News
Obituary



James Earl Jones is pictured at the 71st Tony Awards in New York City, where he received a lifetime achievement award June 11, 2017. The actor, a Catholic with a storied career that included voicing the character Darth Vader, died the morning of Sept. 9, 2024. (OSV News/Carlo Allegri, Reuters)

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James Earl Jones, a distinguished actor known for his resonant voice and a Black Catholic, died Sept. 9 in Dutchess County, New York, at age 93.

His numerous and versatile roles over an illustrious 70-year career included the voice of Darth Vader* in "Star Wars," beginning in 1977, and Mufasa in "The Lion King" (1994); a reclusive author in "Field of Dreams" (1989); and Admiral James Greer in three movies based on Tom Clancy novels including "The Hunt for Red October" (1990). He was also the dramatic voice behind CNN's tagline "This is CNN."

A convert to the Catholic faith as a young man, Jones wrote in 1993, "Perhaps my greatest honor came when I was asked to read the New Testament on tape," pointing to an unabridged recording of the King James Version of the New Testament he made in the 1980s that TOPICS Entertainment remastered for CD in 2002.

"Even if he didn't do this Bible and you said, 'Whose voice sounds like God?' — it would be James Earl Jones," Greg James, TOPICS president, told The Seattle Times in 2006. "He just has such a beautiful, rich voice, it's amazing."

Jones' passing coincided with the feast of St. Peter Claver, a patron saint of Black Catholics.

Jones was born in 1931 in Arkabutla, Mississippi, but as a child he moved to northern Michigan to live with his grandparents. His grandfather was a farmer with strong faith, who preached on Sunday mornings in a chapel he built for Jones' grandmother.

His grandfather's command of language and public speaking both impressed and intimidated the young Jones, who struggled with a stutter. "I could talk, all right. Our farm animals knew that. I found it easy to call the pigs, tell the dogs to round up the cows, and vent my feelings to Fanny, the horse whose big brown eyes and lifted ears seemed to express interest in all I said. But when visitors came and I was asked to say hello, I could only stand, pound my feet, and grit my teeth," Jones recalled in a 1993 essay for Guideposts magazine.

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When he was 14, a retired college professor began teaching at Jones' school, and began to mentor the teen, who shared his love for poetry. He encouraged Jones to write and recite poetry, helping him overcome his speech impediment. With that obstacle removed, Jones began to dream of acting like his estranged father, Robert Earl Jones.

After graduating from the University of Michigan, he served with the U.S. Army in Colorado, where he met a Jesuit chaplain who, Jones wrote, "helped me understand who God really was." While in the Army, he joined the Catholic Church.

Jones pursued acting, came to know his father, and launched a successful acting career. His role in "The Great White Hope" (1970) catapulted him to stardom, establishing him "as America's premier black actor, a status yet to be challenged" in the mid-1980s, The New York Times reported at the time. He took on a variety of Broadway roles and acted in Shakespearean plays, while also acting in film and TV, playing Alex Haley in the television mini-series "Roots."

His talent earned him the elusive "EGOT," having garnered Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards. The Oscar was an honorary Academy Award granted in 2011.

**This story has been updated to correct the spelling of Vader.*