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Democracy Dies in Darkness

James Lipton, host of 'Inside the Actors Studio,' dies at 93

By **Adam Bernstein**

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James Lipton, who had a multifaceted career in entertainment as a soap opera writer, Broadway lyricist and producer-director of star-studded TV spectacles, but who became best known as the discreetly probing host of the Bravo TV show “Inside the Actors Studio,” died March 2 at his home in Manhattan. He was 93.

The cause was bladder cancer, said his wife, Kedakai Lipton.

Mr. Lipton entered show business in the 1950s as a young writer and actor brimming with ambition. For years he struggled to find his place in the industry, laboring over soap opera scripts — he sometimes worked on three shows at once — and weathering two flops when he tried to break into mainstream musical theater as a lyricist and librettist in the 1960s.

He eventually became an impresario behind television specials featuring comedian Bob Hope as well as made-for-TV galas honoring the arts and American history. He was head writer from 1982 to 1987 of the TV soap opera “Capitol,” set in and around Washington, and continued to pour out television films, one based on his novel “Mirrors,” about ballet hopefuls in the competitive world of New York dance. It featured echoes of his own professional life.

“I’m not that fond of everything that’s been written or filmed about dance,” Mr. Lipton told the New York Times. “They’re essentially variations on ‘42d Street.’ The star is hurt, the understudy goes on and a new star is born. More interesting to me are all those dancers to whom that never happens.”

Although he had spent the great part of his career toiling in genres that rarely attract critical esteem, Mr. Lipton was invited in the early 1990s to join the board of the Actors Studio workshop, a vaunted organization established in 1947 by Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis and Cheryl Crawford to train actors, directors and writers. For decades its operations had been dominated by artistic director Lee Strasberg, who died in 1982.

Mr. Lipton found the studio’s finances in grave condition and proposed a master’s-level drama program — initially as a partnership with the New School in Manhattan and later with Pace University — to generate income.

The MFA program, launched 1993 with Mr. Lipton as dean, proved a near-instant success. The next year, he created “Inside the Actors Studio” for Bravo to increase the program’s name recognition.

The show featured an A-list roster of Hollywood and Broadway royalty, including Paul Newman, Barbra Streisand, Robin Williams, Spike Lee and Steven Spielberg. In exchange for their appearance, Mr. Lipton provided a relatively safe space for sometimes guarded celebrities to reveal themselves more personally before a live audience.

Mr. Lipton used large blue index cards, with notes and questions based on his voluminous research about his interviewees, to guide their conversations. He was inquisitive but not tabloid-minded, shunning uncomfortable questions.

[The probing question James Lipton always asked his celebrity guests]

Perhaps because of his own experience, he never lingered on projects that were critical or commercial failures. Instead, he called upon his deep knowledge of stagecraft and the entertainment industry to discuss his guests' philosophies toward their lives and work.

"It is not journalism," Mr. Lipton told the Times. "It is meant as an antidote to what is normally done with these people. I want to create an environment where people are willing to talk about the craft, not about themselves as people but as artists."

Bespectacled, bearded and with a tendency to emphasize his well-rounded vowels, Mr. Lipton came across as cerebral, if sometimes sycophantic. He often ended his show with a questionnaire popularized by French television host Bernard Pivot. "If heaven exists," Mr. Lipton asked, "what would you like to hear God say when you arrive?"

"Inside the Actors Studio" won a 2013 Emmy Award for outstanding informational series or special. He left the program in 2018, a year before it moved to Ovation TV.

"The show is, in the end, about the interior life of those who love the art form, about the struggle that leaves them lonely, introspective, unsure," Times journalist Chris Hedges wrote in a 2001 profile of Mr. Lipton. His "encyclopedic knowledge and unconditional acceptance — he lets his guests edit things they do not like from the tape — combine to create intimate and often moving portraits of lives in progress."

Mr. Lipton's earnestness and unctuous flattery was ripe for lamprooning. On "Saturday Night Live," Will Ferrell played the Actors Studio host as verbose, self-involved and prone to making grandiose claims about forgettable careers and praising a guest's banalities as wisdom.

Mr. Lipton acknowledged and embraced the caricature, telling CNN that he admired Ferrell. "We're good friends — and I think he's got me cold, the rat," he said.

Louis James Lipton was born in Detroit on Sept. 19, 1926. His mother was a teacher and librarian. His father, who had emigrated from Poland as a child with the surname Lipschitz, abandoned the family for an itinerant life as a fiction writer and educator; later, leading “jazz canto” workshops on the West Coast, he attracted an enthusiastic following among Beat authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Raised by his mother and maternal grandparents, the younger Lipton worked odd jobs to help support his family while also developing an interest in theater and radio performance. For a period, he played a child nephew of the Lone Ranger on a local Detroit radio station.

After brief Air Force service, he found himself in Paris. At a financial low point, he worked as a procurer of prostitutes. He returned to the United States determined, he later said, “to be a lawyer because that was as far away from my father’s lunacy that I could imagine.”

He enrolled in acting classes to prepare himself for a career as a courtroom advocate but became immersed in a cultural milieu that included Strasberg and Harold Clurman. “About five years later, I said to myself, ‘Stop kidding. You don’t want to be a lawyer. This is what you want to do,’ ” he recalled in a 2013 Parade interview.

To subsidize more classes in voice, modern dance and choreography, he took acting jobs in low-budget films and had a recurring role as a doctor on the soap opera “The Guiding Light.” He began contributing scripts and was soon named head writer of the show in addition to writing for two other soaps, “The Edge of Night” and “Another World.”

Mr. Lipton made his Broadway debut as an actor in Lillian Hellman's 1951 drama "The Autumn Garden" and teamed with composer Sol Berkowitz on a Prohibition-era musical called "Nowhere to Go but Up," directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Tom Bosley. The show, for which Mr. Lipton wrote the book and lyrics, closed after a week amid dreadful reviews.

The title, however, proved prophetic. Mr. Lipton's next musical, "Sherry!," with a score by composer Laurence Rosenthal and based on George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's hit comedy "The Man Who Came to Dinner," squeaked out a run that lasted two months. (A 2004 all-star recording of the score — featuring Tommy Tune, Bernadette Peters, Nathan Lane, Carol Burnett and Mike Myers, among others — was greeted with more enthusiasm.)

His first two marriages, to actresses Shirley Blanc and Nina Foch, ended in divorce. In 1970, he married Kedakai Turner, a former model who became a real estate executive. She is his only immediate survivor.

An autodidact, Mr. Lipton taught himself French and Latin, learned to fly planes and was a champion equestrian in show-jumping tournaments. He also wrote a book on language, "An Exaltation of Larks," which examined obscure collective nouns (a murmuration of starlings, a rag of colts, a skulk of foxes) and has been in print since it was first published in 1968. Over the years, he proposed his own nouns of multitude, including an unction of undertakers, a shrivel of critics and a queue of actors.

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