

Paul Michael Remembered

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By Jim Meskimen

This week we said goodbye to our dear friend and family patriarch, actor Paul Michael.

Paul was not my biological father, but he and my mom (actress Marion Ross) were constant companions, and effectively a married couple for over twenty years. They met on a play in Los Angeles and instantly fell in love. They continued to work together, touring the world and enjoying life and each other's company. He always said, "Marion is my hero."

Paul was born in Providence, Rhode Island to Lebanese parents. Among his many talents was cooking, and he introduced us all to Lebanese cuisine, which we are all now hopelessly addicted to. Every family holiday get together was complemented by Lebanese dishes which I know how to say, and ask for seconds of, but not how to spell.

He was a hardworking stage, TV and film actor who spent literally years of his life onstage. The last show he did was last summer, performing with my mother in a play written expressly for them by Joe DiPietro. Joe has since won a few Tony awards for other productions, and could have easily won another for Marion and Paul's play, *The Last Romance*, had it made it to Broadway. It still may someday, but now, sadly without Paul. (Sadly for audiences, since his rendition of the role was something marvelous to behold.)

Paul was going to be 85 this year. He and my mother did eight shows a week at the Globe Theater in San Diego, two acts with only one other character. It was a crowning triumph of a truly stellar career. And he was SO funny in the role. The audience, attendance by which broke all records for that venue, was crying with laughter or pathos throughout the play.

I never got to act with Paul, but I was lucky enough to direct him in several audiobook recordings, and he was a complete professional, and brought all his characters to vivid life. I'm glad his wonderful voice will live on in those stories.

Paul was a gentle man, but very tough as well. He was very strong physically, even when he was quite advanced in age. Once he grabbed the arm of a pickpocket who was trying to rob Marion somewhere in Italy, and held him unyieldingly against a wall like the buttress of a cathedral until he dropped what he had taken from her purse and was allowed to flee. Paul was probably a good 75 years old then.

Paul was of course also an extraordinary singer, and had enough power to reach the back of large theatrical venues without amplification; he was, in other words, a trained Broadway singer. He in fact appeared in many, many Broadway productions, and in touring companies of shows like

Zorba, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, where he carried the leading roles. He was that sort of actor, a Tevye, a Zorba, a bigger than life character that audiences wanted to watch and listen to.

He would sing anywhere, anytime, and his booming bass voice would resonate in your chest and echo through the house, or the great outdoors. He sang opera to Marion once on one of their trips abroad, in an ancient Roman amphitheater. He sang to her in romantic places around the world...

He told me one time he estimated he had done professionally over 10,000 live performances.

But he also could have claimed his greatest role was that of Marion Ross' soul-mate. Only it wasn't really a role to him, it was a calling, a cherished post and a pleasure.

Paul had many endearing habits and abilities that make him memorable and lovable. For example, puzzles. He would spend time every weekend doing the most difficult puzzles in the *New York* and *Los Angeles Times*, and always to completion. His vocabulary was remarkable— he had studied Latin for years in his youth and had a very complete understanding of word derivations and definitions. He would show us the puzzles afterwards, explaining the challenge, and then his mind boggling solutions. He said he did it to keep his mind sharp, which it certainly did.

His understanding and love of words extended across languages, and he was fluent in at least five languages, including Arabic, which he loved to use in his travels and in certain restaurants in the states. He would sometimes eavesdrop on waiters who spoke Arabic and then surprise them by answering them in their own tongue.

His facile mind was also a ready clearinghouse for jokes, which he could tell by the dozens if the social setting was appropriate. He probably knew over a thousand jokes by heart, and could instantly recall them, or adapt them to work them into a conversation.

Marion would sometimes play a game with him at parties where she would challenge him, "Tell them the joke about the apple" and he would instantly provide some story that was loosely related to her suggested topic: "Well, there was this circus acrobat that loved apples, and he wanted to leave his wife for the bearded lady..."

One joke that I remember him telling often, (and it was always funny) he said was the great Johnny Carson's favorite joke:

A man goes to visit his brother in the hospital. His brother has been in a terrible accident, and he is basically just a head laying there, no body at all. His brother says, "Johnny, it's your birthday, and I wanted to come by and visit, and I got you a present."

The brother on the bed looks at the present, sighs and says, "Another hat."

I will never forget Paul's laughter. It was as robust as his songs. Often, something would strike him so funny he would come apart laughing, tears filling his eyes with delight.

Paul was a gracious advocate of my character, Professor Knestor Jackdaws, and at family gatherings he would always throw out wonderfully supportive suggestions for painting titles for Knestor to describe; *The Pharaoh's Dog* was one I'll never forget.

For the last couple years, Paul has been having health problems and had been on a steady decline. Last year was a very difficult one, in the season following his triumph with Marion onstage in *The Last Romance*. In truth, he seemed to have been working on a gracious exit from the larger stage of his life since then, and there were numerous emergencies and trips to the hospital, where they patched him up again so that he could return home to Marion and their beloved Happy Days Farm, his puzzles, his kitchen and his cigars.

The final act was what they call a "Classy" one. On the Fourth of July weekend just finished, he cooked an extraordinary breakfast feast of french toast with bacon for about ten people down in Cardiff, where Marion and my sister Ellen have adjacent homes. Take my word for it, it was delicious. The way he made bacon, so that all the fat was baked off... and the french toast... well, it was pretty damned magnificent.

The next day he drove himself and my mother home to Los Angeles. Safely.

Then on Wednesday, July 6th, he enjoyed a cigar in the garden, spoke lovingly on the phone with his son, Matt, said he'd see him that night, then went into the house, took off his shoes and lay down on the couch.

That's where Marion found him.

So, we are thankful today to Paul Michael for the many years of companionship, love, entertainment, of sustenance, of friendship, and of laughter that he gave us, and the many, many warm memories.

Here a giant trod
Here a great soul walked
Here a spirit dwelt
and ever in our hearts.

The End