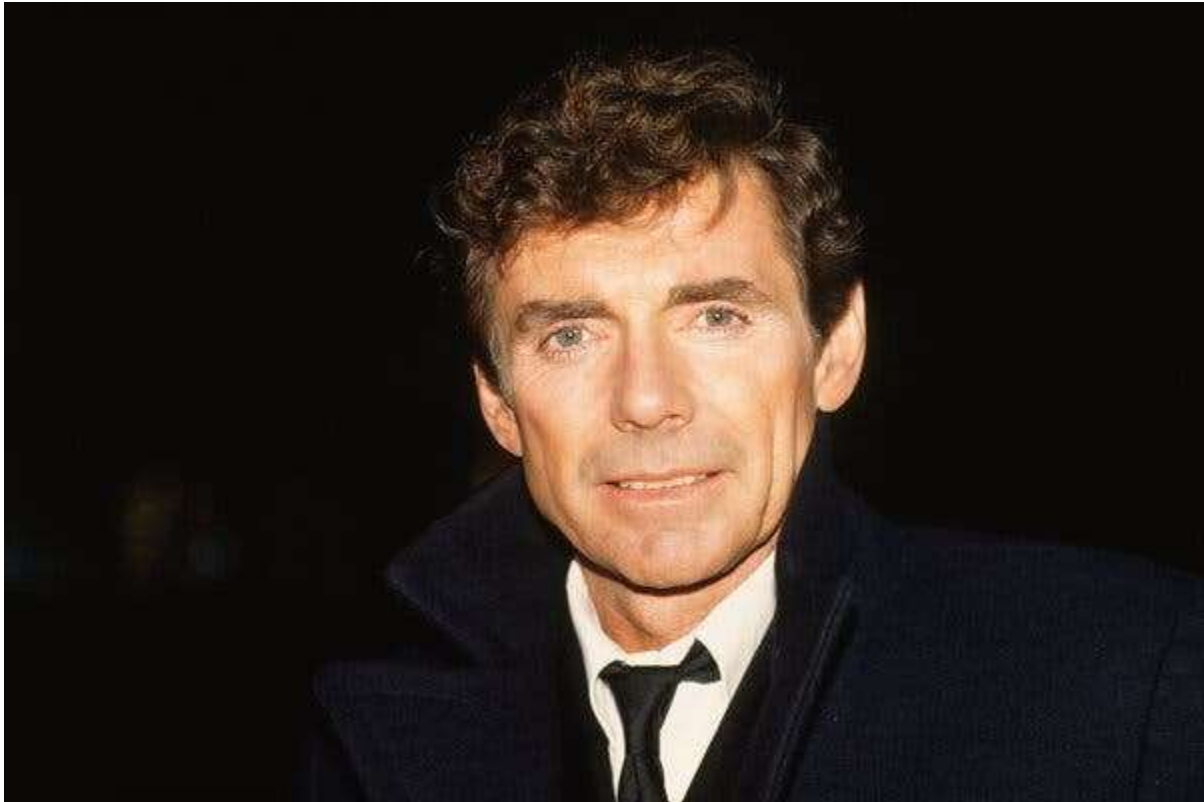


David Birney, Who Starred in TV's 'Bridget Loves Bernie,' Dies at 83

The sitcom, about an interfaith marriage, drew criticism from Jewish groups and was canceled after one season. He fared better onstage than in television.



David Birney in 1989. On Broadway, he appeared in Molière's "The Miser," J.M. Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" and Peter Shaffer's "Amadeus." Credit...François Pugnet/Sygma via Getty Image



By Richard Sandomir

May 2, 2022

[David Birney](#), a classically trained theater actor who found success on the stage, including on Broadway, but who was best known for his role in [“Bridget Loves Bernie”](#) — a short-lived sitcom about an interfaith marriage in which he starred opposite his future wife, Meredith Baxter — died on Friday at his home in Santa Monica, Calif. He was 83.

The cause was Alzheimer’s disease, said Michele Roberge, who said she was his life partner.

