

James Stewart

1908 - 1997

Biography: James Stewart was probably one of the most loved actor of his and most subsequent generations. An actor who captured audience hearts for six decades, Stewart was born on May 20th 1908 in Indiana, Pennsylvania, the son of the local hardware store owner.

Whilst studying architecture at Princeton University he met director Joshua Logan, who was later to make a name for himself directing musicals such as "Annie Get Your Gun", "South Pacific" and "Paint Your Wagon". Logan convinced Stewart to begin acting and after graduating in 1932, Stewart, bitten by the acting bug, moved with Logan to summer stock work with the University Players in Falmouth, MA, joining Henry Fonda and Margaret Sullivan, debuting in "Goodbye Again". That summer a production had a pre-Broadway try-out at Falmouth and Stewart in particular was noticed and written up by a visiting New York critic. Stewart and Fonda moved to New York, where Hedda Hopper recommended Jimmy for a screen test, resulting in a long-term M-G-M contract.

From the first, Stewart's performances stood out. Audiences first took note of him as Eleanor Powell's leading man in BORN TO DANCE (1936) (everyone at Metro at least had to try musicals). Stewart, singing introduced Cole Porter's "Easy to Love". He was hopeless, but the public found him adorable. Most of Stewart's big breaks actually came away from M-G-M: Stevens' VIVACIOUS LADY (1938) at RKO, and Frank Capra's YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU (1938) at Columbia; David O. Selznick's MADE FOR EACH OTHER (1939), opposite Carole Lombard; MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939), with Jean Arthur, at Columbia; and DESTROY RIDES AGAIN (1939) with Dietrich at Universal. M-G-M rallied with two winners, both co-starring Sullivan: Lubitsch's THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER (1940) and Borzage's haunting THE MORTAL STORM (1940). Cukor's THE PHILADELPHIA STORY followed. Stewart surprised the industry and himself, winning a best actor Oscar, despite being second lead to Cary Grant.

At age 33, he enlisted as private and rose to colonel as a bomber pilot in the Air Force, leading one thousand plane strikes against Germany; Stewart won the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross and later rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve. After the war, Stewart contributed what is undoubtedly his best-known performance, in Frank Capra's IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946) and in later years delivered a speech before Congress protesting at the film's "colourisation". Finding postwar audiences no longer wanting sentiment, Stewart changed his image, turning hard-bitten for CALL NORTHSIDE 777 (1948) and working for Hitchcock in ROPE (1948). He returned to Broadway to replace Frank Fay in the whimsical "Harvey" and, before filming the 1950 movie version, made the first two westerns of his career, both of which were hugely popular. Stewart also turned in a heart-tugging performance as a clown in DeMille's THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH (1952).

The Six Shooter brought James Stewart to the NBC microphone on September 20, 1953, in a fine series of folksy Western adventures. Stewart was never better on the air than in this drama of Britt Ponset, Frontier drifter created by Frank Burt. The Six Shooter radio show only lasted One season but was truly one of the bright spots of radio.

The next phase of Stewart's career saw some of his most complex roles, for directors such as Hitchcock, Preminger (ANATOMY OF A MURDER, 1959 earned him a best actor award from the New York Critics and the Venice Film Festival), Ford, Aldrich and Anthony Mann. His famous gawky, stammering mannerisms took on an extra interest for being filtered through toughness, cynicism and world-weariness. Though there have been occasional flops, James Stewart has undoubtedly proved his ability to transcend bad material. Jimmy Stewart died of a heart attack, at his Hollywood home, on July 2nd 1997. The world will be

a sadder place for his passing. Our thoughts go out to those he leaves behind and our thanks to Jimmy for all the joy and pleasure that he has given to us, his fans, over his 89 years.

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