

# William McChord Hurt (1950–2022)

By Edwin Battistella

An award-winning film, television, and theater actor, William Hurt had his first acting job in Oregon at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 1975, when he appeared in *Henry IV*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Over twenty-five years later, he appeared in several productions at Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland. He had roots in Oregon through his mother and owned a ranch in Deschutes County, where he often lived, in addition to property in Harney County and a home in Portland.

William McChord Hurt was born in Washington, D.C., on March 20, 1950. His father, Alfred McChord Hurt, worked in the U.S. foreign service, and his mother, Claire Isabel McGill Luce, worked for Time, Inc. and was the director of the China Institute of America. She was born in eastern Oregon and maintained ties to her native Harney County throughout her life, retaining property there and making substantial donations to the Harney County Library.

William Hurt attended Tufts University, where he majored in theology, and studied theater at the Juilliard School. His film debut was in *Altered States* (1980), playing a physiologist who experimented with drugs. He was a gullible lawyer in *Body Heat* (1981), an angry Vietnam veteran reunited with college friends in *The Big Chill* (1983), a clueless news anchor in *Broadcast News* (1987), and a teacher at a school for the deaf in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). He received an Academy Award for his role as a gay man in a Brazilian prison in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985). After the 1980s, Hurt often acted in supporting roles and was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for his performance as a gangster in David Rabe's *A History of Violence* (2005). He did not win the Oscar, but he did take home several other film awards for the role. He also narrated audiobooks, performed on television, and was the menacing Thaddeus Ross in a series of Marvel movies.

Live theater was an especially important aspect of Hurt's professional life. He was a member of New York's Circle Repertory Company from 1977 to 1982 and earned a Tony Award for his role in *Hurlyburly* in 1984. Theater also reconnected Hurt with Oregon and with Alan Nause, the artistic director of Artists Repertory Theatre, whom he had worked with in *Romeo and Juliet*. Hurt acted in four productions at ART: *The Drawer Boy* (2004), *Vanya* (2007), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (2010), and *No Man's Land* (2011). He particularly valued the opportunity to explore a play through weeks of rehearsal. "Whenever there is considerable rehearsal," he told an interviewer, "there's been considerable quality. One is commensurate with the other." Nause once said of Hurt that "he's not an acquiescent actor. He's generous but at the same time expecting a lot, which is a great thing."

While his career flourished, Hurt's personal life was troubled. During the 1980s, he was treated for substance abuse at the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California. Of his drinking, Hurt later said: "One day you wake up and say, 'This is stupid and this is wrong.' And it was wrong, so I did something about it." He remained sober after the late 1980s, even eschewing painkillers during his treatment for cancer after 2012.

Hurt was married to actress Mary Beth Hurt from 1971 to 1982 and to choreographer Heidi Henderson from 1989 to 1993. He was also in relationships with ballet dancer Sandra Jennings, who later sued for support, and with actress and activist Marlee Matlin, whose 2009 memoir *I'll Scream Later* included accusations of domestic violence by Hurt. In the 1990s, Hurt had a child with French actress and filmmaker Sandrine Bonnaire, whom he met while performing in a film version of Albert Camus's *The Plague*. In all, he had four children.

In addition to acting, Hurt was a pilot, an avid fisherman, and a bicyclist. He was known for his philosophical musings about acting. "It's not pretending," he told a reporter for the *Washington Post* in 1989. "Acting is not looking like you're doing, it's doing. The problem begins when you get into adjectives in acting. Acting is not about adjectives. It's about verbs and adverbs." In 1990, he told the *New York Times* that "even one moment onstage is a glacier of comprehension."

William Hurt died in his home in Portland on March 13, 2022.

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