



Pierce, David Hyde (b. 1959)

by Linda Rapp

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David Hyde Pierce at the Emmy Awards in 1994.
Photo by Alan Light.

Award-winning stage and screen actor David Hyde Pierce is best known for his portrayal of the effete and sometimes pompous but always lovable Dr. Niles Crane on the long-running hit comedy television series *Frasier*. Closeted for decades, Pierce came out in 2007 and publicly acknowledged his partner, Brian Hargrove, in his acceptance speech at the Tony Awards ceremony.

David Hyde Pierce comes from a middle-class family. His father, George Pierce, was an insurance agent in Saratoga Springs, New York, and his mother, Laura Pierce, was a homemaker. David, the youngest of their four children, was born April 3, 1959.

Pierce showed a flair for acting early on, writing little plays that he put on with friends from school. On the one hand, he favored dramatic death scenes--succumbing both as Julius Caesar and John Dillinger--but he also had an instinct for comedy, realizing as a second-grader, he recalled, that "a joke was funnier if I didn't laugh. I've been deadpan ever since."

Pierce is also a talented musician and aspired to a career as a concert pianist. When, as a youngster, he announced this ambition to his parents, they showed him an encyclopedia entry about Albert Schweitzer, an accomplished musician as well as a Nobel Peace laureate, in order to encourage him not to "narrow his focus" too soon.

Pierce remained set on a career in the arts, however. Upon his graduation from Saratoga Springs High School in 1977, he was awarded the Yaddo Medal for best dramatic arts student and subsequently enrolled at Yale University as a music major.

Once he got to college, he later recalled, "It became clear to me that not only didn't I have what it takes talentwise to be a concert pianist, but . . . I didn't want to sit for twelve hours in a practice room and didn't want to take all the music history classes that you had to take." He changed his major to English and theater arts and earned his bachelor's degree in 1981.

Following his graduation from Yale, he moved to New York City, where he took more acting classes, keeping body and soul together with a variety of jobs, including a security guard, a church organist, and a tie salesman at Bloomingdale's, while awaiting his break as an actor.

His Broadway debut was a modest one: he had a small part as a waiter in Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy* in 1982. The following year he joined the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and worked there as an ensemble player for three years before returning to New York. He won the role of Laertes in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *Hamlet* in 1986.

Pierce made his first television performance on *Spenser for Hire* in 1987 and appeared on the big screen--albeit in small roles--in 1988 in James Bridges' *Bright Lights, Big City*, Daniel Petrie's *Rocket Gibraltar*, Joan Micklin Silver's *Crossing Delancey*, and Dean Parisot's *The Appointments of Dennis Jennings*.

In 1989 Pierce was back on Broadway, playing a gay pediatrician in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*. Following this appearance on the stage, he moved to Hollywood, a decision that he initially explained--rather unconvincingly--by saying, "It was highly unlikely that I would ever get a better part. So I could stay there and hope to some day do as well again, or I could strike out on something different." He would later reveal that the cross-country relocation was prompted by the desire of his life partner, Brian Hargrove, to write for television.

In California, Pierce found work with small roles in a number of films--Robert Bierman's *Vampire's Kiss* (1989), Kevin Meyer's *Civil War Diary* (1990), Jodie Foster's *Little Man Tate* (1991), Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* (1991), and Barry Sonnenfeld's *Addams Family Values* (1993)--as well as a more important role as the brother of the female lead in Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993).

In 1992, Pierce won a role on a television situation comedy about a political family, *The Powers That Be*, produced by Norman Lear. The show--and Pierce's performance in particular--received favorable critical comment, but the program failed to find an audience and was cancelled after less than a season.

Pierce soon returned to television, this time in the highly successful and long-running series *Frasier* (1993-2004). Producers planning a spin-off for Kelsey Grammer's psychiatrist Dr. Frasier Crane character from the hit series *Cheers* saw in Pierce a physical resemblance to their star and called him in for an interview, with the thought that they might possibly include a brother character for Frasier. So impressed were they with Pierce that they created the co-starring role of Dr. Niles Crane, also a psychiatrist, especially for him.

In the series, Frasier shared a luxurious condominium apartment with his father, Martin (played by John Mahoney), and Martin's live-in physical therapist, Daphne Moon (played by Jane Leeves). Niles, a frequent visitor, soon became enamored of Daphne.

The match seemed an unlikely one since Niles was sophisticated, even snobbish--but still likable--while Daphne was a working-class woman with simpler tastes, although being British did give her a touch of the exotic. Many glbtq viewers saw another reason for seeing the infatuation as improbable--a sneaking suspicion that Niles was gay.

Both of the Crane brothers were connoisseurs of the finer things--art, opera, wine, and gourmet food. "Before the term 'metrosexual' even entered the English language," writes critic Kamal Al-Solaylee, "Frasier and his brother typified it. The most ambiguously gay couple since Batman and Robin, Frasier and Niles's tastes veered toward the stereotypically gay while their sexual orientation remained decidedly straight"--at least according to the storyline. Al-Solaylee also notes that "the dynamic between the two brothers--protective, competitive, at times destructive--is sometimes rendered in such subtle homoerotic tones that it casts the brothers almost as lovers, or at least co-dependent partners. It's a characterization that the show's writers (many of whom are openly gay) have mined for its comic potential."

