



Robert Drivas in 1973.

Drivas, Robert (1938-1986)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Actor-director Robert Drivas came of age professionally following the explosion on the American scene of "method" actors Marlon Brando and James Dean. Like them, Drivas brought a provocative sexuality and an emotional intensity to his stage and screen performances at a time when the male body was being liberated as the object of the audience's gaze.

He had just made the transition from accomplished actor to successful director when his life was cut short by an AIDS-related illness.

Drivas the Actor

Drivas was born Robert Choromokos to a Greek-American family in Chicago on November 21, 1938. (His year of birth, however, may actually have been 1936; possibly, like Tennessee Williams, Drivas shaved two years off his age when starting out professionally in order to appear more precocious.)

After attending both the University of Chicago and the University of Miami, Drivas trained in classical theater technique at the Greek Playhouse in Athens and was introduced to avant garde theater at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami Beach, where Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* enjoyed its American premiere in 1956.

Drivas made an auspicious professional stage debut as the young pharaoh in Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn* (1958), which starred veteran Anthony Quayle as Moses and the legendary Katharine "Kit" Cornell as the Egyptian princess who raised to manhood the infant found at the riverbank among the reeds.

He went on to act with such (in some cases, incipient) luminaries as George C. Scott, Marian Seldes, and Vincent Gardenia in Millard Lampell's *The Wall* (1960); Alfred Drake in Jack Richardson's *Lorenzo* (1963); and Claudette Colbert in Hugh and Margaret Williams' *The Irregular Verb to Love* (1963). Drivas won the Drama Desk Award playing opposite a similarly honored Estelle Parsons in William Hanley's *Mrs. Dally Has a Lover* (1962).

Drivas's relationship with playwright Terrence McNally influenced Drivas's career both on and off the stage. McNally recalls that, having seen Drivas perform in numerous plays and having been impressed by his stage presence, he invited the actor to read for the part of Sigfrid, a sexually charismatic young man who is deputized by his domineering mother, Ruby, to bring home nightly a sexual pick-up for the subsequent amusement of his cruel family in *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1965), McNally's first professionally produced play.

Whereas Sigfrid usually brings home a female partner, on the evening in question in the play he chooses a sweet-tempered yet ineffectual young gay man, Clarence, whose idealism is so viciously mocked by Ruby

and her brood that he flees from the house and is electrocuted on the security fence that the family has erected around its property, causing Sigfrid to question the reliability of his mother's vision of the world.

The play proved controversial from the start. As Neal Weaver recalls, after a staff member stumbled upon a photo session to create the slides of Sigfrid and Clarence's sexual encounter that Ruby will use to humiliate Clarence, a rumor spread at the Actors Studio that a workshop production of an early version of the play would dramatize the making of homosexual pornography. The discussion that followed that first workshop performance (which did not feature Drivas) grew heated as members of the Studio debated the play's morality.

In a subsequent production at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, members of the theater's board of directors were so upset by the play's subject matter that they refused to allow tickets to go on sale, which resulted in the play being performed every evening to only a few stalwart season subscribers.

The play was vilified by the New York critics when it opened on Broadway on April 26, 1965. Nevertheless, largely appreciative audiences flocked to see it, causing the play to sell out during its short, two-week run. At one performance, however, the five-foot, ten-inch Drivas had to intervene physically when an outraged audience member attempted to pull Drivas's co-star, Eileen Heckart, off the stage and save her from appearing in "such filth."

This shared experience of the sometimes volatile nature of theater cemented Drivas and McNally's relationship both personally and professionally. While rehearsing in Minneapolis in January 1964, they became lovers, and would remain a couple for the next twelve years.

Drivas and McNally found that they shared a sense of humor, and Drivas proved game for participating in the challenges crafted by McNally to the ways in which sexual relationships--particularly male same-sex relationships--could be presented on stage.

McNally would write at least two more plays specifically for Drivas. Audiences were shocked by *Sweet Eros* (1968), a one-act play in which a beguiling yet domineering young man plays a sexual cat-and-mouse game with a naked girl whom he has gagged and bound to a chair. The play, which called for the actor to deliver what amounts to a ten-page dramatic monologue, opened Off-Broadway on Drivas's presumptive thirtieth birthday.

Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone? (1971) might well have been conceived as a love letter to Drivas, for the play seems to have been written to showcase both his acting skills and his personal charisma.

In this raucous challenge to the shallowness and hypocrisy of American culture, which proved simultaneously a biting comment on the failure of the 1960s youth revolution, Drivas played an outrageously charismatic anarchist who cuts a festive swath of social and sexual chaos across contemporary Manhattan. Audiences who were titillated by Drivas's impersonation of Marilyn Monroe in one scene were shocked at the play's denouement by his transformation into a mad bomber.

Influential critic Clive Barnes commented that "Robert Drivas as Tommy gives what must surely be the sweetest and most radiant performance of his career. He is full of sunshine, and gives Tommy Flowers a quality of innocent goodness that even makes his anti-social behavior seem moral."

Drivas's appearance in McNally's early plays cemented his reputation as an actor adept at playing psychologically intense--at times even vaguely psychotic--roles.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Drivas made numerous appearances in such television dramas as *The F. B. I.*, *The Bold Ones*, *Bonanza*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *The Fugitive*, *The Wild Wild West*, *Cannon*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *The Defenders*, *East Side/West Side*, and *Route 66*.

