trying to discover the motivation, the truth of a character—not from his intellect but from the sounds he makes.”

But through exposure to the literature of Shakespeare, Emerson, and Longfellow, offered by Jones’ high school



With wife, Ceci

English teacher, Donald E. Crouch, his fear of the written word began to diminish and he started composing poetry. It was this new passion that ultimately became the catalyst for his journey out of silence.

“One winter, we got grapefruit, shipped all the way from Florida to Michigan on the food train...The taste of it knocked me out, the pure, juicy luxury of grapefruit in winter. I decided to write a poem about it, patterned after the poem I knew best—Longfellow’s ‘Song of Hiawatha,’” Jones recalls. However, Professor Crouch was skeptical as to whether Jones had actually composed the poem himself and suggested that in order to prove that he had not plagiarized, he should recite it aloud in front of the class.

“I was shaking as I stood up, cursing myself. I strained to get the words out, pushing from the bottom of my soul. I opened my mouth—and to my astonishment, the words flowed out smoothly, every one of them,” says Jones. “There was no stutter...Professor Crouch and I had stumbled on a principle which speech therapists and psychologists understand. The written word is safe for the stutterer. The script is a sanctuary.”

Jones, who has never completely overcome his stutter (although it is virtually impossible to detect), remained

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friends with Crouch throughout his life. "Once when I was performing Shakespeare at Yale, I wrote to Donald and said, 'I'd like you to come; here's a ticket.' He replied, 'Jim, I'm going blind and if I can't see, I don't want to just sit there and hear you. I've heard enough of you,'" Jones recounts, releasing a husky chortle.

In the fall of 1949, Jones enrolled in ROTC at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "I loved the Army; I still do. I believe in it as a form of activity for young men and women. But I won't say I miss the draft, although I think there was something right about it when there was a

war," says Jones. "By the time I was assigned to a unit, after leaving college, the Korean War was over. So I was sent off to Colorado for further ranger training in the cold weather. We grew beards and slept in the snow. My big fantasy was to get married and spend my honeymoon in one sleeping bag in the Rocky Mountains."

While Jones initially set out to be pre-med, chemistry and physics eluded him, and he decided to study drama instead, appearing in a number of campus productions. And in 1955, the aspiring actor moved to New York City to study his craft at the American Theatre Wing. Just two

years later, Jones landed his first job on Broadway as an understudy in *The Egghead* and in 1958 he got a speaking part as the valet in the Broadway play *Sunrise at Campobello*. In the ensuing four-and-a-half decades, Jones has built a career, based on eloquence and articulation, unrivaled by any other entertainer.

While he insists that the countless awards he has received throughout the years do not symbolize success or talent, when the call came from The Kennedy Center Honors' co-creator, producer, and writer **George Stevens, Jr.** to say that Jones had been selected as one of the 2002

honorees (along with **James Levine, Chita Rivera, Paul Simon, and Elizabeth Taylor**) for the 25th anniversary celebration, "I went numb," recalls Jones. "To be an actor in a situation like that—there's a button that just turns off and it's like you're not even there."

Host of the KCH, Secretary of State **Colin Powell**, says, "James Earl Jones had the heart of a lion and a voice to match—long before he played Mufasa in *The Lion King*. Like the heroes he has immortalized on stage and film, he had to overcome personal challenges to learn how to become successful. Not the least of these challenges was a severe stutter as a young man. He found his deliverance from that problem in the music of poetry and the magic of acting." Powell adds, "Jimmy is an inspira-

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Ceci and James Earl at their wedding on the Ides of March, 1982, at the United Nations Chapel.

James Earl Jones A Familiar Voice

tion for young people today living in tough circumstances. He is an inspiration not just to young people, to people around the world."

Since the December 7th ceremony, life has returned to normal at the Jones household. A typical workday will find the actor up early, sometimes before dawn, and either in a car to New York City or on a plane heading to a public appearance. Currently, Jones devotes most of his time to his job as the voice of Verizon (formerly Bell Atlantic). As for his professional future he says, "When my contract with Verizon is finished, I hope to get back to the stage and more lengthy movies. Right now, it's hard to carve out the amount of time that a producer needs for Broadway. And I don't think I've made "The Movie" yet. In spite of the wonderful things I've done; there isn't one that I'd say, 'I can leave that as my legacy.'"

While Jones deems the theater his true passion, if not for his foray into television, he would never have met Ceci. Born in Cheyenne, Wyoming, she's an animated, self-proclaimed Army brat who "grew up everywhere, went to high schools in Pennsylvania and Miami, to Emerson College in Boston, and ultimately decided to pursue acting.

"I met Jimmy in 1979, when we did a **Steven Bochco** series together—a big bomb. I was living in Hollywood, where cute little blondes are a dime a dozen. And the idea that I was going to get to work for even one minute with James Earl Jones was almost enough to send me into breathing spasms," she says, smiling at her husband. "I got on the set and there was nothing diva about him. I was married to another man and he was engaged to another woman and had already been married once before. Everyone on the set treated him like he was the second coming. People were pretty much bowing and kissing his feet. And I just needed to see if I could goose him a little. We ended up laughing a lot and hitting it off like gangbusters.

