



Lynde, Paul (1926-1982)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Out magazine, writing after the death of Paul Lynde, said that the comedian, most famous for being the crucial "center square" on the game show *Hollywood Squares*, made the world "a safer place for sissies."

Yet, in spite of (or perhaps because of) his visibility and immense popularity, Lynde was fiercely closeted during his lifetime, and even known to denigrate gay audiences as a whole. Moreover, despite the campy, bitchy comic image he displayed to the public, Lynde was a very tormented individual troubled by chronic alcoholism, weight problems, and loneliness.

Paul Edward Lynde was born June 13, 1926, in Mount Vernon, Ohio. His father was a butcher and also, for a time, the local sheriff. His mother was known for her cooking, as Lynde would be later in life. Indeed, Lynde's early inclination towards overeating led to obesity by his teens; he weighed over 250 pounds when he enrolled as a freshman at Northwestern University in 1944.

Lynde majored in theater at college, where his classmates included Cloris Leachman and Charlton Heston, and while he aspired to be a "serious" screen actor, his manic persona consistently earned him comic roles. To some extent, this typecasting was one of the frustrations that lasted Lynde's entire life.

In 1949, both Lynde's parents died, apparently from the emotional stress of the recovery of the body of his soldier brother, who had been killed in the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 and who had been classified as missing in action for five years. Rather than affording the closure that such recoveries often provide, in this case the recovery opened new wounds and the parents died within weeks of each other.

In the wake of this grief, Lynde devoted all his energies to his career; and after a stint of stand-up comedy in New York clubs, he landed a part in the legendary revue *New Faces of 1952* that earned him great acclaim.

Despite such a seemingly auspicious beginning, Lynde found work hard to come by until 1960, when he won the role of Harry McAfee in the Broadway musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, which he repeated in the film version (1963).

After this turning point, Lynde had recurring roles and appearances on various television programs, including *The Perry Como Show*, *The Munsters* (as Dr. Dudley), and *Bewitched* (as Uncle Arthur). He also had roles in various light-entertainment films, including *Under the Yum Yum Tree* (1963), *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965), and *The Glass Bottom Boat* (1966).

In 1968, Lynde began his long-running engagement as the center square on *Hollywood Squares*, and soon became a favorite television star for his queeny and campy "naughty" responses to the host's questions, some of which were ad-libbed.

Although Lynde acquired fame and wealth during this period, happiness eluded him. He drank heavily, and,

in 1965, he was involved in an incident that threatened to destroy his public image.

Jim Davidson, a young aspiring actor, fell or jumped from the eighth-floor window of Lynde's San Francisco hotel room, after a night of drinking and pub-crawling. The matter was kept quiet by the police and the press, as it could have served to "out" Lynde in a very grotesque manner just as he was developing a large straight following by "acting" gay but never admitting the fact.

Throughout the 1970s, Lynde was one of television's most popular performers. He made numerous guest appearances as well as a couple of TV movies, and he starred in a short-lived series of his own (*The Paul Lynde Show*, 1972), in addition to his regular role on *Hollywood Squares*. He was dismissed from the latter program in 1979, however, when his drinking caused him to be increasingly belligerent to his fellow performers and to contestants during taping.

After a year, though, the show slipped significantly in ratings, as Lynde was one of its main draws, and thus he was brought back in 1980; but by then game shows had become passé and *Hollywood Squares* went off the air in 1981.

Lynde's last days were spent in ill health. He was rumored to have cancer or some "mysterious" disease that was never disclosed to the public. On the night of January 9, 1982, he died in his Beverly Hills home after a sudden cardiac arrest, the result of decades of substance abuse.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.