

Obituary: Brock Peters

Brock Peters, actor in 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' dies at 78

GARY GENTILE

Associated Press



Brock Peters, as the falsely accused Tom Robinson, starred with Gregory Peck in the 1962 film based on Harper Lee's novel. Universal International Pictures

LOS ANGELES – Brock Peters may be best remembered for his heartbreaking performance in “To Kill a Mockingbird,” but his distinctive bass voice also played a vital role in his career.

Peters died Tuesday at his home after battling pancreatic cancer. He was 78.

He was diagnosed with the disease in January and had been receiving chemotherapy treatment, according to Marilyn Darby, his longtime companion. His condition became worse in recent weeks and died peacefully in bed, surrounded by family, she said.

Peters was born George Fisher on July 2, 1927, in New York. His long film career began in the 1950s with the landmark productions of “Carmen Jones” in 1954 and “Porgy and Bess” in 1959.

His voice also landed him work. He sang background vocals on Harry Belafonte’s hits “Banana Boat (Day-O)” and “Mama Look At Bubu,” and he was often used for animated characters such as Jomo in 2002’s “The Wild Thornberrys Movie.”

In recent years, he played Admiral Cartwright in two of the “Star Trek” feature films and also appeared in numerous TV shows.

He was perhaps best known for portraying accused rapist Tom Robinson, defended by Gregory Peck's Atticus Finch in the 1962 film "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"He was such a dear friend and one of the most lovely human beings I knew in my life," said Mary Badham who played Jean Louise "Scout" Finch in the film. "I am just devastated at his loss."

Badham had just visited Peters at his home a few weeks ago. Since making the film, Badham had remained close with Peters, joining him numerous times for visits around the country.

Peters paid tribute to Peck after he died in 2003.

"In art there is compassion, in compassion there is humanity, with humanity there is generosity and love," Peters said. "Gregory Peck gave us these attributes in full measure."

Peters recounted how shortly before he was to start filming, he was awakened early on a Sunday morning by a phone call from Peck to welcome him to the production. He was so surprised, he recalled, that he dropped the telephone.

"I worked over the years in many, many productions, but no one ever again called me to welcome me aboard, except perhaps the director and the producer, but not my fellow actor-to-be."

In May, Peters was on hand as Harper Lee, the reclusive author of "To Kill a Mockingbird," made a rare step into the limelight to be honored by the Los Angeles Public Library.

In "Carmen Jones," Peters worked with Dorothy Dandridge and Belafonte. Otto Preminger's production of "Porgy" starred Sidney Poitier and Dandridge, and featured Sammy Davis Jr., Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll as well as Peters.

Among Peters' other films were "Soylent Green," "The L-Shaped Room" and "The Pawnbroker."

His accolades include a National Film Society Award, a Life Achievement Award from the Screen Actors Guild, and a Tony Award nomination for his performance on Broadway in "Lost in the Stars."

In a 1985 story by The Associated Press on blacks in the movies, Peters said there had been a string of recent hits involving blacks, but "I have been here a long time, and I have seen this cycle happen before. I'll wait awhile and see if this flurry of activity leads to anything permanent."

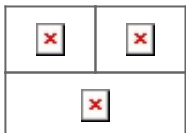
Peters was a widower and has one daughter, Lise Jo Peters.

A public memorial service will be held Saturday at 11 a.m. at St. John's Episcopal Church, 514 W. Adams St., Los Angeles.

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AP Writer Polly Anderson in New York contributed to this report.

Death of a "Mockingbird" Star



by Joal Ryan

Aug 23, 2005, 5:00 PM PT

The way [Brock Peters](#) recalled it, the competition for [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) came down to him and [James Earl Jones](#). Peters won out. "I never actually knew who made the decision," he remembered, "but to whoever it was...I am ever grateful."

Peters, the character actor who made his mark as, and lent his booming voice to, the doomed Tom Robinson in the 1962 film version of Mockingbird, died Tuesday at his Los Angeles home following an eight-month battle with pancreatic cancer, the Associated Press reported. He was 78.

