



Sargent, Dick (1930-1994)

by Linda Rapp

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Actor Dick Sargent is most widely remembered as "the second Darrin" on the situation comedy *Bewitched*. He remained closeted for most of his career, but came out in 1991 and embraced gay activism as a "new mission in life."

Sargent was born Richard Cox in Carmel, California on April 19, 1930. His mother, Ruth McNaughton Cox, had been an actress in silent films. His father, Colonel Elmer Cox, had served with distinction in World War I.

Sargent's relationship with his father was difficult. "I wanted him to love me, and I'm quite sure that he didn't," he commented in 1991.

Cox died of a stroke when Sargent was eleven, and afterward the boy was sent off to military school. He was so unhappy that he went on a crash diet to get himself expelled for poor health.

Once back home he graduated from high school and entered Stanford University, where he studied acting and appeared in a number of student productions. During those years he came to realize that he was gay, which filled him with anxiety and led him to "a couple of good college tries at suicide."

Sargent left Stanford to pursue a career as an actor. He did odd jobs to sustain himself while working on stage and eventually finding minor screen parts.

After appearances in several forgettable films, Sargent won roles--albeit still small ones--in more successful productions, including *The Great Impostor* (directed by Richard Mulligan, 1960) and *That Touch of Mink* (directed by Delbert Mink, 1962).

Sargent also did television work, including a recurring role on the situation comedy *One Happy Family* in 1961.

Sargent auditioned successfully for a lead role in the situation comedy *Bewitched* but was unable to accept it because of contractual obligations to Universal Studios. He eventually did take the part in 1969 when actor Dick York, who originally played the role, had to withdraw for health reasons.

Sargent took over the part of Darrin Stephens, an ordinary middle-class man who was married to a beautiful witch and who had to put up with the shenanigans of her decidedly eccentric supernatural relatives. He joined a cast that included lesbian actress Agnes Moorehead and gay actor Paul Lynde.

Like many other actors Sargent remained closeted, fearing that the revelation of his sexual orientation would spell ruin for his career. As other actors, including Raymond Burr, had done before him, he invented a former spouse, in Sargent's case a fictional divorced wife. In another time-worn move, he cooperated in fueling media speculation that he was romantically involved with women, escorting starlets to Hollywood

parties. On one occasion he posed with actress Connie Francis for pictures that appeared in a movie fan magazine. "We looked passionately at each other, but that was the only time I ever saw her," Sargent recalled in 1991.

Unbeknownst to audiences, Sargent was in a loving and stable relationship with another man, a television screenwriter, whom he later identified publicly simply as Frank. It pained Sargent not to be able to speak openly about their bond and to have to call the love of his life a "business associate." The pair were together for twenty years until Frank died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1979.

Among those who knew of the relationship was Elizabeth Montgomery, the star of *Bewitched*, who became a good friend to Sargent. She and her husband often socialized with Sargent and Frank.

After *Bewitched* ended its run in 1972, Sargent continued to work in television, appearing in a number of shows including *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Taxi*, *Murder, She Wrote*, and *L.A. Law*. He also played in both cinematic and television movies.

Sargent chose October 11, 1991, National Coming Out Day, to announce that he was gay. He stated that factors motivating his decision to come out included California governor Pete Wilson's veto of a bill to protect gay men and lesbians from job discrimination and also his concern about the rate of suicide among young gay people, but he was responding as well to his outing by a tabloid newspaper, *The Star*, that erroneously reported that he and a new lover had trashed a house and that the police had evicted them.

Sargent found coming out liberating. "It was such a relief. I lived in fear of being found out. Now it's given me a whole new mission in life," he commented.

Sargent--with his friend Montgomery at his side--served as Grand Marshal of the 1992 Orange County, California gay pride parade. He also participated in the Lesbian and Gay Public Awareness Project and began speaking out on gay rights issues.

Sargent was gratified by the positive reaction that he received from friends after coming out. He was especially pleased by the support of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder of the Special Olympics, who assured him that she welcomed his continued participation in the organization, for which he had done work for two decades.

Sargent acted in a handful of movies--none of them particularly memorable--in the 1990s, but working became increasingly difficult because of his health. Diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1989, Sargent underwent extensive radiation treatment but finally succumbed to the disease on July 8, 1994.

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