

Roddy McDowall

Titles: 26 Sources: 6 Stills: 0

Born: Roderick Andrew Anthony Jude McDowall
Herne Hill, London, September 17th 1928.
Educated at St Josephs and Hanover Academy of Dramatic Art
Died: October 1998

As an adult, Roddy McDowall became such a vague and vapourish screen presence, so infuriatingly twitchy and mannered, that it's easy to forget how appealing he was as a boy and youth, his pleasant vulnerable face with a suggestion of wistful melancholy, his light voice and gentle Welsh accent endowing him with the career good fortune not to outgrow boyish roles too quickly.

His manners always as well-scrubbed as his knees, even when playing Ginger in "**JUST WILLIAM**", Roddy was very much of the "nice boy" school, though not petulant or haughty with it, which led eventually to Freddie Bartholomew's fall from grace. He was featured much with dogs and horses, and evidently preferred the former to the latter. In "**HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY**" (41) he is already credited as "Master Roddy McDowall", clearly signifying the boy had become a star in his own right, and he would claim top or second billing in the features to follow. In 1944, all the same, he was designated (mistakenly as it turned out) a "Star of Tomorrow".

Ruth Gordon once said of the adult Roddy: "He has more friends than anyone else I know. I don't know anyone who has such a following, except perhaps Queen Elizabeth". In the light of which it is curious, reading his extensive Daily Telegraph obituary (below), how little is said of his private life. He never married, and it seems not unlikely that McDowall was gay, given the kind of roles – "camp frustrated bachelors" – he tended to favour in his later career.

An actor's private life is his own affair, absolutely (I've no interest in posthumously "outing" anyone), but if Roddy McDowall were indeed homosexual, this would make his work *more* interesting, not less. He would not be the only boy star to transpire to be gay – Disney's Tommy Kirk was another, more forthright one – but they are a rare breed. American society is still too homophobic to recognise that young homosexual boys also need positive role models within their own culture. All of this, however, is idle speculation.

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion entry:

"British child actor of the forties, in Hollywood from 1940. Developed into an unpredictable adult performer, but made a reputation as a photographer."

Halliwell's Television Companion entry:

"British actor in America, former child star, who pops up in films and TV guest spots. He also played the leading ape in the series "**Planet of the Apes**" and had a continuing role in "**Fantastic Journey**". TV movies: "**NIGHT GALLERY**", "**TERROR IN THE SKY**", "**A TASTE OF EVIL**", "**WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE YOU**", "**THE ELEVATOR**", "**FLOOD**", "**THE RHINE-MANN EXCHANGE**", "**THE IMMI-**"

GRANTS", "THE THIEF OF BAGHDAD".

Motion Picture Almanac 1994 entry:

"Actor. Educated at St Joseph's, London. He first appeared in the British film "**MURDER IN THE FAMILY**" at the age of 9. In 1940 signed by 20th Century Fox. Star of Tomorrow - 1944. Named Screen Actors' Guild representative on the National Film Preservation Board, 1989. Published two volumes of his photography: "Double Exposure" (1966) and "Double Exposure II" (1989)."

The Virgin International Encyclopedia of Film entry:

"Former child model and prolific juvenile actor who took a break from films in 1951 and returned, after a decade of theatre work, in the early sixties. McDowall's roles ranged from apes (1968's "**PLANET OF THE APES**" and its three sequels) to apostles ("**THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD**" 1965). He has directed one film ("**THE DEVIL'S WIDOW**" 1970) and published "Double Exposure" and "Double Exposure Take Two", collections of his photographs, in 1966 and 1989 respectively."

The Moving Picture Boy entry:

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Those Endearing Young Charms entry:

"Brown hair and brown eyes. A student of diction and dramatics under Edith Hall at Hanover Academy, Roddy McDowall began as a child actor on the London stage, switching over to the screen at the age of eight with his first role in "**MURDER IN THE FAMILY**". He played the British films until 1941 when he made his US debut in "**MAN HUNT**". He left London with his mother in January of 1941 when London was besieged with a barrage of bombing raids.