Drivas was featured as "Loudmouth Steve" in *Cool Hand Luke* (directed by Stuart Rosenberg, 1967), a popular and critically applauded film about a Southern prison work camp that starred Paul Newman. And he delivered a mesmerizing performance opposite Rod Steiger and Claire Bloom in *The Illustrated Man* (directed by Jack Smight, 1969), a confusing film made from a novel by Ray Bradbury about a man who searches for the woman who tattooed his body, each tattooed image pulling the viewer into a different psychedelic state.

Other film roles include a bravura turn as a truck driver in Joseph Strick's cult film, *Road Movie* (1974), and as a murderer in Larry Cohen's *God Told Me To* (1976, also released under the title *Demon*).

Drivas enjoyed a final stage success as "Himself" in Edward Albee's *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983). This demanding role, which Albee biographer Mel Gussow speculates that Albee wrote with Drivas in mind, required him to deliver almost eighty percent of the full-length play as a dramatic monologue.

Unfortunately, the absurdist satire about the price of success and celebrity, which was also Albee's smack at critics and audiences who treat experimental artists like himself as freaks, closed after only sixteen performances. Drivas's masterly negotiation of the play's shifts in tone from stuffy complacency to absurdist outrage received far better notices than Albee's script, which possibly remains the great playwright's least often performed play.

Drivas the Director

Drivas's relationship with McNally allowed him to make an easy segue from actor to director.

In 1973 Drivas accompanied McNally to Yale University where the latter was in residence as a Fellow in Playwrighting. While at Yale, McNally worked on a sexual farce initially titled "The Tubs" about an unassuming garbage collector from Cleveland who inadvertently takes refuge in a seedy gay bathhouse in lower Manhattan from his vengeful Mafioso brother-in-law.

Drivas directed the revised version, which opened on Broadway as *The Ritz* on January 20, 1975, starring Jack Weston as the hapless misfit; Jerry Stiller as his sadistic brother-in-law; Stephen Collins as a handsome private detective whose falsetto voice belies his heterosexuality; F. Murray Abraham as a promiscuous sexual reveler named Chris who takes the terrified garbage man under his wing and helps him negotiate the dual challenge of hiding from his brother-in-law's thugs and negotiating the sexual maze of the baths; and--most famously--a Tony Award-winning Rita Moreno as an gloriously untalented, malaprop-spouting club performer eager to be cast in a Broadway show.

The Ritz proved the surprise hit of the season, running 400 performances. McNally later commented that this was possibly the most subversive show he had written inasmuch as it asked largely straight, upper-middle-class audiences to watch the manic goings-on in a gay bathhouse and not only to accept as a given a largely alien way of life, but to care about the characters and their emotional and sexual needs. Drivas's direction kept the farcical action moving at a fast pace and its sexual edge sharply honed. Midway through the run, Drivas succeeded the departing F. Murray Abraham as the sexually irrepressible Chris.

Drivas would win an Obie Award as Best Director for McNally's dark comedy about the American pursuit of faddish psychotherapeutic solutions to one's personal problems, *Bad Habits* (1974), which starred F. Murray Abraham, Doris Roberts, Paul Benedict, and Cynthia Harris.

He would also direct his close friend James Coco in Albert Innaurato's disturbing portrait of a grossly obese young man who eats himself to death on stage, *The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* (1977), and in a revival of the Neil Simon, Cy Coleman, and Carolyn Leight musical, *Little Me* (1982). Likewise, he would direct Elizabeth Ashley and F. Murray Abraham in Samuel Taylor's *Legend* (1976); Lou Jacobi, Jack Weston, and Doris Roberts in Michael Jacobs' *Cheaters* (1978); Renee Taylor and Joseph Bologna in their comedy *It Had to Be You* (1981); and sultry songstress Peggy Lee in her musical biography, *Peg* (1983).

Death

Drivas died on June 29, 1986 of a combination of AIDS-related complications that included Kaposi's Sarcoma. Although Drivas and McNally had ceased to be lovers ten years earlier, they had continued to be close friends.

Following Drivas's death (and that a year later of another close friend, actor James Coco), McNally wrote *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987) about the human need to connect. "We gotta connect," Johnny implores Frankie, echoing novelist E. M. Forster. "We just have to. Or we die."

In his preface to the published text, McNally wrote: "I still don't quite know where *Frankie and Johnny* came from. I do know that I began it shortly after I had lost my two best friends and dearest collaborators in the theater, Robert Drivas and James Coco. Friends seemed especially precious and life unbelievably fragile. I had always thought they would be in my personal and professional life forever. . . . I missed Bobby and Jimmy a lot. I still do, I always will, but I missed them less while I was writing *Frankie and Johnny*."

McNally also quietly memorialized Drivas in his television play *Andre's Mother* (1988) in which Hal tells his late partner's mother, from whom Andre had been alienated for several years, that "You should have come up the summer he played Hamlet. He was magnificent." Like Andre, Drivas had been particularly effective in the title role of Shakespeare's tragedy in a production at the Shakespeare Festival in Washington, D. C., that had been directed by Philip Burton, the father of actor Richard Burton.

In *Andre's Mother*, Hal's appropriation of Horatio's line, "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" was McNally's moving benediction for all the AIDS dead. But it seems also to have been a private blessing for "my sweet Bobby," the man whom--at numerous fund raisers and political rallies to raise support for AIDS research and for the care of Persons with AIDS at which McNally spoke at the height of the pandemic--he rarely failed to include in the list of those lost to the plague.

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