

## Title:

TV Stars - Really? They Started On The Legit Stage

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## Summary:

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## Article Body:

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The fact is the technique most often taught to American stage actors - some form of the Stanislavski Method - works very nicely on both TV and film. Although there are adjustments to be made going from the stage to television, a well-trained stage actor can usually make those adjustments fairly quickly.

The biggest changes have to do with the subtlety employed by those acting for the camera. Stage actors find that physically and vocally less is more in front of the camera. Additionally, a good film or television actor has a sound sense of how to use the camera frame to their best advantage. An actor like Michael Caine is a master at this.

For someone who has only done television or film, acting on the stage can be difficult. The stage demands that actors sustain a character for long periods of time, something the electronic media does not do. Overall, stage performing also

calls for bigger actions than those needed for television and film. If someone has never been trained for the theatre, this can be intimidating.

Of course the scariest thing about acting on stage is the fact that you're in front of a live audience and if you make a mistake, you don't get a Mulligan. Even when a television show is done in front of a "live audience," there's less pressure for the actor to be perfect. If they "go up" (that is, forget their lines), they can make a joke and get a laugh while "cut" is called. They then get to try the moment, action or scene again. There is no "cut" in a live stage performance; there is only "covering" for a flubbed line, a missed entrance, or a misplaced prop.

Here are a few actors that you've become familiar with on television who first acted on the legitimate stage.

Jerry Orbach

Orbach, who passed away in 2004, was best known as the wisecracking Detective Lennie Briscoe on Law and Order. As a young man, he attended the University of Illinois and Northwestern University where he studied drama. After going to New York, he continued to study for the stage. He became closely associated with musicals, creating the role of El Gallo and singing the well-know opening number "Try to Remember" in the long-running musical The Fantasticks. He won the Tony in 1969 for his portrayal of Chuck Baxter in Promises, Promises; he sang the hit song "I'll Never Fall in Love Again" in that show. He also played leads in Chicago (Billy Flynn) and Forty-Second Street (Julian Marsh). Most Law and Order fans don't realize that Orbach had a beautiful, resonate singing voice.

Bebe Neuwirth

Beatrice "Bebe" Neuwirth has recently become a regular on Law and Order, where she plays the role of Tracey Kibre. However, it was on the sitcom Cheers that she found fame by playing Lilith Sternin-Crane - a tough, tense psychiatrist and wife of Frasier Crane. Neuwirth trained at the Julliard School and first made her name as a dancer and actor in the national tour of A Chorus Line (1980), where she played Cassie and Sheila. In 1982, she appeared on Broadway in Dancin', directed and choreographed by the legendary Bob Fosse, and in the musical Little Me. She cemented her reputation on the Great White Way by playing the lead in Bob Fosse's revival of the musical Sweet Charity (1986), for which she won a Tony. Neuwirth is an amazing, charismatic musical performer, who commands the stage with her voice and body.

Jason Alexander

Best known as Jerry Seinfeld's obnoxious best friend George Costanza in the sitcom Seinfeld, Alexander, who was born Jay Greenspan in Newark, NJ, is another former Tony winner. While he was an undergraduate at Boston College, Alexander was cast in Stephen Sondheim's Broadway musical Merrily We Roll Along. He won the Best Actor in a Musical Tony for his role in Jerome Robbins' Broadway (1989). In the first few episodes of Seinfeld, he wasn't quite sure of how to play George Costanza so he imitated Woody Allen.

#### Sam Waterston

On television he plays tough, no nonsense D.A. Jack McCoy in Law and Order (1990), but originally Waterston was best known for his stage roles. He went to Yale, where he did not study acting, but did take acting classes at the American Actors Workshop in Paris. Waterston played numerous roles in New York, including Jonathan in Oh, Dad, Poor, Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling so Sad, Hamlet in Hamlet, and Signor Benedick of Padua in Much Ado About Nothing, for which he won the Drama Desk Award for Best Actor. Prior to becoming associated with Law and Order, he was best known for his work in straight plays, both new and classic. On stage, Waterston perfected an elegant, refined style, displaying an ability to make precise and subtle acting choices.

#### Barry Bostwick

On the Michael J. Fox sitcom Spin City, Bostwick played the dimwitted mayor Randall M. Winston Jr. in 70 episodes. Since that time, he's appeared on numerous hit TV shows as a guest star, including Scrubs, Cold Case and Law and Order. But Bostwick has deep Broadway roots that include the creation of the role of Danny Zuko in Grease, for which he received a Best Actor in a Musical nomination, and the creation of the lead role of Jamie Lockhart in the musical The Robber Bridegroom, for which he won the Tony. Bostwick, who also played in numerous straight plays, was known for his high energy and slapdash style. While performing in his award winning run as Jamie Lockhart, Bostwick broke his arm when he fell swinging across the stage on a rope. He proved he was a trouper though when, after a short recuperative period, he got back on stage with his arm in a cast and continued to play Lockhart, rope swing and all.

#### Patricia Heaton

For 70 episodes, Heaton played Debra Barone, Ray Romano's wife on the very popular sitcom Everybody Loves Raymond. As a young woman, she focused on theatre arts at Ohio State University and then went to New York where she studied with William Esper. She made her debut in the Broadway gospel musical Don't Get God

Started, but overall during her career in New York she was relegated to small roles. With a few acting buddies, she started a theatre company called Stage Three, which produced new works in NYC. In 1989 they took their successful production of The Johnstown Vindicator to Los Angeles, where casting directors saw and liked Heaton. Slowly her TV career started to take off. But Heaton has long acknowledged that despite the fact that she never made it big on Broadway, her stage training has been instrumental to her success on television.

James Gandolfini

Gandolfini continues his run as the cold-hearted, insecure, narcissistic Tony Soprano on HBO's hit series The Sopranos. After receiving a degree in Communications from Rutgers University, Gandolfini went on to study acting in the late 1980's at the prestigious Actors Studio in New York City. After making his professional stage debut in Big El's Best Friend, he appeared in many New York productions. He made his Broadway debut in 1992 as Steve Hubbell in the revival of Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, which starred Alex Baldwin and Jessica Lang. Other New York credits included On the Waterfront, One Day Wonder and Tarantulas Dancing. The same year he first appeared on Broadway, he also landed his first screen role, which was in Sidney Lumet's A Stranger Among Us. Since 1992, he's appeared in over 20 films. He's been Tony Soprano in over 70 episodes.

Other actors, who have either made their name or learned invaluable acting lessons in the theatre before becoming part of the electronic entertainment industry, include Martin Sheen, Stockard Channing, Dustin Hoffman, Robert Duvall, Meryl Streep, and Swoosie Kurtz. These actors have labored hard to learn their craft on what was the first acting platform available to humankind - the live stage.

Movies are a little over 100 years old and television is about 75 years old. The formal theatre goes back over 2,500 years! It's the true learning and testing ground for acting technique, stamina, and skill that, once honed, can then be transferred to any other venue.

Go to a Broadway show or a professional theatre near you - you may catch a performance by someone you'll see break through on the tube in the next few years. One night, you'll be sitting in your den or living room watching the next big hit drama or sitcom and say, "Hey, didn't we see that actor on the stage?" Yeah, you did, before they were famous. Very cool.