

James Earl Jones

“This is CNN.”

“Luke, I am your father.”

“Welcome to Verizon.”

”Simba, Remember.”

One of the most memorable voices in the entertainment industry belongs to a young man born in Arkabutla, Mississippi in 1931 during the Great Depression. His parents separated before he was born, so he was raised by his maternal grandparents. At age five the family moved to a farm in rural Dublin, Michigan. Interestingly, he is of Irish, African-American and Native American decent. One day he stood up to recite in Sunday School and was so nervous the other children made fun of him. This episode coupled with the dramatic adaptation to a new environment was so traumatic he became afraid to speak aloud. He developed a severe stutter and refused to speak even at home. Jones later commented, “I was a stutterer. I couldn't talk. So my first year of school was my first mute year, and then those mute years continued until I got to high school.”

Jones was functionally mute for 8 years until a high school teacher, Donald Crouch, decided to bring him out of his shell. He made James recite a report he had written before the class under the guise of proving he had actually authored it himself. Crouch pushed James to take drama lessons, participating in the debate team and won an award in public speaking over the next few years. The award's prize was a scholarship to the University of Michigan. When James entered the University of Michigan he intended to study medicine, but he found himself attracted to drama and the theater. After serving in the military as an Army Ranger, he moved to New York to seek acting opportunities.

Work for black actors was scarce enough, but his father, actor and former boxer, Robert Earl Jones had been blacklisted for his political activism and this hampered James' career even more. He did anything to make a living including scrubbing floors and making sandwiches in a delicatessen. He also continued taking acting classes on a regular basis to hone his skill and work on the still persistent stutter. After a few small roles he caught the attention of critics with his performance in the American premiere of Jean Genet's, *The Blacks*. This historic 1961 production introduced a new generation of outstanding African-American actors; the cast included Cicely Tyson, Godfrey Cambridge and Maya Angelou to name a few.

After several other theatrical standouts, he appeared in his first film, *Dr. Strangelove, or How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Bomb*. He is a crew member on the bomber with several lines of dialogue (including informing the captain that the self destruct device has blown itself up) in what has come to be known as his distinctive authoritative voice. In 1968 Jones earned respect for his performance in *The Great White Hope* playing a character based on Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion. His performance in the play on Broadway won him his first of two Tony Awards. He was chosen to reprise the role in the film version where he received an Oscar nomination for his performance in 1970.

He began a string of over 50 successful film appearances, playing everything from a reclusive 1960's radical author in *Field of Dreams* to the villain in *Conan the Barbarian* and the repeated role of Admiral Greer in two of the Tom Clancy hits, *The Hunt of Red October* and *Patriot Games*. He was thrust onto the world scene, though, when Director/Producer George Lucas decide to not use the voice of Orson Wells as Darth Vader, because he thought the voice would be too recognizable) and chose James Earl Jones to become the voice of one of the most notorious villains in film history. His role in the comedy *Coming to America* alongside Madge Sinclair as the pompous king probably helped him land the role of King Mufasa in Disney's *The Lion King* (also paired with Sinclair as his Queen). In television he played several roles including Alex Haley in *Roots*, *the Next Generation* and an ex-con in *Gabriel's Fire* (starring again with Madge Sinclair), for which he won one of his four Emmy Awards.

A new generation knows him as the voice announcing every half hour, "This is CNN" and welcoming customers to Verizon Wireless telecommunications service. He was the first established celebrity to appear on television's award-winning *Sesame Street*. His autobiography, "Voices and Silences," was published in 1993. He has a great sense of humor and humility. He refused to allow his name to be included in the credits for the first two *Star Wars* movies his voice appeared in. On his role for *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* he commented, "When I read that part in the script where it said, 'Luke, I am your father', I thought, 'He's lying. I have to see how they carry this lie out'."

Jones won a second Tony with his stunning performance in August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize drama *Fences*. Most recently he starred in the Broadway revival of *On Golden Pond*. Amazingly James still stutters, but he is an inspiration to anyone with a limitation that anything can be overcome when you put your mind and attitude toward it. He spoke before a congressional committee on literacy to share his commitment to reading. He says he owes much to his affliction in that it has spurred him on to a "more intimate relationship with language," and challenged him to find meaning and knowledge with the burden he carries. Recently he addressed a graduating college class with these words: "Let us dream; let us hope and pray; let us reinvent ourselves every morning."

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