



## Jeter, Michael (1952-2003)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2003, glbtq, inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Versatile character actor Michael Jeter played a wide variety of roles on stage, in movies, and on television. He was also a dedicated fundraiser in the cause of AIDS research.

Michael Jeter came from a family of health-care professionals, and it was expected that he, like his father, would go into medicine. Thus, when he left Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, the small city where he was born on August 26, 1952, it was to enroll as a pre-med student at Memphis State University.

Leaving Lawrenceburg was a relief for Jeter. He had always known that he was gay, but growing up in "a very conservative Southern Baptist family" in a generally conservative community caused him to have "a particularly traumatic time accepting" the fact. "I knew instinctually that I had to get out of there if I was ever going to understand what [my] difference was and get comfortable with it," he recalled.

As a student at Memphis State, Jeter discovered theater and soon developed a lively interest in pursuing an acting career. He abandoned his medical studies and transferred to the arts program.

After graduation in 1974, Jeter headed for New York, where he worked as a secretary at a law firm to support himself while he sought out acting jobs.

A small role in Milos Forman's *Hair* (1979) gave Jeter his first movie credit. He worked for Forman again in *Ragtime* (1981).

Jeter also found some work in off-Broadway theater productions, beginning with a role as a bellboy in Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's *Once in a Lifetime* (1978).

After appearing in several other stage shows, Jeter joined the cast of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* (1981-1983), directed by Tommy Tune.

It was in another production directed by Tune, Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel* (1989), that Jeter had his greatest success on the stage, winning an Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Actor in a Musical, a Drama Desk Award for Featured Actor in a Musical, the Clarence Derwent Prize for most promising actor on the metropolitan scene, and a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical.

At the 1990 Tony Awards ceremony at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater, Jeter stopped the show with his Charleston number from *Grand Hotel*, a piece that was not even in the original play. Jeter praised Tune, the choreographer as well as director, for creating a number suited to him even though he was not trained in dance. "I think that's one of Mr. Tune's little bits of specific brilliance," said Jeter. "That he can look at the way your body moves, and he can find the medium, in dance, within which to move it."



Michael Jeter at the Emmy Awards ceremony in 1992.

This image was created by Alan Light and appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License.

The dance was also ideally suited to Jeter's character, Otto Kringlein, a dying bookkeeper who, having led a sad and boring life, goes to Berlin "for a first and last fling." Jeter portrayed Kringlein, wrote Mervyn Rothstein, "breaking loose, with arms and legs gyrating in unexpected moments of sheer, uninhibited joy."

In his acceptance speech at the Tony Awards ceremony, Jeter said, "If you've got a problem with alcohol and drugs and think you can't stop, I stand here as living proof" to the contrary. Afterward, he declined to speak in detail about his problems, saying only that they had begun when he was trying to gain acceptance by his peers at around age fourteen, and that he had been in recovery for some nine years.

Jeter became familiar to millions of television viewers when he appeared on the CBS situation comedy *Evening Shade* starring Burt Reynolds. In the show, which ran from 1990 to 1994, Jeter played Herman Stiles, a wimpy and high-strung high school math teacher tapped to be the assistant football coach. Jeter won an Emmy for his role in 1992 and was nominated again in each of the next two years.

Jeter explained the appeal of the Stiles character by saying, "He is not perfect in any sense of the word. Everyone is Herman on some level." He went on to note that he had become comfortable with being less than perfect himself, saying, "I know that I am not what one normally thinks of as, let's say, fit for fantasy. I am not a romantic lead, and that's fine.... There was a time in my life when I hated myself for being so sort of squirrely looking and odd."

Jeter gained fans in a younger generation of the television audience in 1998, when he joined the cast of the PBS children's series *Sesame Street*, appearing as the well-intentioned but bumbling Mr. Noodle in the "Elmo's World" segment.

Jeter appeared on television frequently in the 1990s, earning two more Emmy nominations for roles as a guest star on *Chicago Hope* and *Picket Fences* (both CBS). The role of an eccentric frog-breeder in the episode of *Picket Fences* was written especially for him.

He also performed in the PBS miniseries *Tales of the City* (1993), based on the stories of Armistead Maupin and directed by Alastair Reed, as well as a number of made-for-television movies.

Jeter's long list of film credits is a testament to his versatility as a character actor. A cartoonish bad guy in the Disney movie *Air Bud* (1997, directed by Charles Martin Smith), Whoopi Goldberg's comic sidekick priest in the slapstick *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* (1993, directed by Emile Ardolino and Bill Duke), and a kindly mental patient in *Patch Adams* (1998, directed by Tom Shadyac), Jeter also gave a poignant performance as a homeless cabaret singer with AIDS in Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* (1991).

The movie role Jeter is perhaps best known for is as kind-hearted Cajun death-row inmate Edward Delacroix in Frank Darabont's *The Green Mile* (1999). Critics raved about his performance, and Darabont concurred, commenting, "It's a hell of an indication of how good someone is when you see some big, hairy grip wiping his eyes after you cut."

Jeter had just completed filming his scenes for Robert Zemeckis's *The Polar Express* (2004) when he died in Hollywood on March 30, 2003.

Jeter was diagnosed as HIV-positive in the mid-1990s. He spoke publicly of his condition at an HIV/AIDS symposium at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in April 1997 and discussed it again a few months later on the syndicated television program *Entertainment Tonight*.

Jeter was an active supporter of AIDS charities, particularly AIDS Project Los Angeles, and appeared frequently at fundraisers and benefits.

Jeter also had a "mission...to win over homophobic minds." His own parents were slow to accept his sexual

orientation. They had never met a partner of their son until 1999, when Jeter introduced them to Sean Blue, his lover of four years. He called the occasion "really quite momentous in my life."

Jeter noted that photos of him at movie premieres were rarely published because he and Blue routinely held hands as they walked down the red carpet. He found, however, that most fans were accepting when they met the pair. Jeter observed, "The most effective way to do anything about the perceived differences between us is to say, 'This is the person I love, and we're happy to meet you.' And people are happy to meet us back."

### **Bibliography**

"Actor Michael Jeter Comes Out--as HIV-positive." *The Advocate* 741 (September 2, 1997): 22.

"Actor Michael Jeter, 50, Dies." *The Advocate*. (April 2, 2003). [www.advocate.com/new\\_news.asp?id=8216&sd=04/02/03](http://www.advocate.com/new_news.asp?id=8216&sd=04/02/03).

Epstein, Jeffrey. "He Walks the Mile." *The Advocate* (February 1, 2000): 46.

"Michael Jeter, 50, Dies; Won Acting Prizes." *New York Times* (April 3, 2003): C18.

Oliver, Myrna. "Michael Jeter, 50; 'Mr. Noodle' on Sesame Street." *Los Angeles Times* (April 1, 2003): Part 2, p. 11.

Rothstein, Mervyn. "Tony Winner's Journey from Rock Bottom to Top." *New York Times* (June 5, 1990): C13.

### **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).