



Walter Charles

APR 4, 1945 - AUG 3, 2023



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Table of Contents

Obituary	Page 3
Tribute Wall	Page 6



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Walter Charles Obituary

Walter Charles - Musical Theater Star, dies at 78. Walter Charles, who rose to celebrity on Broadway in *La Cage Aux Folles* and as the original Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* at Madison Square Garden, passed away peacefully Thursday, August 3, 2023, at the Cleveland Clinic Fairview Hospital, in Cleveland, Ohio. He died of complications from Frontotemporal dementia. He is survived by his longtime companion/wife, Leslie Thompson, (m. 2019), and a host of friends and admirers. One of Mr. Charles' best known runs on Broadway was in the role of "Albin," a drag queen in *La Cage Aux Folles*, a Tony Winning Musical that debuted in 1983 at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic. Mr. Charles' strutted in high heels and boas and brought down the house with his resolute baritone singing of the show's signature song "I Am What I Am." An actor, who like so many others always felt that his most recent show would be his last, defied the odds and worked solidly from his debut as Vince Fontaine in the first national tour of *Grease* in 1973 until his final Broadway show as the Captain in the Broadway Revival of *Anything Goes* in 2012. In a career that spanned over 40 years on stage and screen, Mr. Charles also performed on Broadway in *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Me and My Girl*, *Aspects of Love*, *The Apple Tree*, *The Woman in White* and several other shows. In addition, he starred frequently in theaters from NY to CA, England and Canada, some of the shows were: *Sunset Boulevard* (with Diahann Carroll and Rex Smith), *South Pacific*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Shenandoah*, *My Fair Lady* (with Christopher Cazenove and Sally Ann Howes) and Off-Broadway in *Wit* (with Kathleen Chalfant), *Call Me Madam* (with Tyne Daly), *The Immigrant* and *Sweeney Todd* - His is the haunting face and voice that introduces the "Ballad of Sweeney Todd" in the legendary filming of *Sweeney Todd* with Angela Lansbury and George Hearn. Walter Charles worked with the greatest artists of our time including Leonard Bernstein, Stephen



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Sondheim, Trevor Nun, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Hal Prince. His luxurious voice and magnificent stage presence placed him front and center on the world's greatest stages including Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, and The London Palladium. He was a dazzling leading man, a story teller, a musician, an artist and a friend. He had an infectious laugh and a warmth and kindness that made him a delight to work with. Walter "Happy" Charles Jacobsen was born April 4, 1945, in East Stroudsburg, PA to parents Theodore E. Jacobsen and Catherine C. Jacobsen, née Carstensen, of Austrian and Danish descent. Mr. Charles was raised in Sparta, New Jersey with his brother, Theodore (d. 1966). A graduate of Sparta High School, Walter started his musical career playing piano. He continued his pursuit of music attending Bucknell University where he studied the piano. He then transferred to Boston University as a music major specializing in piano where, after hearing him sing in the choral group, the music director encouraged him to direct his time to try for a vocal career where "he could reach the stars." He studied under the contralto and BU voice faculty member Mary Davenport. Mr. Charles' rise to celebrity was hardly overnight. Following graduation in 1966, Mr. Charles worked as a singing waiter in dinner theaters and joined choruses on a few bus and truck tours before landing the non-singing role of Vince Fontaine in the first road company of Grease in 1972. He was in good company in that production with other newbies including John Travolta, Jerry Zaks, Marilu Henner, and Judy Kaye. His next job offered even more potential – he was in the ensemble and also the understudy for Len Cariou, who starred opposite Angela Lansbury, in the original production of Sweeney Todd. But, after understudying Len Cariou for over a year, he was denied even a single appearance on stage as the demon barber by an indefatigable Mr. Cariou who never missed a performance. On closing night, Mr. Cariou gave him a thank you card saying, "Sorry, Walter." Back in the vocal ensemble and with small roles in Leonard Bernstein's 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Cats, Mr. Charles concentrated on developing his acting skills with Mary Tarcai of the famed Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. Walter Charles' big break came after understudying George Hearn on Broadway, in La Cage Aux Folles, where his ringing baritone voice and acting ability impressed writer, Jerry Herman, and director, Arthur Laurents, enough to give him a



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major career lift by giving him the lead role of Albin when Mr. Hearn left the show. Glowing notices and enthusiastic audiences confirmed their decision. Mr. Charles recalled that seeing his name plastered in big letters on the side of city buses advertising the show gave him hope that this was the start of something good. During the run of *La Cage Aux Folles*, Walter Charles was stage inamorata to Gene Barry, Van Johnson, and Keith Michell. And, as a tribute to his versatility, Mr. Charles also played the more reserved lead, Georges, in subsequent productions. One of the highlights of his working years was in the first production of *A Christmas Carol* at Madison Square Garden in 1994 directed by Mike Ockrent and with songs by Alan Menken and Lynn Ahrens. Scrooge was one of his greatest performances in a grueling schedule that required four shows a day on weekends. At one point in the musical, he was hooked to a system of wires and zoomed out and around the audience. On more than one of these precarious flights he thought that this could well be the end of Scrooge and his career. His theater credentials firmly established; Walter Charles never had much difficulty finding leading roles until illness ended his career in 2016 with his final performance playing George, opposite Lee Roy Reams, in *La Cage aux Folles* at the Wick Theater in Boca Raton, FL.. After retiring at age 71, he moved out of his UWS apartment, formerly known as The Bradford, to his woodland retreat in Roscoe, NY, where he delighted in spending time fishing, hiking, birdwatching, and listening to classical music and opera with his wife, Leslie, his cat, India, and his German Shepherd, Teddy.

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Tribute Wall

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BM

Bob Moyer posted:

In 1960 my family moved to our new house on Bennett Lane. The Jacobsen's were our neighbors. I was 10 and Hap was in high school provably a junior or senior. My parents bought a used piano so that my younger sister could take lessons. I remember the impromptu concert Hap gave us.

April 5 at 4:26 AM

VW

V Paulette West posted:

Walt was my late husband's (Lowell Kenton West) best friend, beginning in high school, and my son's (Ericson) Godfather. I would always try to see Walt when he toured with a show to a city near me. He was a truly remarkable, lovely, gentle man and an outstanding actor. Ericson & I will miss him greatly.

February 24 at 11:59 AM

KR

Kathy Rubbico posted:

Walter and I were students at Boston University. We met up again in LA on La Cage. I was playing piano. I did not know Walter had left us. Matter of fact, I had a mutual friend, the late conductor, Jeff Rizzo, ask Walter to get in touch with me last year, just for Auld LangSyne. Now I know why I didn't hear from him, his terrible illness. My deepest condolences to his wife. Kathy Rubbico

November 7 at 3:44 PM

DN

Debbie Wolford Nehring posted:

Rest in Peace Walter Hugs and prayers Leslie

August 17 at 8:00 PM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Walter by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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