



Stiers, David Ogden (b. 1942)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known to many television viewers for his role as Major Charles Emerson Winchester III on the series *M*A*S*H*, David Ogden Stiers has had a long and successful acting career not only on the small screen but also in film and on the stage. A lover and student of classical music, he has also been the guest conductor of dozens of orchestras. For the majority of his career he remained closeted for fear of losing opportunities to work.

Major Winchester was a Boston Brahmin, but the man who so convincingly portrayed him was born on October 31, 1942 in Peoria, Illinois, and spent most of his youth in the area.

When he was in his mid teens, the family moved to Eugene, Oregon. In high school, Stiers began taking part in plays and also developed his musical talent, playing the French horn and the piano.

Upon graduating, he enrolled at the University of Oregon, but he soon abandoned his studies there to take a job with the California Shakespeare Company in Santa Clara, where he worked for seven years. During his time in California he also acted in productions of the San Francisco Actors' Workshop and was a member of an improvisational comedy group called The Committee, whose members included Rob Reiner and Howard Hesseman.

Although he already had considerable acting experience, Stiers enrolled at the Juilliard School at the relatively late age of twenty-seven to pursue formal studies in both drama and voice. There he found a mentor in the accomplished actor John Houseman.

When Houseman subsequently founded the troupe The Acting Company, Stiers was among its players. His success with the group led to other stage work, and in 1974 he made his Broadway debut opposite Zero Mostel in *Ulysses in Nighttown* (dramatized by Marjorie Barkenstein from the novel by James Joyce, score by Peter Link).

Despite his success on the New York stage, Stiers returned to California, where he had already begun to work in film. His entry into the medium was with a voice-over role in George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), and he first appeared on the big screen in Bob Rafelson's *Drive, He Said* (1971).

During the 1970s Stiers also began a career in television, mainly playing small parts until he was cast in a recurring role as the station manager on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. His performance caught the eye of producers launching the series *Charlie's Angels* in 1976. Stiers appeared prominently in the pilot episode but declined an offer to continue in the role when the ABC network picked up the series.

His work, however, had again been noticed, and the following year he joined the cast of the hit series *M*A*S*H* in the role of Major Winchester, a stuffy, elitist, reluctant draftee doctor who served as a foil to star Alan Alda's character, the iconoclastic Doctor Hawkeye Pierce. Stiers brought humanity to the role of Winchester, particularly through the love of music that he and the character shared. Stiers's work on *M*A*S**

He earned him Emmy nominations in 1981 and 1982.

When the series ended its run in 1983, Stiers continued his work in television. His performance in the 1984 mini-series *The First Olympics: Athens 1896* brought him another Emmy nomination. He also had a recurring role as District Attorney Michael Reston in the *Perry Mason* series of made-for-television movies (1986-1988). In addition, he became something of a fixture on PBS, narrating a number of history and science series.

Stiers subsequently returned to commercial television in the short-lived series *Love & Money* (1999). Only a few episodes were aired—unfortunately in a time-slot opposite the baseball World Series—before the show was canceled for poor ratings.

Stiers had greater success with the USA Network series *The Dead Zone* (2002-2007), based on the Stephen King novel of the same title. A fan of science fiction since boyhood, Stiers relished the opportunity to participate in a project in that genre.

"I really like science fiction," he stated, "because it tells terrifically human stories in a framework that keeps you visually excited and challenged and lets you recognize the commonality of the characters in the piece with you and people you know in the here and now. . . . It causes you to think about big things in ways that are practical and real that otherwise might become just theoretical."

Meanwhile, Stiers had never abandoned film. Even while he was working on *M*A*S*H*, he performed in a number of features, and he subsequently appeared in numerous other motion pictures, including Lawrence Kasdan's *The Accidental Tourist* (1988), Frank Darabont's *The Majestic* (2001), and three Woody Allen productions, *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001).

Stiers has also had great success with a series of voice-over roles in animated features for the Disney Studio, beginning with Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). He went on to work in Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg's *Pocahontas* (1995), Trousdale and Wise's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders's *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), as well as a sequel, *Lilo & Stitch 2* (2005, directed by Michael LaBash and Anthony Leondis), and a spin-off television series.

Some of the Disney work was done at a studio in Vancouver, which was relatively convenient to Newport, Oregon, to which Stiers had moved in the early 1990s to be with his elderly parents, Kenneth and Margaret (née Ogden) Stiers, in their last years. His father and mother died in 1996 and 1999, respectively.

Upon returning to Oregon, Stiers began an ongoing association with both the Newport Symphony Orchestra and the Ernest Bloch Music Festival, for both of which he has performed as a conductor. He has also conducted dozens of other orchestras, often in benefits for charities.

Stiers has also returned to his roots on the stage, particularly in the works of Shakespeare, including several stints in the title role of *King Lear*, which he reckons "is the hardest thing probably pretty much any actor will ever do" but also one of the most interesting and rewarding.

Stiers's involvement in the theater has brought him opportunities to direct. In 1997 in Philadelphia, he was at the helm of a production of John Lowell's *Autumn Canticle*, a love story about two men, one a singer of chamber music and the other a composer.

Interviewed at the time, Stiers denied being gay, although he tempered his response by adding, somewhat enigmatically, "but I believe that we're all the same person differently expressed." He also stated, "Equal

rights for homosexuals isn't an emotional issue for me as much as it is logical."

In a 2009 interview with Wayne Fuller, however, Stiers publicly acknowledged that he is gay and "very proud to be so." He explained that his reluctance to come out earlier was based on a fear of losing work.

He stated, "From the late 1980s until about seven or eight years ago, you would find certain individuals coming up to you, me, and advocating the position that since we were doing family fare that it would be best were the actors to maintain a certain palatability to parents. These parties likely had heard rumors or harbored suspicions about me and wanted to make sure no embarrassing incidents were forthcoming. Cogsworth, the character I did on *Beauty and the Beast*, could be a bit flamboyant on screen because basically he is a cartoon, but they didn't want Cogsworth to become Disney's gay character because it got around that a gay man was playing him."

A second reason for his decision to come out at the age of sixty-six was a very personal one. "I wish to spend my life's twilight being just who I am," declared Stiers, adding poignantly, "Now is the time I wish to find someone and I do not desire to force any potential partner to live a life of extreme discretion for me."

While Stiers admitted to having "nagging worries" about revealing his homosexuality, he said that he felt "a tad more comfortable in discussing [his] personal life" in 2009 than he had previously. Reflecting on his situation, he stated that he had "been working internally on whether [his fears of facing prejudice] were the problem or if [he] just continued using them as an excuse long after the call for conservative private lives passed." That he asked himself the question is in itself an answer.

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