



James Coco.

## Coco, James (1930-1987)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Quick-witted, roly-poly, sad-eyed clown James Coco proved one of the most versatile and successful American stage, film, and television actors from the late-1960s through the mid-1980s. Master of the slow burn, he might rise to comic heights of hysterical outrage, only suddenly to assert a quiet dignity that made his audience stifle their belly laughs and melt with sympathy at the absurdity of his plight.

Coco was the lynchpin in a gay theater coterie that played a weekly poker game at his apartment on Greenwich Village's West Tenth Street in the 1960s and early 1970s. The coterie included playwright Terrence McNally and actor Robert Drivas among other aspiring talents. These young artists, bound by ties of friendship and sensibility, would become significant contributors to American theater of the day.

Coco's stage and screen partnerships with playwrights Terrence McNally and Neil Simon would prove one of the great comic legacies of late twentieth-century American culture.

### Biography

"I'm just a kid from the Bronx who wanted to be an actor," Coco would say self-deprecatingly when his circumstances grew complicated or his fame became overwhelming.

James Emil Coco was born on March 21, 1930 to a shoemaker and his homemaker wife; he had one sister. He grew up in what he described as "an old-fashioned Italian family where we used to sit down for Sunday dinner at 2 and get up at 7." That same love of food and good company contributed to the eating disorder that would both compromise his self-image and drive his comedy as an adult.

From an early age Coco was serious about acting. His anecdotes about the children's theater company which he joined after graduating high school may have planted a seed in the mind of his close friend, playwright Terrence McNally, that years later would become "Captain Lou and Miss Jessie's Magic Theatre for Children of All Ages" in McNally's *Dedication, or The Stuff of Dreams* (2005).

Coco went on to study with Uta Hagen, one of the most influential people shaping acting style on the post-World War II New York City stage.

He made his Broadway debut alongside Bert Lahr and Angela Lansbury in George Feydeau's *Hotel Paradiso* (1957). And he quickly went on to appear in such diverse plays--and to act with such major talents--as Patrick Dennis's *Everybody Loves Opal* (1961) with Eileen Heckart and Brenda Vaccaro; Santha Rama Rau's *A Passage to India* (1962), based on the E. M. Forster novel, with Gladys Cooper and Anne Meacham; Bertolt Brecht's *Arturo Ui* (1963) with Christopher Plummer; John Whiting's *The Devils* (1965), based upon Aldous Huxley's study of religious hysteria, *The Devils of Loudun*, with Anne Bancroft and Jason Robards; and Pauline McCauley's *The Astrakhan Coat* (1967) with Brian Bedford and Roddy McDowall.

He won Obie awards for his performances in Denis Johnston's *The Moon in Yellow River* (1961) and in a pair

of one-acters by Murray Schisgal titled *Fragments* and *The Basement* (1968), in which he appeared with Gene Hackman.

It was Coco's involvement with playwright Terrence McNally, however, that established him as one of the most versatile and popular actors of his generation. Ironically, their initial collaboration on *Here's Where I Belong* (1968), a musical based on John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* for which McNally wrote the book, proved a disaster, closing after only one performance and losing its entire investment, driving *Variety* to label it "The Costliest One Night Stand on Broadway."

McNally was so angry with changes made to his script without his permission by producer Mitch Miller (of television's "Sing Along with Mitch" fame) that he demanded that his name be removed from the program. But Coco's hilarious performance as a Chinese houseboy who exploited racist stereotypes by speaking pidgin English to his employers but perfectly modulated English privately to his friends proved the one element of the production applauded by most critics.

Later the same year, however, the friends collaborated on a pair of plays, one of which would firmly establish their respective careers. "Why doesn't anybody ever write a play for a fat character actor?" Coco had asked McNally, who set out to craft two vehicles for Coco's abundant talents.

In *Witness*, Coco played a brash window washer who stumbles into the apartment of a would-be presidential assassin. And in *Next*--which enjoyed workshop productions at the White Barn Theatre in Westport, Connecticut, and at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, before opening in Manhattan on February 10, 1969 at the Greenwich Mews Playhouse--Coco played an overweight, middle-aged man who is clearly unfit for military service yet is forced to undergo a humiliating army induction physical by a physician who ignores the obvious.