"We spent two weeks that I call two weeks of tears—my veil of tears," Peters said of the movie shoot before an audience in Kansas in 2000, per the site [To Kill a Mockingbird & Harper Lee](#).

Tears didn't necessarily come easy to Peters the actor, nor did they come easily to his stoic character. They did, however, apply to Tom Robinson's plight: A wrongly accused black man faced with an all-white jury in the 1930s South.

Acclaimed by the American Film Institute as one of the 100 greatest U.S. films of the last century, *Mockingbird* won three Oscars, including one for star [Gregory Peck](#), who [died](#) in 2003. And it was Peters who read the eulogy at Peck's funeral. "In art there is compassion, in compassion there is humanity, with humanity there is generosity and love," Peters said. "Gregory Peck gave us these attributes in full measure."

Over the years, Peters was a regular on the *Mockingbird* circuit, as it were, appearing on stage with [Mary Badham](#), who played young Scout in the movie, and, most recently, at a 2005 Los Angeles tribute to Harper Lee, upon whose novel the largely faithful film was based.

Breaking into the movies at the onset of the civil-rights movement, Peters had roles in two key black-led studio films of the 1950s, [Carmen Jones](#) and [Porgy and Bess](#). In 1996, he revisited the time with a supporting role in [Ghosts of Mississippi](#), director [Rob Reiner](#)'s account of the murder of civil-right leader Medgar Evers.

In the 1970s, as Hollywood became eager to exploit blaxploitation, Peters costarred in the [Jim Brown](#) revenge opus [Slaughter's Big Rip Off](#), and that same year, produced [Five on the Black Hand Side](#), a kinder, gentler alternative to the era's heavily armed entries.

Arguably, Peters found the steadiest screen work in the more enlightened future. A stalwart of the sci-fi genre, Peters

played Commander Sisko's father in several episodes of [Star Trek: Deep Space Nine](#) and appeared as Starfleet Admiral Cartwright in [Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home](#) and [Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country](#). In 1981, he began work on the National Public Radio production of the original Star Wars trilogy. He was the voice of Darth Vader, the role old friend James Earl Jones originated in the movies. Other genre credits included 1973's [Soylent Green](#) and guest shots on the likes of Battlestar Galactica and The Bionic Woman.

Born George Fisher on July 2, 1927 in New York, Peters earned a Tony nomination for the 1973 Broadway musical revival of Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*. In 1991, he was presented with a lifetime achievement award by the Screen Actors Guild.

He is survived by his daughter, Lise Jo.

Brock Peters of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' Is Dead at 78

By MEL WATKINS

Published: August 24, 2005

Brock Peters, the versatile film and stage actor, singer and producer who first rose to prominence in the 1960's and 70's with his powerful singing voice and poignant screen portrayals of angry, belligerent black men, died yesterday at his home in Los Angeles. He was 78.



Universal Pictures, via Reuters

Gregory Peck and Brock Peters in "To Kill a Mockingbird" (1962).

The cause was complications of pancreatic cancer, his

companion, Marilyn Darby, told The Associated Press.

Among his most striking roles were the lead in the 1972 Broadway musical [“Lost in the Stars”](#) and in the later movie, and the minor but striking part of the man wrongfully accused of rape in the film version of [“To Kill a Mockingbird,”](#) released in 1962.

Mr. Peters’s first screen appearances were in two lavish 1950’s all-black musicals directed by Otto Preminger. He was cast as Sergeant Brown, the brutal army officer who harasses [Harry Belafonte](#) in [“Carmen Jones”](#) (1954), and Crown, the equally terrifying Catfish Row villain who stalks [Dorothy Dandridge](#) in the 1959 film adaptation of [George Gershwin’s](#) classic folk opera, [“Porgy and Bess.”](#) His explosively convincing performances in the roles proved as much a burden as a blessing.

