



Reilly, Charles Nelson (1931-2007)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Funnyman Charles Nelson Reilly gained fame during the 1970s as a regular guest on game shows and celebrity talk shows. His flamboyantly campy manner and sheer goofiness endeared him to television audiences, both on game shows and in series such as NBC's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1968-1970), and to movie audiences in films such as *Cannonball Run II* (1984).

However, Reilly had all the credentials of a genuine old trouper of the stage. He not only won awards on Broadway for his character roles, but was an acclaimed director, a writer of plays and opera libretti, and an acting teacher.

Though seldom confrontational about being gay, Reilly also never attempted to be someone he was not, and his unapologetically sissified persona injected a refreshing gay sensibility into all of his roles.

Born on January 13, 1931 in New York City, Reilly was raised in the Bronx by an angry, verbally abusive mother and a depressed, alcoholic father. His father was a movie poster artist, whose skill earned him a job offer from Walt Disney. However, his mother stubbornly refused to consider moving to California, so the family stayed in New York, where the elder Reilly finally drank himself to a nervous breakdown.

Young Charles Nelson escaped from the family pain into a world of fantasy and make-believe. He went on stage for the first time at the age of nine, playing Columbus in a school play, and found that he loved to act. At age 13, he survived a disastrous circus fire in Hartford, Connecticut.

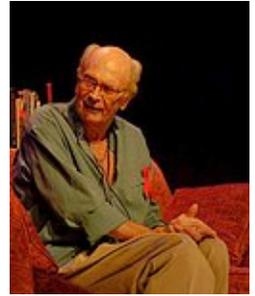
When Reilly was eighteen he began studying acting with famed method teacher Uta Hagen. Steve McQueen, Gene Hackman, Hal Holbrook, and Jack Lemmon were among his classmates.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the eager young actor appeared in twenty-two Broadway and off-Broadway plays. He won a Tony Award for his performance as Bud Frump in *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* (1962). Two years later, he earned a Tony nomination for his performance as Cornelius Hackel opposite Carol Channing in the original production of Jerry Herman's *Hello Dolly* (1964).

In 1960, while understudying the lead in *Bye Bye Birdie*, Reilly got to know actor Gene Rayburn, who later became host of the television game show *The Match Game*. Their friendship would lead to dozens of television jobs for Reilly.

Reilly first came to national attention with his regular appearances on the television variety show *The Steve Lawrence Show* in 1965. He then spent a two-year stint on the popular NBC situation comedy, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, playing the fastidious Claymore Gregg.

In 1969, Reilly secured a role on the children's show *H. R. Pufnstuf*. He also appeared in its spinoff, the ABC series *Lidsville*, where he played an evil magician. He later appeared in the title role of another children's



Charles Nelson Reilly on the set of the film *The Life of Reilly* (2006). Photograph by Joe Piccolo. Courtesy www.charlesnelsonreilly.com.

show, *Uncle Croc's Block*.

Throughout the 1970s, Reilly was seen on television as a guest on a number of situation comedies and variety shows, but became best known as a regular panelist on such game shows as *The Match Game*, *Tattle Tales*, and *Hollywood Squares*. In these lightweight venues, Reilly played up his campy side, frequently wearing a captain's hat and ascot, and delivering his lines with mordant prissiness.

Reilly's persona in these appearances, as in most of his guest roles on television, was a version of the film sissy that was a staple of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood movies. Often petulant and waspish, but revealing a less complex personality, he also bore a resemblance to Paul Lynde, who also appeared on many of the same television venues in the 1960s and 1970s.

Though seldom on Hollywood's A-list, Reilly also became a popular guest on a number of celebrity talk shows, including *Dinah!* and *The Merv Griffin Show*. He appeared 98 times on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*.

It was backstage on the game show *Battlestars*, in 1980, that Reilly met the man who would become his life partner. Patrick Hughes III was a set decorator and dresser on the show. He soon moved into Reilly's Beverly Hills home, where the two lived a quietly open life.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Reilly appeared in guest parts in a number of television series, including *The Drew Carey Show*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, and *The X-Files*. He earned two Emmy Award nominations for such guest appearances. In addition, he directed several episodes of *Evening Shade* and made several appearances on the revived game show *Hollywood Squares*.

Throughout the ups and downs of his television and film career, Reilly's stage career flourished. He directed many plays, in New York and on the road, from classics like *Harvey* and *The Gin Game* to tours de force such as Julie Harris's one-woman tribute to Emily Dickinson, *The Belle of Amherst*. In 1997, he received a Tony nomination for directing Harris in a revival of *The Gin Game*.

Reilly also became a respected acting teacher. For many years he taught acting at HB Studio, the acting studio created by Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof. Among his students were Lily Tomlin, Christine Lahti, and Bette Midler.

In October 2001, Reilly opened on Broadway in a one-man show about his life, *Save It for the Stage: The Life of Reilly*. Though some critics complained that the show's three-hour length cried out for editing, all were charmed by the versatile Reilly's frankness and gentle humor.

One moment in the show was especially poignant for his gay audience. Reilly reminisced about his first attempts to seek work on television. An NBC executive told him flatly, "They don't let queers on TV." With arch irony, Reilly pointed out that by the 1970s he had become one of the most familiar faces in American television.

A film version of *The Life of Reilly*, directed by Barry Polterman and Frank Anderson, premiered at film festivals in 2006.

Charles Nelson Reilly died of pneumonia on May 25, 2007. He was survived by his partner, Patrick Hughes III.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.