Directed by comic genius Elaine May, *Next* was equal parts Vietnam War protest play and horrific, Kafkaesque nightmare. Coco's self-deprecating businessman presumes that the absurdity of his induction notice will be recognized once his physical begins, yet he grows increasingly desperate as he finds himself overtaken by the dark, impersonal forces of a totalitarian government agency.

*Next* was very much a part of the Zeitgeist of the time, starting with a title that echoed the dramatic song "Next" in Eric Blau and Mort Shuman's long-running *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* (1968), which was likewise a protest against the dehumanizing experience of being inducted into the military. McNally's *Next* ran for 707 performances, Coco's performance proving a tour-de-force of comic mania, winning him enormous acclaim, and allowing him to move out of his seedy apartment on West 10th Street (which he bequeathed to the younger and less-prosperous McNally).

Coco would collaborate one final time with McNally on the ill-fated *Broadway, Broadway* (1978), in which Coco played James Wicker, a stage-actor who had abandoned Broadway for Hollywood to star in a television situation comedy that has just been cancelled. The play presents the farcical goings-on at the opening night party celebrating the latest work of Wicker's best friend, playwright Peter Austin--an evening that reveals the gross self-absorption of theater people, yet, finally, the extraordinary creative bond that they share which allows them to rise above disappointment and enthusiastically begin work on a new show even before their current flop has closed.

Filled with jokes about the contemporary Broadway scene, but also offering an affectionate portrait of McNally and Coco's past history, the play failed during its Philadelphia try-out, in part due to the miscasting of Geraldine Paige as a ditzy first-time producer. But in 1987 McNally would rewrite *Broadway, Broadway* as *It's Only a Play*, in which Coco played opposite a much better suited Christine Baranski. It earned Coco excellent notices, and proved his last stage performance before his death.

Coco served other playwrights equally well. His most daring performance was in Albert Innaurato's *The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* (1977), directed by close friend Robert Drivas, in which he played a five hundred pound man, once raped orally by a group of boys on a school playground, who locks himself in an apartment and consumes his own flesh--that is, he literally eats himself to death. The *New York Times* reported that although Coco "was initially afraid . . . that he might fail and destroy his entire career, his shattering performance elicited superlative reviews"--but, curiously, no Obie Award nomination.

Coco likewise proved an ideal interpreter of playwright Neil Simon, who wrote especially for him *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers* (1969), a comedy about the inept attempts of an overweight, married, middle-aged restaurant owner to join the 1960s sexual revolution. Coco received a Tony Award nomination for his performance in the play, which also starred Doris Roberts and Linda Lavin, and which ran for 706 performances.

Coco would go on to star in three Neil Simon-penned films: *Murder by Death* (1976), *The Cheap Detective* (1978), and *Only When I Laugh* (1981). For the latter, in which he played Marsha Mason's gay best friend, Coco earned the distinction of being one of only two actors to be nominated in the same film for both an Academy Award for *best* performance, and a Razzie Award for *worst* performance, by a featured actor. In 1982, Coco would return to the Broadway stage in a revival of Simon's *Little Me*, a musical based upon Patrick Dennis's fictional memoirs of sexual adventuress Belle Poitrine.

From the late 1960s until the mid-1980s, Coco seemed omnipresent in film and on television. He acted opposite Liza Minelli in *Tell Me that You Love Me*, *Junie Moon* (1970) and Elaine May and Walter Matthau in *A New Leaf* (1971), a film written and directed by May, who had directed him on stage in *Next* three years earlier. He played the hapless, down-to-earth Sancho Panza to Peter O'Toole's Don Quixote and Sophia Loren's Aldonza/Dulcinea in the film version of *Man of La Mancha* (1972), and starred in a fictional version of silent film actor Fatty Arbuckle's fall from grace, *The Wild Party* (1975).