Arriving in the United States with only \$42.00 in cash, Roddy immediately sought out the movie companies in order to earn money for his mother and younger sister, Virginia. He visited 20th Century Fox's casting office in New York, where he was given a screen test

that was flown to Hollywood where William Wyler viewed it. Mr Wyler felt Roddy might just have it, so he had him take the first train to Hollywood. Many more tests followed until the day arrived when he signed a long-term contract.

For his performances in "**HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY**", "**THE PIED PIPER**" and "**LASSIE COME HOME**" he was given the Critics' Award by Film Daily. Roddy was educated at St Joseph's Academy in London and the 20th Century Fox Studio School.

Roddy McDowall has blossomed into one of the finest leading actors. He is equally at home on the dramatic stage - in George Bernard Shaw's "Misalliance" - as he is on the screen - in "**PLANET OF THE APES**". On television he appeared in Hallmark Hall of Fame's "**The Tempest**". He was an associate producer of the film "**KIDNAPPED**" and has just recently tried his hand at directing."

What the Critics Said

...of "**MY FRIEND FLICKA**":

"...a gem among animal pictures, magnificently colour photographed in ranching country in the Rockies, with a memorable performance by McDowall as the boy who loves the horse he calls Flicka (the Swedish world for girl)."

- **The Films of 20th Century Fox**

"The teenage Roddy McDowall enjoyed one of his best Hollywood roles in this enormously popular story of a boy and his horse, stunningly shot in Technicolor on Utah locations by Dewey Wrigley."

- **TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995**

Daily Telegraph obituary (5/10/98):

"**RODDY McDOWALL**, the English-born actor who has died aged 70, made a hit as a child star working with animals in "**LASSIE COME HOME**" and "**MY FRIEND FLICKA**", and in middle age gained a new following as a chimpanzee in the "**PLANET OF THE APES**" films.

McDowall made a successful transition to adult roles without suffering the neuroses and drug addiction that plagued many child actors. "I think it was because I was never a really huge star," he said, "by the time I was 18 my career was fading and I think Hollywood was happy to let me go off to Broadway." McDowall never willingly turned down a part and, apart from his stage work, appeared in more than 140 films. (His 100th was **"THE CAT FROM OUTER SPACE"** in 1978.)

Few would rate **"PLANET OF THE APES"** (1968) as highly as **"HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY"** (1941), the film in which he made his name. But to a new generation McDowall was most familiar as Galen, the mild-mannered chimpanzee with a philosophical bent. Neither the director nor Twentieth Century Fox held many hopes for a film in which the leading actors' faces were obscured by bendy replicas of the faces of chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas.

McDowall claimed that he accepted the role because he saw acting behind a mask as "a challenge to get the character over to the audience". He visited zoos to study the movements of chimpanzees. **"THE PLANET OF THE APES"** films met an enthusiastic response from a public that seemed to detect in them a deep mythic appeal.

McDowall went on to star as the simian philosopher in four of the five **"PLANET OF THE APES"** films. They packed drive-ins all over America. Twentieth Century Fox then sold the idea to CBS for television and McDowall needed no persuasion to recreate the character. The series did not enjoy the same success on television, but it remained in profit for almost two years. McDowall was, he said, "deeply saddened" when it was axed in 1976.

Roderick Andrew Anthony Jude McDowall was born at Herne Hill, south London, on September 17 1928, the son of a Scottish merchant seaman and his Irish wife. She was a "frustrated actress" according to her son. At the age of eight he did well in a play at his school, St Joseph's, and Mrs McDowall decided to enrol him at the Hanover Academy of Dramatic Art. He made his film debut as an orphan in **"SCRUFFY"** (1938), and in the same year appeared with Will Hay in **"CONVICT 99"**.