Mr. Birney had been in a handful of television series and movies when he was cast in 1972 as Bernie Steinberg, a Jewish taxicab driver and struggling writer. [Ms. Baxter](#) played Bridget Fitzgerald, a schoolteacher from a wealthy Roman Catholic family.

“This is not a message show,” Mr. Birney, who was Irish American, said during an interview with The Kansas City Star before the series’ debut. “It’s not even an idea show.”

CBS gave it a plum time slot between “All in the Family” and “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” on Saturday night; it consistently finished among the top 10 programs in prime time and was the highest rated new series of the 1972-73 season.

But it [attracted criticism](#) from a broad spectrum of Jewish groups, which objected chiefly to its treatment of intermarriage between Jews and Christians as a positive outcome and complained that it used Jewish stereotypes. CBS publicly played down the criticism but, without an explanation, canceled “Bridget Loves Bernie” after 24 episodes.

“One segment of the protesters is truly concerned about the dilution of their faith,” Mr. Birney told The Daily News several months after the cancellation. “But intermarriage is on the rise, nevertheless. The threat doesn’t come from a harmless show such as ours, but from within.”

Mr. Birney and Ms. Baxter married in 1974.

In 1976, Mr. Birney received acclaim for playing John Quincy Adams in the public television production of “The Adams Chronicles.” Later that year, he was hired to play Frank Serpico, the corruption-fighting New York City detective, in an NBC series [adapted from](#) the Sidney Lumet movie “Serpico” (1973), which had earned Al Pacino an Oscar nomination for best actor.

Mr. Birney was cast in the role on the strength of his work playing an officer in two episodes of “Police Story,” another NBC series. But “Serpico” was canceled after less than a full season.



Mr. Birney and Meredith Baxter in an episode of “Bridget Loves Bernie,” a short-lived CBS sitcom about an interfaith marriage. Jewish groups were critical of it. Credit...CBS via Getty Images

David Edwin Birney was born on April 23, 1939, in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Cleveland. His father, Edwin, was an F.B.I. agent, and his mother, Jeanne (McGee) Birney, was a homemaker and later a real estate agent.

After earning a bachelor’s degree in English from Dartmouth College in 1961, Mr. Birney turned down a scholarship from Stanford Law School and instead chose to study theater arts at the University of California, Los Angeles. He received a master’s degree a year later. In the Army, he was part of a program called [the Showmobile](#), which entertained at military bases in the United States.

Mr. Birney’s theater career began in earnest in 1965, when he won the Barter Theater Award, enabling him to spend a season acting in shows at the prestigious Barter Theater in Abingdon, Va. He moved on to the Hartford Stage Company in Connecticut, and in 1967 he played Antipholus of Syracuse in a New York Shakespeare Festival production of “A Comedy of Errors.”

Mr. Birney made his Broadway debut two years later in Molière’s “The Miser.” And in 1971 he starred in a Broadway production of J.M. Synge’s “The Playboy of the Western World” at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center. Mr. Birney played Christy Mahon, who enters an Irish pub in the early 1900s telling a story about killing his father.

“Mr. Birney had a cock sparrow arrogance,” [Clive Barnes wrote in his review in The New York Times](#), “that mixture of both confidence and certainty that seemed perfectly right.”

At the opening of “Playboy,” the Clancy Boys, a popular Irish singing group that Mr. Birney had befriended at a Manhattan bar, sat in the front row.

“They had their Irish sweaters on,” Ms. Roberge said in a phone interview, “and their arms crossed as if to say, Come on, show us what you’ve got.”

Over the rest of his theatrical career, Mr. Birney played a wide variety of roles, including Antonio Salieri, as a replacement, in Peter Shaffer’s “Amadeus” on Broadway; Benedick in “Much Ado About Nothing” at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J.; Hamlet at the PCPA Theaterfest in Santa Maria, Calif.; and James Tyrone Jr. in Eugene O’Neill’s “A Moon for the Misbegotten” at the Miniature Theater of Chester, Mass.

