

Obituaries

Bob Dorian, actor and magician who introduced classic films on AMC, dies at 85

By [Harrison Smith](#)

June 24

Bob Dorian, an actor, magician and avuncular movie buff who presented more than 10,000 classic films, B-movie serials and pre-Code Hollywood gems as the first prime-time host of American Movie Classics, died June 15. He was 85, although he often said he preferred to give his age by way of film history, declaring that he was “born between ‘Flying Down to Rio’ and ‘Top Hat.’ ”

His daughter Melissa Dorian confirmed the death but did not say precisely where or how he died, noting that the family prepared only a two-line obituary in keeping with his desire for privacy.

Mr. Dorian performed on the stage, radio, television and occasionally on film, appearing in two movies by one of his favorite contemporary directors, Woody Allen, and lending his voice to Sam Raimi’s 1981 horror classic “The Evil Dead,” as an archaeologist whose [tape-recorded readings](#) from an ancient text summon demonic spirits to a cabin in the woods.

Bespectacled and bushy-browed, he began acting at 14; dabbled in stand-up comedy and trapeze-catching at the circus; played the bass in a New York jazz group, the Four Dimensions; and performed mind-reading tricks and other illusions as the Amazing Dorian, sometimes incorporating his wife and three daughters into his act.

“Women, cars — you name it and I’ve floated it,” he told The Washington Post in 1991, describing his powers of levitation. A magic performance he once gave in Saudi Arabia, he added, drove his audience from the room because “they thought I was doing the devil’s art.”

Mr. Dorian appeared in a 1976 television special alongside magicians David Copperfield and Carl Ballantine, but became far better known as the principal host of American Movie Classics, later shortened to AMC. The network launched in 1984 as a premium-cable showcase for old films, presenting movies without cuts or commercials a decade before the creation of Turner Classic Movies, the channel’s main competitor.

Although he was later joined by daytime hosts Gene Klavan and Nick Clooney, Mr. Dorian was “the heart and soul of AMC,” Los Angeles Times journalist Susan King [wrote in 2002](#), about one year after Mr. Dorian left the network. His departure coincided with sweeping programming changes at AMC, where old movies were replaced with contemporary films and, eventually, original series such as “Mad Men.”

During his tenure, Mr. Dorian introduced movies with a two-minute segment filmed at a living-room set, where he roamed between bookshelves, a black Maltese Falcon statue, and portraits of stars Jean Harlow and [Hedy Lamarr](#).

Regaling viewers with Hollywood history and behind-the-scenes trivia, he explained how the filmmakers of “Casablanca” wrote the script as the movie was being made; how Bette Davis landed the lead role in “All About Eve”

only after Claudette Colbert suffered a cracked vertebra while filming “Three Came Home”; and how no fewer than 188 actors had played the roles of Sherlock Holmes and his assistant, Dr. Watson.

While TCM host [Robert Osborne](#) was an urbane film historian, Mr. Dorian insisted that he was little more than a movie fan. “We never use tape-overs,” he told the Dallas Morning News in 1994, explaining his process. “If I make a mistake, we leave it in. I want to seem like a human being who enjoys movies, not a superior professor talking down to an audience.”

He recalled that he got the AMC hosting job in large part through chance, when he met a producer in the early 1980s after being cast as Dracula in a television ad for a video game. “It was a very long two-day shoot, with most of my time spent in a tight coffin filled with way too much smoke,” he [told GoFatherhood](#), a parenting blog. “Lunchtime usually lapsed into long conversations about all those great old movies the producer and I enjoyed when we were growing up.”

The producer, Norm Blumenthal, later helped start AMC, and asked Mr. Dorian if he would be interested in serving as an announcer. Executives were considering “two Broadway actors, a well-known TV film critic and a few others who were more involved in writing as a profession,” Mr. Dorian said.

After Mr. Dorian was suggested as half of a Siskel-and-Ebert-style duo, one executive purportedly had a breakthrough. “Wait a minute,” Mr. Dorian recalled his saying. “The critic might not be too crazy about some of the films we’ve brought in. This guy Dorian likes everything!”

Indeed, he favored classics such as “Citizen Kane” and “King Kong” as well B-movie serials such as “Zombies of the Stratosphere,” encouraging viewers to give the 1952 science-fiction film a try — if only because it featured [Leonard Nimoy](#), who later played the pointy-eared Spock, in a supporting role as a Martian.

Mr. Dorian was born in Brooklyn in April 1934, two months after the release of “It Happened One Night.” He rarely discussed his upbringing, aside from recounting the Saturdays he spent evading matrons at local movie theaters, where he watched three or more films for the price of a dime.

He later worked as a theater usher, a job that enabled him to catch 86 screenings of the swashbuckling 1950 film “Cyrano de Bergerac,” and appeared in television shows such as “Suspense” and “Studio One,” according to one Washington Post report.

Mr. Dorian performed in the Allen movies “The Curse of the Jade Scorpion” (2001) and “Hollywood Ending” (2002), along with an independent Civil War film, “The Last Confederate” (2005). He was also a mainstay of regional theater productions — including at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, N.J. — before retiring to Florida in recent years.

Survivors include his wife of 65 years, Jane Dorian; three daughters, Melissa Dorian, Robin Dorian and Jane Dorian; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Dorian likened his work at AMC as that of a historian or archivist, keeping old films alive for younger generations. But he seemed to find equal — if not greater — delight in his theatrical performances, notably in a 1998

touring production of “The Wizard of Oz,” during which he served as the understudy to the wizard, played by [Mickey Rooney](#), and began the show as Dorothy’s Uncle Henry.

“Then we go through the tornado scene,” he [told the New York Times](#), explaining his transformation into a new character. “I’m upstairs becoming a citizen of Oz, and I come out a little bit later when the Winkies are working for the Wicked Witch. I’m the head Winkie. We hired a line of Broadway ensemble dancers to be the Winkies, and I kept saying, Couldn’t you put me behind these people?”

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Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago. [Follow](#) 
