



## McDowall, Roddy (1928-1998)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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A Twentieth Century Fox advertisement promoting child star Roddy McDowall (1944).

For many--perhaps most--child stars, life after adolescence means a decline in fame, financial and personal disaster, and, in all too many cases, substance abuse and premature death. Roddy McDowall was one of the great exceptions to the rule.

The British-born actor not only made a graceful transition from juvenile roles to a career as a highly versatile character actor on both stage and screen, but he also enjoyed acclaim for his photographic portraits of his peers.

Roderick Andrew Anthony Jude McDowall was born in London on September 17, 1928, to a Scottish father and an Irish mother. His mother, who had herself aspired to be an actress, enrolled him in elocution lessons at the age of five; and at the age of ten he had his first major film role as the youngest son in *Murder in the Family* (1938). Over the next two years he appeared in a dozen British films, in parts large and small.

McDowall's movie career was interrupted, however, by the German bombardment of London in World War II. Accompanied by his sister and his mother, he was one of many London children evacuated to places abroad.

As a result, he arrived in Hollywood in 1940, and the charming young English lad soon landed a major role as the youngest son in *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). The film made him a star at thirteen, and he appeared as an endearing boy in numerous Hollywood movies throughout the war years, most notably *Lassie, Come Home* (1943), with fellow English child star Elizabeth Taylor, and *My Friend Flicka* (1943).

By his late teens, McDowall had outgrown the parts in which he had been most successful. Accordingly, he went to New York to study acting and to hone his skills in a wide variety of roles on the Broadway stage, where he made his debut in 1953 in a revival of George Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance*.

McDowall was praised for his performance as a gay character in Meyer Levin's *Compulsion* (1957), a fictionalized account of the Leopold-Loeb murder case; and he won a Tony award for best supporting actor as Tarquin in Jean Anouilh's *The Fighting Cock* (1960).

After a decade's absence, McDowall returned to Hollywood, and over the last four decades of his life he appeared in more than one hundred films, encompassing a wide range of genres from sophisticated adult comedy to children's fare, from horror to science fiction, usually as a character actor.

His best known appearances include those in *The Subterraneans* (1960), *Midnight Lace* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963), *The Loved One* (1965), *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965), *Lord Love a Duck* (1966), *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and its various sequels, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1973), *The Legend of Hell House* (1973), *Funny Lady* (1975), *Mae West* (1982), *Fright Night* (1985), *Fright Night II* (1987), *Carmilla* (1989), *Only the Lonely* (1991), *Last Summer in the Hamptons* (1993), and *It's My Party* (1995). His last film role was the voice of Mr. Soil, an ant, in *A Bug's Life* (1997).

Although McDowall never officially "came out," the fact that he was gay was one of Hollywood's best known secrets. It is a tribute to his characteristic discretion and the respect with which "Hollywood's Best Friend" was regarded by his peers that his homosexuality was never really an issue or used against him in his six decades in the entertainment business.

McDowall died of cancer at his home in Studio City, California, on October 3, 1998. At the time of his death, he held several elected posts in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and was a generous benefactor of many film-related charities.

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