



Raymond Burr.
Courtesy Robert
Benevides.

Burr, Raymond (1917-1993)

by Linda Rapp

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For millions of television viewers worldwide, actor Raymond Burr will always be identified with Perry Mason, the character he played in a long-running courtroom drama series, but in his career, which spanned five decades, he played a variety of roles in radio, television and film and on the stage. He was also an avid breeder of orchids and the owner of a winery.

Quite apart from his importance as an accomplished actor, however, Burr has a particular significance in glbtq history for his response to the pressure he faced as a gay actor in a homophobic culture. It is clear that he felt the need to hide his homosexuality by carefully constructing (if not inventing out of whole cloth) a biography in which he seemed to conform to the heterocentric norms of the 1950s, when he rose to prominence as an actor.

Raymond William Stacy Burr was born in New Westminster, British Columbia, on May 21, 1917. When he was six, his parents, William Burr, a hardware dealer, and Minerva Smith Burr, a pianist and music teacher, divorced, and the boy and his mother moved to Vallejo, California, where his maternal grandfather owned a hotel.

Burr was sent to the nearby San Rafael Military Academy but, with the onset of the Great Depression, dropped out at the age of thirteen to help support the family. In the ensuing years he had various jobs, working on a sheep and cattle ranch, at a U.S. Forest Service weather station and in China, as well as doing surveying and sales work.

Burr also began doing occasional acting jobs at the age of twelve. He appeared on the stage in Canada, England, and Australia and also sang at a nightclub in Paris. He eventually worked on Broadway, appearing in *Crazy With the Heat* in 1941 and *The Duke in Darkness* in 1944.

After service in the Navy, Burr headed for Hollywood and soon won his first film role in Mervyn LeRoy's *Without Reservations* (1946). The intense and physically imposing Burr was often cast as a villainous or intimidating character. Notable among his early work were his performances as a district attorney in George Stevens' *A Place in the Sun* (1951) and as the murderer in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954).

In the course of his career, Burr had significant roles in over sixty cinematically-released films and almost forty made-for-television movies. His work included dramas, westerns, monster movies, and even comedies such as Ken Finkleman's *Airplane II: The Sequel* (1982).

In 1955 Burr was asked to audition for the part of district attorney Hamilton Burger in a planned television series based on the Perry Mason mystery novels of Erle Stanley Gardner. Burr insisted on trying out for the title role as well. Impressed by Burr's performance, Gardner chose him to play the lead.

Perry Mason ran from 1957 until 1966. Burr won two Emmy awards (1959 and 1961) for his work on the popular series, and he became one of the highest-paid actors in television at the time. Burr returned to the

role of the clever defense attorney in 1985, making over two dozen *Perry Mason* movies for television in the next eight years.

Burr starred in two other television series, the hit *Ironside* (1967-1975) and the flop *Kingston: Confidential* (1977), and appeared in several miniseries.

When it came to his private life, Burr has been described as "the most secretive of men." Reference sources state that he was married three times and had a son, but it is unclear how much of this information is true.

According to various accounts, Burr's first wife was Annette Sutherland, an English actress whom he married in 1941 and who supposedly died in the same plane crash as actor Leslie Howard when, on June 1, 1943, during World War II, the aircraft, en route from Lisbon to London, was shot down by the Germans.

At the very least, the story about Sutherland's death is a fabrication. There were only three adult females on the list of passengers and crew of Howard's ill-fated flight, and Annette Sutherland (or Burr) was not among them.

Burr's second marriage, which can be documented, was in 1947 to Isabella Ward. The union was annulled after a few months.

The name of Burr's third wife is given as Laura Andrina Morgan, who allegedly married Burr in 1953 and died of cancer in 1955.

The putative son of Burr and Sutherland, Michael Evan Burr, is said to have died of leukemia at the age of ten in 1953. In a rare public comment on his personal life, Burr claimed to have taken time off and traveled around the United States with his son in the last year of the boy's life.

Reports from Burr's closest associates cast doubt on the account. John Strauss, his publicist since 1953, said that Burr "never mentioned any wives or a son" and that he was in fact working steadily during the time when he claimed to have been on the road with his son. In addition, Burr's sister, Geraldine Fuller, said that neither she nor her mother ever saw Burr's son. None of Burr's longtime friends seems to have met any of his wives.

Despite the suspicious biography and occasional efforts to portray Burr as romantically linked to various actresses, including Natalie Wood, industry insiders were aware of his homosexuality. In 1961 Hedda Hopper, gossip columnist and mother of William Hopper, a co-star on *Perry Mason*, wrote to tell Burr that she had received a compromising letter about him but said that she would not divulge the information, promising to "stand up and swear anything for [him]."

In 1963 Burr and his partner, Robert Benevides, an actor whom he had met on the *Perry Mason* set, bought Naitumba, an island in Fiji. There they pursued their shared interest in breeding orchids, a hobby that they turned into a successful business, Sea God Nurseries.

They also ran a cattle ranch and worked to improve the lives of the 150 residents of the island, building houses, a church, and a school. Burr sponsored the publication of the first dictionary of the Fiji language and also provided money to send the island's youngsters to school, a practice that he continued even after he and Benevides sold the island in 1983.

By 1980 Burr and Benevides had moved their orchid business to a farm in the Sonoma valley of California. In the early 1980s Burr donated two greenhouses and a portion of the orchid collection to the California State Polytechnic University-Pomona.

In the decade that followed, he and Benevides donated thousands more plants, and in 1992 they gave the

university a collection of art and antique furniture valued at \$1,100,000. Other gifts made by Burr and Benevides include theater and law school scholarships.

In the 1980s Burr and Benevides became interested in grape-growing and wine production. Vines were planted on their northern California farm in 1986, and their first vintage was produced in 1990.

At the same time both men were involved in the making of *Perry Mason* television movies, Burr as the star and Benevides as a producer. By the early 1990s, however, Burr was in failing health due to cancer. In August 1993 he completed his last film, *Perry Mason: The Case of the Killer Kiss*, after which he retired to the farm, where he died on September 12, 1993.

Although Burr had not wanted it, Benevides decided to name their business the Raymond Burr Vineyards as a tribute to his partner of thirty-five years.

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Raymond Burr Vineyards website: www.raymondburrvineyards.com

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