

Film Feature: HollywoodChicago.com Remembers John Mahoney

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CHICAGO – The actor John Mahoney, the son of Chicago that came here from England, died on February 4th, 2018 at his home in nearby Oak Park. He was 77. He had a varied career of stage and screen roles, but he is best remembered as Dad Martin Crane to sons Niles and “Frasier,” on that long running series.

He was born in Blackpool, Lancashire, England, and came to the U.S. because his sister was a war bride. She sponsored his emigration here, and after serving in the army graduated from downstate Quincy University. Post graduation, he was a teacher at Western Illinois University and journal editor in Chicago, but a dissatisfaction for that life led him to acting lessons through members of the fledgling Steppenwolf Theatre company. He joined that ensemble in the late 1970s, and had a hit play called “Orphans” that went to New York and put him on the map. He stayed on Broadway and won a Tony Award for his role in “The House of Blue Leaves” two years later.

He launched his film and television career shortly thereafter, debuting in the film “Tin Men” in 1987. From the 1980s through the ‘90s, he did prominent character turns in films such as “Moonstruck,” “Eight Men Out,” “Say Anything...” “Barton Fink,” “The American President” and “The Broken Hearts Club.” But it was 1993 that began his signature character, that of Martin Crane on the TV series “Frasier,” which lasted until 2004. He continued in theater, film and TV in during and post his “Frasier” years, and passed away due to cancer complications in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois, where he resided.

Patrick McDonald, Spike Walters and Jon Lennon Espino of HollywoodChicago.com have their favorite John Mahoney performances, and offers an overview.



FRASIER (1993-2004) by Jon Lennon Espino



Big Daddy: John Mahoney as Martin Crane in 'Frasier'

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

Growing up, there are always characters in television shows or films that you will identify with on some personal level. Whether its someone in a guiding role like Will from "Will and Grace," or someone that reminds you of one of your aunts like Fran Drescher's character in "The Nanny," the effects go beyond the surface of the show and enter a more intimate realm. John Mahoney is best known for his role in "Frasier" as Martin Crane, the father figure we can all relate to and identify with. My parents divorced when I was really young, so I would have to go and spend every other weekend with my biological father. The visits turned into little more than me spending most of the time bonding with his television, while being supervised by his new wife. "Frasier" was still on the air, but I would catch the reruns every time I went over since I would stay up late at night. As a young child, much of the intellectual humor went over my head, but what I enjoyed about the show were the relationships, like the father-son dynamic.

As Martin Crane, Mahoney provided a much-needed father figure in a time where I was desperately in need of one. (*Spoiler Alert* - I would find a healthy, supportive, and real father figure a few years after this with my new step-father.) The way Mahoney played Martin would set a standard for fathers everywhere. He was conservative and level-headed, which he would usually put to use in a well-timed quip or humorous remark that would help keep his kids grounded. He was a "man's man", which usually translates to being averse to sharing feelings, but Martin displayed a vulnerability (even if sometimes a little too macho) and emotional depth that allowed him to express his feelings and validate his children in a way that I have never experienced with my biological father to this day. Revisiting the show, I can see how much of an archetype the character was, but what made him unique was the unforgettable performance John Mahoney delivered consistently within every episode.



SAY ANYTHING... (1989) by Patrick McDonald



Incarcerated: John Mahoney Delivers the Key Line in 'Say Anything...'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

Who would think that a teen romance comedy, starring a young John Cusack (as Lloyd) and ingenue Lone Skye, would end up getting “performance stolen” by a gravelly-voiced middle aged man? John Mahoney portrayed James McCourt, the single father of Skye’s character Diane, and his pure portrayal made the film as much his story as the star-crossed teens. McCourt owns a rest home, and treats his residents with gentle deference and service. Behind the facade, he is perpetuating a tax scam using the resident’s money, and is motivated to do so because of the love for his daughter (he doesn’t want her to have money worries). As his scam gets revealed, and the feds get a wind of it, his transition from saintly Dad to hard bitten convict is sensational. His joy, as his daughter succeeds, is rendered in an off-key singalong to “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number” on the radio, and his fear resides in a chilling scene of a fetal position in a bath tub as everything unravels. Mahoney delivers it all, including the key line (and one of my favorites in movie history), “I’m incarcerated, Lloyd!”



BARTON FINK (1991) by Spike Walters



John Mahoney As W.P Mayhew in 'Barton Fink'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

John Mahoney was the kind of actor who made just about everything better simply by being in it. And for a brief period in the early 1990's he got the chance to become a bit player for the [Joel and Ethan] Coen Brothers. While his collaboration with the quirky auteurs was far too brief, he did have memorable supporting turn in the minor Coen Brothers classic "Barton Fink." Mahoney plays the formerly great novelist W.P. Mayhew (with shades of F. Scott Fitzgerald and countless others) who wastes away his days in Hollywood by getting soused by noon and tackling whatever drivel that washes up on his desk. It's a great sketch of a character, and Mahoney gives it a lot of lived-in charm. In the Coen brothers overstuffed collection of outsized personalities, Mahoney's performance doesn't exactly spring to mind first, but he rewards examination with depth and feeling you may have missed the first time around.

Source material for this article is from Wikipedia and the New York Times. John Mahoney, 1940-2018



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