With his dark skin, searing eyes and intimidating scowl, Mr. Peters was quickly type-cast as the archetypal, menacing, black villain on screen.

“It was almost disastrous,” he later told a reporter for The New York World Telegram and Sun. “Producers didn’t want to see me. They had liked my performances but couldn’t see me as anything but a heavy.”

In the early 60’s, however, he began stretching out as an actor. In 1962 he received solid reviews for his role as Johnny, a sensitive and complex homosexual trumpet player who befriends [Leslie Caron](#) in a seamy London rooming house in the British film [“The L-Shaped Room.”](#) He also vied with [James Earl Jones](#) and won the role of Tom Robinson in the movie version of Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, “To Kill a Mockingbird.” The film was nominated for eight Academy Awards, with [Gregory Peck](#) winning as best actor and [Horton Foote](#) winning for best screen adaptation. Mr. Peters received high critical praise and won the All-American Press Association

Award as best supporting actor.

By the mid-60's, Mr. Peters was recognized as one of the most versatile and talented black actors in America.

Mr. Peters was born Brock Fisher in New York City in 1927, the son of Sonny and Alma A. Fisher. He made his stage debut at 15 in the 1943 Broadway production of "Porgy and Bess" in a minor role, as Jim, one of the denizens of Catfish Row. After attending the University of Chicago (1944-45) and City College of New York (1945-47), he continued training for the stage in New York while working as a Y.M.C.A. and Parks Department instructor, hospital orderly and shipping clerk. He also honed his resonant bass singing voice as a member of the de Paur Infantry Chorus and toured clubs in the United States and Canada with a cabaret act.

In 1953 he made his first television appearance as a singer on "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts." In 1961 he married Delores Daniels, a television producer and public relations consultant, with whom he later started Delbro Enterprises, an independent production company that produced the feature-length comedy ["Five on the Black Hand Side"](#) (1973) and the PBS documentary "This Far by Faith" (1975).

Throughout his career Mr. Peters worked behind the scenes for the rights of actors in general and black actors in particular, and both he and his wife were also involved in community affairs. Mr. Peters served as the chairman of the California State Arts Commission and, along with Cecily Tyson and Arthur Mitchell, was a founder of the Dance Theater of Harlem.

Mrs. Peters, known as DiDi, died in 1990. Besides his companion, Ms. Darby, Mr. Peters's survivors include his daughter, Lisa Jo Peters.

His success in "Mockingbird" was followed by a minor role in the British comedy ["Heavens Above!"](#) (1963), which starred

[Peter Sellers](#). In 1965 he received rave reviews for his role as the ghetto hood Rodriguez, [Rod Steiger's](#) bitter antagonist in [Sidney Lumet's](#) film ["The Pawnbroker."](#) In the 60's and 70's Mr. Peters had supporting roles in more than a dozen feature films, including ["The Incident"](#) (1967), "Slaughter's Big Rip-Off" and ["Soylent Green"](#) (both 1973), and ["Two-Minute Warning"](#) (1976).

Onstage, he played the title role in a 1963 production of [Shakespeare's "Othello,"](#) starred as the prize fighter Jack Jefferson in the touring company of ["The Great White Hope"](#) (1969-71) and appeared in the lead role of [Stephen Kumalo](#) in "Lost in the Stars," the musical adaptation of Alan Paton's ["Cry, the Beloved Country,"](#) with a score by Kurt Weill. He was nominated for a Tony and won the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards for outstanding performance by an actor in a musical for "Lost in the Stars," and he reprised the role in the 1974 motion picture adaptation.

Mr. Peters remained a familiar presence on television, screen, stage and radio into the 1990's. His later credits include the television mini-series ["Battlestar Galactica"](#) and "Roots: The Next Generation" (both in 1979), the Emmy-nominated television musical "Polly!" (1989), as well as popular feature films like ["Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home"](#) (1986) and "Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (1991).