Coco also worked as a regular on television soap operas like *The Edge of Night* (1967-68) and *Guiding Light* (1986-87), and as a guest star on such television series as *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Medical Center*, *Maude*, *Trapper John, M.D.*, *Fantasy Island*, *Matt Houston*, *The Love Boat*, *Murder, She Wrote*, and *Who's the Boss?*

His dramatic range was evident in a movie made for television of *The Diary of Ann Frank* (1980), in which he played opposite his *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* co-star, Doris Roberts. He won an Emmy Award in 1982 for his guest appearance on *St. Elsewhere*.

Coco's experience in youth working as a member of a children's theater company served him well in his performances in "Looking through Super Plastic Elastic Goggles at Color" (*NBC Children's Theatre*, 1970), as Santa Claus in *The Curious Case of Santa Claus* (1982), and as Mr. Skeffington in *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984).

Curiously, for all his ubiquity on television, producers had difficulty crafting a successful series for him. In *Calucci's Department* (1973), he played the harried director of a state unemployment bureau. And in *The Dumplings* (1976), he was half an overweight married couple who operated a delicatessen in New York City. Neither show shot more than eleven episodes, which at the time proved less than half a season.

As he aged, Coco had increasing difficulty controlling his appetites. He went on an emotional roller coaster of compulsion, depression, and recovery. However, after one particularly successful weight-loss program, he authored *The James Coco Diet* with actress Marion Paone, with whom he had appeared on stage decades earlier in both Innaurato's *The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* and McNally's *Witness*. At the time of his death, he was reported to be writing a cook book, *Cooking with Coco*.

Coco died of coronary arrest on February 25, 1987, just hours after sitting with Terrence McNally, still his best friend, watching on television an episode of *Who's the Boss?* titled "Diet in Cell Block 11," in which Coco had performed two weeks earlier.

McNally, the principal speaker at the memorial service held at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel three days later, recalled that "Jimmy was not feeling well and looked it. . . . Jimmy, of course, was wonderful [in the sitcom]--the timing, the takes (*honest* takes; there is such a thing when a Master is at work), the truth in the most trivial of TV sitcom scripts. The audience, as usual, he had eating out of his hand and his fellow actors were clearly delighted to be sharing a scene with a prince. But instead of watching the show, I found myself watching Jimmy. He sat forward in his chair. Leaning towards the set. He was smiling. His eyes were shining. He really was a kid again, taking the greatest joy in what he did just about better than anyone I know."

### **Legacy**

Following Coco's death, Neil Simon eulogized Coco as "an acting comedian" who "was as funny as any actor I've ever met. He typified the loser. As a character, he was always in trouble in everything he ever did. He exposed himself in all the most vulnerable ways, and he was always able to play the foibles of anybody."

Coco's sensitive representations of the vulnerability of human desire no doubt sprang in part from the challenges that his weight and premature baldness created for him as a gay man living in New York City at the height of what Brad Gooch has termed "The Golden Age of Promiscuity."

McNally eulogized Coco in terms of the nickname, "Juicy," that the playwright had given him when they first met years earlier: "Ripe. Abundant. Delicious. You could taste him." But it wasn't just the spirit of life that Coco incarnated that McNally sought to celebrate with the nickname; there was an emotional component to be communicated as well. "His love was inexhaustible. Juicy. It couldn't stop, wouldn't stop, didn't know how to. Juicy."

Coco infused his performances with this same spirit of delight, allowing McNally to praise as well the enormous pleasure that Coco took in acting. "He was an immaculate actor. Fastidious. Precise but with an emotional generosity that went to the last row. People adored Jimmy but I think they adored acting with him even more. He made the great ones greater by always giving 100% of himself and made the less-than-his-equals nearly that by giving 150%. Jimmy could not give a 'walk-through' performance. The theatre and his craft were too holy. Jimmy lived to act."

Perhaps the greatest tribute that McNally paid his friend and colleague was to create in his image the character of Ganesh in *A Perfect Ganesh* (produced in 1993, but first conceived during a trip that McNally made to India a week after Coco's death), who teaches two grieving American tourists that "We all have a place here [on earth]. Nothing is right, nothing is wrong. Allow. Accept. Be."

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### **About the Author**

**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.