



Winfield, Paul (1941-2004)

by Linda Rapp

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The theater always had a special place in the heart of actor Paul Winfield, but his career included numerous film and television roles. He was nominated for several acting awards and won an Emmy in 1995.

Paul Edward Winfield was born in Los Angeles on May 22, 1941 to Lois Beatrice Edwards, a garment-industry worker and union organizer. When Winfield was eight, his mother married Clarence Winfield, a construction worker.

The family moved to Portland, Oregon for a time. One of Winfield's vivid memories from those years was seeing Mark Robson's 1949 film *Home of the Brave*, in which African-American actor James Edwards played a leading part rather than the role of servant to which actors of color were typically confined.

When the family returned to Los Angeles, Winfield attended Manual Arts High School, where he excelled in both music and acting. He was named best actor in the Speech and Drama Teachers Association Drama Festival for three consecutive years.

Because of these achievements he was offered a scholarship to Yale but, apprehensive about fitting in there, chose to accept a two-year scholarship at the University of Portland. He subsequently attended other colleges on the West Coast, including UCLA, which he left in 1964 six credits short of a degree when professional opportunities beckoned.

In addition to appearing on stage he served as artist in residence at Stanford University during the 1964-1965 academic year.

Winfield became a contract player for Columbia Pictures in 1966. Initially he continued his stage work and played minor parts on television, but in 1969 Sidney Poitier chose him for a role in Robert Alan Arthur's film *The Lost Man*.

Winfield also became familiar to viewers of the small screen with a regular role as Diahann Carroll's boyfriend on the situation comedy *Julia* (1968-1970), a groundbreaking series that many consider to have been influential in increasing opportunities for African-American actors on television.

Winfield turned in a memorable performance in Martin Ritt's 1972 film *Sounder*, which earned him a nomination for an Academy Award as best actor.

Sounder came out when many films starring African-Americans were of the so-called "blaxploitation" variety that featured comic-book style action heroes. Winfield's portrayal of Nathan Lee Morgan, a Louisiana sharecropper jailed for stealing a ham to feed his starving family during the Great Depression, was a radical departure from what audiences had come to expect.

Of Winfield's performance, Stephen Bourne wrote, "a black father had never been depicted in an American

movie in such a personal and intimate way, and with such humanity." He added that Winfield's finest moment in the film came when he expressed his love for his son.

Winfield lived with his *Sounder* co-star Cicely Tyson for about a year and a half, but the relationship failed. In 1975 Winfield left Hollywood for San Francisco, which he described in a 1990 interview as a place where "a lot of people go to find themselves. There's a lot of introspection, a lot of social and sexual and interpersonal experimentation."

These comments are undoubtedly an oblique reference to his personal life, for there he began a lifelong relationship with San Francisco native Charles Gillan, Jr., a set designer for television shows and a partner in the design firm TECTA Associates, which specialized in architectural restoration. The couple remained together until Gillan's death from a bone disease on March 5, 2002.

Following the sojourn in San Francisco, Winfield returned to Los Angeles, where he amassed a long string of credits in film and television. He was honored with Emmy nominations for his 1978 portrayal of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Abby Mann's mini-series *King* and for his role in Georg Stanford Brown and John Erman's *Roots: The Next Generations* in 1979. He finally won an Emmy in 1995 for his work as a guest star on the series *Picket Fences*.

The versatile Winfield appeared in a wide variety of other screen projects from the science-fiction classic *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982, directed by Nicholas Meyer) to James Cameron's 1984 action picture *The Terminator* to a comedy series spoofing the Cinderella story, *The Charmings* (1987), on which he played a wisecracking mirror.

Winfield also had a starring role in gay filmmaker James Bridges' *Mike's Murder* (1984), in which he portrayed a gay man distraught over the death of his former lover.

In addition to on-camera work, Winfield also did voice-overs. After playing boxing promoter Don King in the HBO movie *Tyson* (1995, directed by Uli Edel), he voiced the King-inspired character Lucius Sweet on *The Simpsons* cartoon series (1996 and 1998). Beginning in 1998 he narrated the A&E cable television series *City Confidential*, which deals with crimes and their impact upon the cities in which they occur. Winfield's narration for this series was highly melodramatic.

Winfield was happiest performing on stage, particularly in the works of Shakespeare. He also appeared in numerous plays by modern writers.

Winfield's avocations included home renovation, an interest that he shared with Gillan; playing the cello; and raising champion black pug dogs, whom he named after characters from his beloved Shakespeare. He also became an avid collector of objects depicting the breed, accumulating hundreds of bronze and ceramic figures, including a 600-year-old sculpture from China.

While at a dog show in Denver in the late 1990s, Winfield fell into a diabetic coma and required three weeks of hospitalization. This caused him to "take [the disease] seriously" and to speak out publicly to make African-Americans more aware of the dangers of diabetes and obesity. He was also a vocal proponent of civil rights. Within the entertainment industry he worked tirelessly to promote cultural diversity.

Winfield did not, however, play an active role in the gay rights movement. His friend actor-producer Jack Larson described him as "openly gay in his life if not in the media." Indeed, in a 1990 article in *People Weekly* Tim Allis wrote that Winfield "mentions no current relationship," although he and Gillan had by then been partners for well over a decade.

One cannot say with certainty why Winfield chose to maintain public silence regarding his sexual orientation. It may be noted, however, that many actors of his generation, such as Rock Hudson and Richard

Chamberlain, long concealed their homosexuality for fear of losing employment.

Larson stated that Winfield had been distraught in his final years due to Gillan's death. Winfield died of a heart attack on March 7, 2004 in Los Angeles.

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