"My marriage didn't work out and neither did Jimmy's relationship. I decided to move back east, which he found out through the grapevine," says Ceci. "When I got off the plane, Jimmy couldn't be there because he was doing a matinee, so he sent a stretch limousine and a dozen long-stemmed red roses. There was this driver holding a sign with my last name and I still assumed it was for someone else. The note with the flowers read, 'Sorry I couldn't be there and that things didn't work out with you and your husband. Let's have dinner.' That was the beginning."

In 1982, the couple married at the United Nations Chapel and are very close to their son, **Flynn** (now a 20-year-old college student), who Jones describes as "a fabulous artist, both drawing and writing." He adds, "I would be very pleased if he wanted to pursue a career in show business, but I'm also happy that he doesn't."

Jones, who had been living in Dutchess County prior to marrying Ceci, was not confident that his living arrangements would meet her standards. "We drove up to this house," she says, pressing her hands over her eyes. "And I was just horrified. There were used cars on blocks in the front yard. It was the butchest house I'd ever seen. I thought, 'No way, I'm not living here.'

"The kitchen had a makeshift stovetop, sink, and table, all on sawhorses, and there were no cupboards." Ceci decided to renovate, adding a wing and other amenities to



With their son, Flynn

the lodge-style home, where they live to this day. Originally residing on an eight-acre parcel, "We just kept adding plots around us," says Jones. "We have flower and vegetable gardens. I love my collard and turnip greens."

The pair still keeps an apartment in New York City, but savors time spent alone and with friends—neighboring actors **Jane Alexander**, **Liam Neeson**, **Natasha Richardson** and Broadway producers **Fran** and **Barry Weissler**—in the country.

"Barry and I met Jimmy and Ceci professionally when we hired them to perform in our production of *Othello*," says Fran Weissler. "However, we became good friends when we discovered their incredible warmth, intelligence, and humor. Our time together is a complete joy. They are true friends and wonderful people."

Jane Alexander, who is also acquainted with the couple both professionally and personally, is equally enamored with her friends. "Jimmy is a giant on stage and screen. Both my husband (director **Ed Sherin**) and I have worked with him and Ceci and we've known them for years—through other relationships," she says. "They are truly a perfect match. We always knew that Jimmy needed someone strong, yet nurturing, and that's Ceci.

"Although our busy work schedules do not permit us to get together as frequently as we would like, we feel very close to them. We talk about our kids, go out to dinner, and spend time at each other's homes. They always have something wonderful going on at their house—like some amazing new fish tank."

The fish that Alexander is referring to are of the koi variety, which the Joneses raise along with pygmy goats. The couple also has a nine-year-old dog named **Patches**. "He's a mutt—part German pointer, part pit bull—who so wishes he could talk," says Jones with boyish candor. "He can't handle it when people are having a conversation that he's not a part of."

The Joneses also enjoy "the wonderful shopping in various little local villages, like Katonah," says Ceci. "I

never imagined that I would be able to find clothes that I require for certain functions outside of Manhattan, but Mary Jane Denzer in White Plains is as fabulous, if not better, than anything in the City. I bought a stunning, deep burgundy gown with pearls, sparkles, and beads by Badgley Mischka from her for The Kennedy Center Honors. The minute I saw it, I knew it was the one."

Going to the movies together is another pleasure for James Earl and Ceci. But his celebrity makes such public appearances tricky. "I don't mind being approached at all, because, for the most part, people are very nice. But you never know when it's going to get overwhelming," says Jones. "It becomes distracting for my family when more than one or two people gather and, as such, attract attention."

One of the advantages of Jones' fame, however, is the ability to lend his name and time to charitable organizations, The American Heart Association in Westchester (Ceci's mother died of coronary artery disease) topping his list. Jones will be an honored guest at their premier benefit event, *An Affair of the Heart*, at the Apawamis Club on May 1st, where he will present Lifetime Achievement Awards to world-renowned heart surgeon **George E. Reed, M.D.**, Medical Director of the Westchester Medical Center and Vice-Dean of New York Medical College, and business leader **Martin S. Berger**, Chairman of the Board of Robert Martin Company LLC and Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of City and Suburban Federal Savings Bank.

"Mr. Jones is making an invaluable contribution to our efforts to reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke for all of us and will help make *An Affair of the Heart* one of the most exciting events of the season," says Executive Director **Shelley S. Lotter**. "An extraordinary man, James Earl Jones is a wonderful, dedicated, and inspiring individual whose compassion and involvement with this and other important causes is tremendously appreciated. We thank him from the bottom of our hearts."

Brilliant performer, generous soul, and devoted husband and father—Jones appears unflawed. But Ceci—like any good wife—is quick to reveal a couple of his bad habits: "He spits in the sink and then turns on the hot water to wash it away, but it doesn't. And, he always leaves the lights on," she says with mock irritation. "But the big picture is that he is giving, funny, tender, and erudite. We really are an easy fit."

The Joneses insist that neither age nor race has ever impacted their relationship. However, Ceci admits that, "to this day, there are country roads in the Deep South on which—in spite of Jimmy's celebrity—I would not want to break down with him," she says matter-of-factly.

But as with old friends, a dose of wicked humor is soon to follow. "Of course, I could just jump into the back seat," says Ceci, turning to cue her husband.

"And I'd say, 'Miss Daisy, I told you we should have gassed up.'" **WAG**

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