In the first year of the war Roddy appeared in **"JUST WILLIAM"** and **"THIS ENG-**

LAND", a patriotic history ramble, retitled **"OUR HERITAGE"** for Scotland. While working on his 13th film, **"MURDER IN THE FAMILY"** (1940) he was spotted by Darryl F Zanuck, who offered him a contract with Twentieth Century Fox. So he moved to America with his mother and elder sister.

In 1941 Roddy McDowall played opposite Walter Pidgeon and Maureen O'Hara in **"HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY"**. This dramatic black and white evocation of childhood in a Welsh mining village made a great impact and gave McDowall a leading place among child actors. After this success, American studios made sure they milked the years of childhood still left to him. He was landed with the task of acting with animals in **"LASSIE COME HOME"** (1943), the mawkish tale of a lovable long-haired collie that is sold by its impoverished owners but travels across America to be reunited with them. On **"LASSIE"** McDowall had the fortune to work for the first time with Elizabeth Taylor. They remained friends.

In the same year McDowall was cast as a boy trying to train a wild colt in **"MY FRIEND FLICKA"**. He looked back on these animal films with mixed feelings. "There were about four horses as Flicka," he recalled, "and they were all pretty jumpy and kept stepping on my feet. But the dog who played Lassie, he was a great dog. He still remembered me five years later."

Meanwhile, throughout the Forties, McDowall continued at a great rate to make such films as **"THUNDERHEAD, SON OF FLICKA"** (1945) for Twentieth Century Fox. "They knew our careers wouldn't last long," he remembered, "so they were desperate to get as many films out of us as possible."

At 20 he was still being cast as a young teenager. "The child star thing became a demon walking with me," he said. "I was just an old English child actor." He decided to leave Hollywood for Broadway.

Throughout the Fifties, he worked in New York theatre, and found he had to learn to act all over again, since an adult on stage had little in common with a child actor on a film set. There were parts in Shaw's **"Misalliance"** (1953) and **"The Doctor's Dilemma"** (1955), and at the same period the roles of Malcolm in **"Macbeth"** and Ariel in **"The Tempest"**.

McDowall also took on as much television work as he could, appearing in a vast number of such shows as "**The Kaiser Aluminum Hour**", "**Dupont Show of the Month**" and "**The AlcoaHour**". This brought home the bacon, but McDowall did not abandon the stage or big screen.. In 1960 he met Richard Burton when they were both playing in the Broadway production of the musical "Camelot". They became friends, and McDowall was later to open a discotheque with Burton's wife.

In 1961 Burton and McDowall were bought out of their theatrical contracts to appear in the blockbuster film "**CLEOPATRA**", starring Elizabeth Taylor. The production was plagued with problems, made no easier by the increasingly public affair between Burton and Taylor. McDowall was remembered by the cast and crew for his diplomacy in remaining Taylor's confidant while still living with Burton and his wife.

"**CLEOPATRA**" marked the start of a series of "epic" films for McDowall. These included the huge war feature, "**THE LONGEST DAY**" (1962) and George Stephens's rambling treatment of the Bible, "**THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD**" (1965), with McDowall playing St Matthew.

But in the late Sixties McDowall's career faltered again. One of the films in which he appeared, "**LORD LOVE A DUCK**" (1966), was described as blending "vulgarity, pretentiousness, inept imitation, stupidity and such a proliferation of stomach-turning jokes as would take your average smut-pedlar a lifetime to assemble".

In "**THE CURSE OF THE GOLEM**" (1967) he played a madman who keeps his dead mother in the bedroom and persuades a monster to destroy Hammersmith Bridge.

Attempting to diversify, McDowall developed his interest in photography. While working on "**CLEOPATRA**" in 1961 he had sold shots of the stars to magazines. Now he enlisted the help of the photographer Richard Avedon in producing in 1966 a book of photographs. In "Double Exposure", star photographs were printed opposite text written by other celebrities who were fans. Joan Sutherland wrote in admiration of Julie Andrews, and Edward Albee wrote about Judy Garland.