He also adapted some of [Mark Twain’s short stories](#) into a play, “The Diaries of Adam and Eve,” which he often performed and directed. In 1989, he starred in one of the productions, with Ms. Baxter, for American Playhouse on PBS.

The couple divorced that year. [In 2011, she wrote in her book](#), “Untied: A Memoir of Family, Fame and Floundering,” that Mr. Birney had been abusive during their marriage. [He denied her accusation](#), calling it an “appalling abuse of the truth.”

One of Mr. Birney’s biggest successes on television was a starring role as a doctor in the first season of the medical dramedy “St. Elsewhere.” But as the second season approached, he left the series because of his commitment on Broadway to “Amadeus.”

He continued to work in television through 2007, when he was a guest on the police procedural “Without a Trace.”

In addition to Ms. Roberge, Mr. Birney is survived by his children with Ms. Baxter, his daughters Kate and Mollie Birney and a son, Peter Baxter; a stepdaughter, Eva Bush, and a stepson, Ted Bush, Ms. Baxter’s children from a previous marriage; two grandchildren; and his brothers, Glenn and Gregory. Another marriage, to Mary Concannon, also ended in divorce.

Richard Sandomir is an obituaries writer. He previously wrote about sports media and sports business. He is also the author of several books, including “The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper and the Making of a Classic.” @[RichSandomir](#)

New York Times May 3, 2022

David Birney A Memory

Arthur Bloom

In the fall of 1957, almost 65 years ago, the freshman class of Dartmouth College assembled in the school's infirmary, stripped naked, and lined up alphabetically. David Birney wound up in front of me, and so we met, as he liked to put it, with absolutely nothing to hide. Michele just called me and told me that David passed away peacefully last evening. I had not thought to see this day. Although we had been expecting this, it seems impossible now that it is here, because David was so vital, so athletic, so full of life. I used to kid him, saying: "If you die before I do, I'm warning you, I'm going to come to your funeral and sing *Danny Boy*. If that doesn't keep you alive, nothing will."

Now that the moment has come, there will be many different people remembering David in many different ways. But I will remember him most as a stage actor. I saw him first in Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* and last as Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. His career spanned the full range of dramatic literature. He appeared in works by Sophocles, Moliere, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Gilbert and Sullivan, Noel Coward, James Millington Syngé, Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Miller, Frank Loesser, Lerner and Lowe, Lanford Wilson, Tom Stoppard, Peter Shaffer and most of all, William Shakespeare. Within the Shakespearean canon he acted in *The Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet* (in the title role at least three times), *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* (as both Romeo and Mercutio), *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Tempest*, and *As You Like It*.

While he may be best known to the public for his work on television, what he was proudest of was his work in live theatre. When the first symptoms of the Alzheimer's that ended his life occurred, he was actually studying Malvolio, and we were talking about how he might tackle King Lear. His was a career to be proud of and celebrated.

As I grow older, I have come to understand that we are all the heroes of our own lives. David was the bright, particular name-above-the-title star of his. And sometimes this was not easy, because it meant that those around him became members of the supporting cast. But this was not done out of any sense of grandiosity or ego. It was the result of the fact that David approached life as an art form and believed that like all art forms, it demanded excellence. Whether he was selecting tiles for his kitchen or buying first editions of Dickens or insisting that Mozart music be used underneath a tv crime drama, David demanded excellence. He demanded it of himself and of everyone around him. I, for one, am lucky to have known him.

* * * * *

A Remembrance From Oscar Arslanian About David And The Legacy Of The Arts:

When I served as class president, we adopted a project to support the performing arts at The Hop. Who better to enroll in its possibility than David Birney. He agreed to spearhead the project that he named The Class of 1961 Legacy for the Performing Arts. It would serve as a continuing gift that would live long after we are all gone.

David was a tireless advocate for The Legacy that honors the importance and long tradition of the American performance in the arts, its theatre, music and dance within the Dartmouth community.

Today, the endowment has grown to over \$2 million. It not only brings the best performing artists to Dartmouth, it is also a lasting legacy of our classmate and my dear friend, David Birney.--Oscar

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