As Pierce approached his role, he "look[ed] for ways to make [his pompous character] as close to an actual human being as possible" and did so with great success. His Niles--fussy, fastidious, and fey, prone to haughtiness but vulnerable at his core--was a favorite of both the audience and the critics. Pierce was nominated for an Emmy Award as Best Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series in each of the eleven years that *Frasier* ran, winning four times. Other honors included awards from the Screen Actors Guild and the Television Critics Association.

During the run of *Frasier*, Pierce had mostly minor roles in a number of films--Andrew Bergman's *Isn't She Great* (2000), Pontus Löwenhielm and Patrick von Krusenstjerna's *Chain of Fools* (2000), David Wain's *Wet*

Hot American Summer (2001), Steven Soderbergh's *Full Frontal* (2002), and Peyton Reed's *Down with Love* (2003). He did, however, have an important part as White House counsel John Dean in Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995).

He did voice-over work in several other movies--John Lasseter's *A Bug's Life* (1998), Bert Ring's *The Tangerine Bear* (2000), Bobby and Peter Farrelly's *Osmosis Jones* (2001), and Ron Clements and John Musker's *Treasure Planet* (2002). Pierce noted that "for voice-over, you have to energize your voice more. But I still value subtlety and throwaway delivery. That's the kind of humor that I do--not hitting anything too hard, letting people be surprised by the laugh rather than pointing the way to it."

Pierce returned to Broadway in 2004 in the musical comedy *Spamalot* (book and lyrics by Eric Idle, music by John DuPrez and Idle), a stage adaptation of Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). Pierce starred as Sir Robin, a knight fonder of minstrelsy than combat. He showed off both his singing and dancing abilities in the show-stopping production number "You Won't Succeed on Broadway," in which he and a male chorus performed a Cossack dance reminiscent of the one in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Pierce next starred as Boston police lieutenant--and fan of musical theater--Frank Cioffi in *Curtains* (2007). The musical, originally a collaboration of composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb, with a book by Peter Stone, was still unfinished when both Ebb and Stone died. Rupert Holmes took over the work on the book, largely rewriting it, and he and Kander provided additional lyrics to bring the piece to completion.

Pierce won plaudits for his portrayal of Lieutenant Cioffi, who, when called in to investigate the on-stage murder of the incompetent leading lady in a foundering musical, *Robbin' Hood of the Old West*, winds up not only solving the crime but also working the musical into shape and even helping various couples among the cast salvage their romantic relationships.

Reviewer David Rooney of *Daily Variety* wrote that "Pierce, with his polished comic timing and more than serviceable singing skills, is the most invaluable asset [to the show]. Combining a doe-eyed apparent docility with a suggestion of mischief, and balancing the seriousness of his role as investigator with his giddy distraction at being thrust into showbiz, he's clearly having a great time up there. His detective is a memorable comic creation."

Tony Award voters agreed, and in June 2007 Pierce took the prize for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical. He ended his touching and heartfelt acceptance speech with thanks to his partner of twenty-four years, Brian Hargrove.

Pierce had long been reticent about speaking of his personal life. Fred Schruers of *US* magazine, who interviewed him in 1998, wrote that "if Niles is a gentleman who is really not that comfortable revealing his inner workings, well, . . . there are some similarities the actor just can't mask."

Rumors of Pierce's homosexuality swirled for years, and as early as 2000, the web site *Mr. Showbiz*, which no longer exists, named Hargrove as his partner. Pierce deflected questions from the press about any romantic attachments that he might have by saying, "My life is an open book, but don't expect me to read it to you."

The openness of the book is debatable. Pierce surely did not follow the lead of Dan Butler, a supporting actor on *Frasier*, who came out publicly in 1994 and began speaking out in support of glbtq rights. On the other hand, Pierce was out to many in the entertainment industry, and hosted parties with Hargrove at their home in Los Angeles.

Pierce's first apparent public reference to his relationship with Hargrove came in a May 2007 interview with

the Associated Press in which he stated that his move to California in the early 1990s had been prompted by Hargrove's wish to pursue a career in writing for television. Pierce identified Hargrove simply as his "partner," leaving open the possibility of a professional connection between the two men. Pierce's publicist subsequently confirmed that Pierce and Hargrove are a couple.

They had already been treated as such in the mainstream press. In August 2006 correspondent Shelby Hodge of the *Houston Chronicle* mentioned "a benefit piano recital by Stephen Hough, held in the 1920s Spanish Revival manse of David Hyde Pierce (Niles on 'Frasier') and Brian Hargrove."

Pierce is known for his charitable work, especially in the fight against Alzheimer's Disease, with which his grandfather and father were both afflicted. A national board member of the Alzheimer's Association, he has testified before Congress to urge increased federal spending for research to combat the disease.

He has also participated in fundraising events for AIDS charities, Habitat for Humanity, and for victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

In 2008, after the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality, Pierce and Hargrove were married. A generous supporter of the campaign against Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage, Pierce took part in the protests that took place after the Proposition was passed by a slim margin.

In an interview explaining his participation in the protests, Pierce declared, "this is not about being gay. This is about having the basic right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and having that put up for a vote, not only here in California but across the country, and that is just fundamentally not what this country is about."

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