He also appeared in the stage productions of ["Driving Miss Daisy"](#) (1989) and "My Children, My Africa" (1990). His voice-over work included the character Lucius Fox in "Batman: The Animated Series" (1992), and he was the sinister voice of Darth Vader in the NPR radio version of the ["Star Wars"](#) trilogy.

He was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1976, and he received a Life Achievement Award from the National Film Society in 1977. The Screen Actors Guild also honored him with an achievement award in 1990, citing his

durability and versatility.

Aug. 24, 2005

Peters dies; defendant in 'Mockingbird'

By Kimberly Speight (Hollywood Reporter.com)

Brock Peters, a SAG Life Achievement Award recipient best remembered for his role as the wrongly accused man on trial in the film "To Kill a Mockingbird," died Tuesday from complications relating to pancreatic cancer at his home in Los Angeles. He was 78.

His longtime companion, Marilyn Darby, said he died peacefully in bed, surrounded by family. Peters, who was diagnosed in January, had been receiving chemotherapy treatment, she added, but said his condition had worsened in recent weeks.

In 1962's "To Kill a Mockingbird," Peters – an actor-producer-singer who appeared in films, on television and on the stage – portrayed Tom Robinson, the black man who was defended by attorney Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) after being wrongly accused of raping a white woman. He received an All American Press Award for the role.

Upon Peck's death in 2003, Peters paid tribute to the actor, telling of how just before Peters began filming "Mockingbird," he was awakened by a phone call early one Sunday morning. It was Peck, welcoming him to the production. Peters said he was so surprised that he dropped the phone.

"I worked over the years in many, many productions, but no one ever again called me to welcome me aboard, except perhaps the director and the producer – but not my fellow actor-to-be," he recalled.

In May, Peters made an appearance at the Los Angeles Public Library at an event honoring Harper Lee, author of the book

"To Kill a Mockingbird."

Peters received his Life Achievement Award from SAG in 1990. In a statement Tuesday, SAG president Melissa Gilbert praised Peters for his work not only as an actor but for his "dedication as a civil rights activist."

Upon receiving the SAG honor, Peters said: "I have lived a life of amazement, sorrows and glories. I could bemoan all of the barriers and difficulties I have experienced and fought over the years, but I have been extremely fortunate in my life to find friends who have gathered around me in the times of greatest need or who were just there to be helpful or to seek help from me or to just be friends."

Peters was heavily involved in community and civic organizations, including serving as chairman of Dance Theatre of Harlem, a board member of Free Southern Theatre and a member of the creative board of Third World Cinema.

He once said, "Both my wife and I were reared by exceptional black women who taught us that a part of whatever success we attained in life must be returned to the community from which we came."

Born George Fisher on July 2, 1927, in New York, Peters got his start as a stage actor in the 1940s and '50s before segueing to the big screen with his film debut in 1954's "Carmen Jones," followed by a role in 1959's "Porgy and Bess."

After "Mockingbird," Peters had roles in such films as 1963's "The L-Shaped Room," 1965's "The Pawnbroker," 1967's "The Incident," 1970's "The McMasters," 1973's "Soylent Green" and 1976's "Two Minute Warning." More recently, he portrayed Admiral Cartwright in 1986's "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home" and 1991's "Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country." He also voiced animated characters, including Jomo in 2002's "The Wild

Thornberrys Movie.”

Peters also wore the hat of film and TV producer. Under the banner of his production company, Delbro Enterprises, Peters produced the feature film “Five on the Black Hand Side” and the PBS documentary “This Far by Faith.” He also executive produced the PBS special “Voices of Our People,” which won multiple Los Angeles Area Emmy Awards.

Among his other accolades, Peters was nominated for a Tony Award in 1973 for the Broadway musical “Lost in the Stars.” He also was recognized with a NAACP National Humanitarian Award and life achievement awards from the National Film Society and the National NAACP; he was inducted into the Black Filmmakers’ Hall of Fame in 1976.

In addition to Darby, Peters is survived by a daughter, Lise Jo Peters.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.