But in films, McDowall's career seemed to have dwindled away, until the unexpected

success of "**PLANET OF THE APES**". Afterwards he continued to work hard, accepting parts in some truly dreadful films. He was a robot in "**BLACK HOLE**" (1979); he had the one consolation of working with Peter Ustinov in "**CHARLIE CHAN AND THE DRAGON QUEEN**" (1981); and he shared in the disapproval of a critic who described "**CLASS OF 1984**" (1981) as an "unpleasant, calculatedly camp melodrama with a buzz-saw finale".

The following year he appeared once more opposite Ustinov in the lavish Agatha Christie whodunnit "**EVIL UNDER THE SUN**", playing the sour, spinsterish author involved in a murder plot. In later years McDowall made a speciality as camp, frustrated bachelors.

When not working McDowall added to his huge collection of Hollywood memorabilia. On his first day on set in 1938 he had asked for the autograph of everyone from the star to the clapperboard operator. He continued the practice on every film he made.

He collected photographs, posters, handbills and magazines. "I've always been crazy about movies," he said.

"Even when I first started making them I'd find time to go to the movies two or three times a week." He also continued to take photographs, publishing a second collection, "Double Exposure Take Two", in 1989."

A Minor Consideration obituary:
- webmaster@minorcon.org -

In Memoriam Roddy McDowall
Sept. 17, 1928 - Oct. 3, 1998

"Already a veteran of several British films, Roddy was relocated to the United States at the age of 11 during the German bom-bardment. His innocent face and precise diction gained him the respect of Hollywood producers. He appeared in many films, including the Oscar winning "**HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY**". When his career as a child actor ended, he demonstrated that he was very versatile, appearing in parts ranging from a Mexican-American to a Southerner in "**NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS**".

As a child actor, he had an innocence that reached through the screen and touched his audience. Though he has passed, this innocence lives on. Rest in peace, Roddy."

Filmography: "THE FILMS OF
RODDY McDOWALL"
David Castell
Barnden Castell Williams/ISBN 0
904159 19 1

FILMOGRAPHY

	Year	Age	Title	Role
deb	36	8	SCRUFFY	
	36		MURDER IN THE FAMILY	
	37	9	CONVICT 99	
	37		JUST WILLIAM †	as Ginger
			<i>with Dicky Lupino, Norman Robinson, Peter Miles</i>	
	38	10	I SEE ICE	
	38		HEY! HEY! USA	
	38		YELLOW SANDS	
	38		JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN	
	39	11	THE OUTSIDER	
	39		POISON PEN	
	39		DEAD MEN'S SHOES	
	39		HIS BROTHER'S KEEPER	
	39		MURDER WILL OUT	
	40	12	SALOON BAR	
	40		YOU WILL REMEMBER	
	40		THIS ENGLAND	
	41	13	MANHUNT	US debut, as cabin boy Vaner
	41		CONFIRM OR DENY	Third billing, as office boy Albert (12), killed in air raid
	41		HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY	as Huw Morgan (10)
	42	14	SON OF FURY	
	42		THE PIED PIPER	as Ronnie Cavanaugh
			<i>with Peggy Ann Garner, Merrill Rodin, Maurice Tauzin, Fleurette Zama</i>	
	42		ON THE SUNNY SIDE	
	43	15	MY FRIEND FLICKA	as Ken McLaughlin
	43		LASSIE COME HOME	
			<i>with Elizabeth Taylor</i>	
	44	16	THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER	
	44		THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM	
	45	17	HANGOVER SQUARE	(voice only)
	45		THUNDERHEAD, SON OF FLICKA	as Ken McLaughlin
	45		MOLLY AND ME	
	46	18	HOLIDAY IN MEXICO	
	48	20	KIDNAPPED	(also associate producer)
	49	21	TUNA CLIPPER	
	49		BLACK MIDNIGHT	
	50	22	KILLER SHARK	
	50		BIG TIMBER / TALL TIMBER	
	50		MACBETH	as Prince Malcolm

† he's listed on the credits as "Roddy McDowell"