

Movie Giant Ossie Davis Remembered

Fought racial injustice on stage, in real life

(AP)—Ossie Davis, whose rich baritone and elegant, unshakable bearing made him a giant of the stage, is being remembered for his work on screen and the civil rights movement.

Davis, 87, was found dead Friday in his hotel room in Miami Beach, Fla. He was making a film, "Retirement," said Arminda Thomas, who works in his New Rochelle, N.Y. office.

Miami Beach police spokesman Bobby Hernandez said Davis' grandson called shortly before 7 a.m. when Davis would not open the door to his room at the Shore Club Hotel. Davis was found dead, apparently of natural causes, Hernandez said.

Davis wrote, acted, directed and produced for the theater and Hollywood. Even light fare such as the comedy "Grumpy Old Men" with

Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau was somehow enriched by his strong, but gentle presence.

Davis and his wife, Ruby Dee celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in 1998 with the publication



Ossie Davis and wife, Ruby Dee, pose in front of their movie poster at the opening night gala of their film "Gone Are the Days!" on Sept. 23, 1963.

of a dual autobiography, "With Ossie & Ruby: In This Life Together."

Their partnership called to mind other performing couples, such as

the Lunts, or Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. Davis and Dee first appeared together in the plays "Jeb," in 1946, and "Anna Lucasta," in 1946-47. Davis' first film, "No Way Out" in 1950, was Dee's fifth.

Both had key roles in the television series "Roots: The Next Generation" (1978), "Martin Luther King: The Dream and the Drum" (1986) and "The Stand" (1994). Davis appeared in three Spike Lee films, including "School Daze," "Do the Right Thing" and "Jungle Fever." Dee also appeared in the latter two; among her best-known films was "A Raisin in the Sun," in 1961.

In 2004, Davis and Dee were among the artists selected to receive the Kennedy Center Honors.

When not on stage or on camera, Davis and Dee were deeply involved in civil rights issues and efforts to promote the cause of blacks in the entertainment industry. They nearly ran afoul of the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the early 1950s, but were never

openly accused of any wrongdoing.

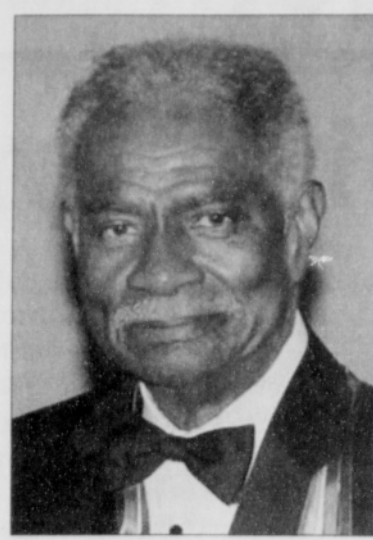
Actor Roy Scheider, who had performed with Davis and attended anti-war rallies with him, called

Davis and Dee "the first political couple of America."

Ossie seemed to always show up at the right time, on the right side, which was always the human side," Scheider said. "He was always progressive and had a very heartfelt sympathy for all people everywhere."

The oldest of five children, Davis was born in tiny Cogdell, Ga., in 1917 and grew up in nearby Waycross and Valdosta. He left home in 1935, hitchhiking to Washington to enter Howard University, where he studied drama, intending to be a playwright.

His career as an actor began in 1939 with the Rose McClendon Players in Harlem, then the center of black culture in America. There, the young Davis met or mingled with some of the most influential figures of the time, including the preacher Father Divine, W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.



Ossie Davis

He lined up with socialist reformer DuBois and singer Paul Robeson, remaining fiercely loyal to the singer even after Robeson was denounced by other black political, sports and show business figures for his openly communist and pro-Soviet sympathies.

"We've never been, to our

knowledge, guilty of anything — other than being black — that might upset anybody," he wrote.

They were friends with baseball star Jackie Robinson — Dee played his wife, opposite Robinson himself, in the 1950 movie "The Jackie Robinson Story" — and with Malcolm X.

In the book, Davis told how a prior commitment caused them to miss the Harlem rally where Malcolm was assassinated in 1965. Davis delivered the eulogy at Malcolm's funeral, calling him "our own black shining prince — who didn't hesitate to die, because he loved us so." He reprised it in a voice-over for the 1992 Spike Lee film, "Malcolm X."

Along with film, stage and television, the couple's careers extended to a radio show, "The Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee Story Hour," that ran on 65 stations for four years in the mid-1970s, featuring a mix of black themes.

Both made numerous guest appearances on television shows.

School Board Member Considers Future

Embattled school board member Derry Jackson called a news conference Friday to pledge his innocence in a dispute over violating a judge's restraining order.

Jackson, 42, said he would finish the five months remaining on his term on the Portland School District Board of Education.

He said that he would consider the needs of his family and talk to members of the community be-



Derry Jackson. (KGW photo)

fore decided whether to run for re-election.

Jackson was jailed Feb. 1 in Washington County in Hillsboro, on four misdemeanor counts of violating a family abuse restraining order.

During the news conference, backed by some of his supporters in the African American community, he denied using or threatening violence against his estranged wife, Bernel Jackson.

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