



No Joke

Actor Robert Guillaume remembers the day a stroke changed his life—
and the warnings he didn't take seriously enough.

BY LINDA CHILDERS

Actor Robert Guillaume, 82, admits that after more than six decades in the limelight he's learned to enjoy semi-retirement.

"I'm having a love affair with sitting down," Guillaume jokes as he relaxes in his Southern California home. Consider it a well-deserved break for one of Hollywood's busiest actors, a screen veteran whose career spans both theater and television.

A veteran of stage musicals, Guillaume made his Broadway debut in 1961 and was nominated for a Tony award for his role in *Guys and Dolls* in 1976. Yet for many fans, Guillaume will forever be linked with his alter ego Benson DuBois, the witty, acid-tongued butler on the 1970's sitcom, *Soap*, and its subsequent spin-off, *Benson*, a role for which he won two Emmy awards: the first in 1979 for Best Supporting Actor in *Soap* and the second in 1985 as best actor in the *Benson* series.

In 1998, Guillaume was cast as managing editor Isaac Jaffe in the television comedy *Sports Night*, a show that focused on the relationships and workplace drama of the staff of a televi-

sion sports program. One of *Sports Night's* most memorable moments took place when the cameras weren't rolling: On his way into work at the Disney studios on January 14, 1999, Guillaume suffered a stroke.

SURPRISED BY STROKE

"I had been diagnosed with high blood pressure for several years but hadn't been inclined to take it too seriously," Guillaume says. "At the time I thought I would live forever."

The actor and father of four remembers leaving home and dropping his youngest daughter Rachel off at school before heading to Jerry's Deli. He typically enjoyed breakfast there with friends before arriving on the set of *Sports Night*.

"As I got up to leave from the deli, my feet seemed to become tangled," Guillaume recalls. "My friends asked if I needed help, and I remember they walked me to my car. My gait was somewhat off and I felt as if I were losing energy. But it never occurred to me that I might be having a stroke."

At the time, Guillaume says, his symptoms seemed more

MONSIEUR GUILLAUME

Left to right: Robert Guillaume as Benson DuBois, with the cast of *Benson*; Guillaume as Isaac Jaffe, with the cast of *Sports Night*; Baby Simba, Rafiki the Mandrill (voice by Guillaume), Queen Sarabi, and King Mufasa from *The Lion King*.



humorous than serious.

“As I was walking to my car supported by my two friends, one of our other friends walked by and joked, ‘Does this mean I shouldn’t have the veal?’ Guillaume says. “They asked if I was okay to drive to work. I told them I had to drive because I was obviously in no condition to walk. At the time none of us realized the seriousness of my condition.”

By the time Guillaume reached the Disney studios, he was feeling worse. He remembers falling over as he attempted to change into costume, although he never lost consciousness.

“The director called me to the set but when I didn’t answer several of the crew came to my dressing room to check on me,” Guillaume remembers. “I said I didn’t feel well, and they immediately called a doctor. Even then it never occurred to me that I was having a stroke.”

Guillaume was taken to a nearby hospital and promptly admitted. As doctors evaluated his symptoms, he remembers hearing comment that he might be having a stroke.

“I told them I couldn’t possibly be having a stroke,” Guillaume says. “Disney didn’t allow strokes.”

WHAT IS A STROKE?

According to the National Stroke Association, a stroke, or “brain attack,” occurs when blood flow to a region of the brain is obstructed.

There are two main types of stroke: ischemic and hemorrhagic. An ischemic stroke is caused by a blockage in an artery that supplies blood to the brain, resulting in a deficiency in blood flow. A hemorrhagic stroke is caused by the bleeding of ruptured blood vessels in the brain. Within an hour, the nerve cells in that area of the brain can become damaged and die. As a result, the part of the body controlled by the damaged area of the brain cannot work properly.

The effects of a stroke can range from mild to severe and may be temporary or permanent. A stroke can affect a patient’s vision, speech, behavior, and ability to move certain parts of their body.

BENSON AND SPORTS NIGHT: ABC/PHOTOFEST; LION KING: WALT DISNEY PICTURES/PHOTOFEST

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Patients who suffer a severe stroke can often sustain complications including aphasia, a neurological disorder caused by damage to portions of the brain responsible for language. The National Institute for Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) says that primary signs of aphasia include difficulty in expressing oneself when speaking, trouble understanding speech, and difficulty with reading and writing. In some cases, a patient will regain their speech without treatment, but in most cases, rehabilitation with a speech therapist should begin as soon as possible. While the prognosis varies from patient to patient, the NINDS says that in general, patients tend to recover skills in language comprehension more completely than those involving expression. (See *Neurobics*, page 9.)

GUILLAUME’S RECOVERY

The actor was diagnosed as having sustained a mild stroke and was hospitalized for three weeks before undergoing physical therapy. After his release from the hospital, Guillaume continued to have weakness in his left hand and leg and found it hard to walk without a cane.

“His physical therapist was very tough on him,” says Guillaume’s son-in-law, John Wesley. “She had him up and moving as soon as possible and doing exercises to help him regain his full mobility.”

The American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation says that after patients are treated for a stroke, their typical initial rehabilitation period will last two to three weeks, depending on how severely the stroke disabled them. Time is of the essence when being treated for a stroke; the fact that Guillaume was quickly taken to the Providence St. Joseph Medical Center, a short distance from the Disney studios, may account for the fact that he was able to return to the set of *Sports Night* in May, just four months after his stroke.

While Guillaume was still recovering, his wife, Donna, approached the producers of *Sports Night* about the possibility of writing his stroke into the show.

“My family and everyone on the show were all incredibly supportive,” Guillaume says. “Aaron Sorkin, who was the writer and director of *Sports Night*, liked the idea of having my character suffer a stroke as well, which allowed me to return to the show and not have to pretend I hadn’t had a stroke.”

The experience also made Guillaume an advocate for stroke prevention. He has teamed with the American Stroke Association (ASA) to record several public service announcements for their Power to End Stroke Movement, which helps inform African Americans on the risk factors of stroke and the importance of monitoring high blood pressure. (See “Black, White, and Gray,” page 18, for a look at the increased risk of stroke among African Americans.)

“In retrospect, I wish I had paid more attention when I was diagnosed with high blood pressure,” Guillaume says. “I thought I was eating properly and had everything under control.”

The actor delved into his family history and learned that his mother had diabetes and that his grandmother had suffered a stroke. Several years ago, Guillaume was also diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes which—along with high blood pressure—can increase an individual’s risk of sustaining a stroke.

Today, the actor continues to have a slight limp but is grateful the stroke wasn’t more severe and didn’t affect his speech or cognitive abilities. He has adopted a regular exercise regimen since his stroke and now works out with a personal trainer at home three days a week.

“The effects of my stroke are still with me but are much less pronounced,” says Guillaume, who recently returned to television for an appearance on *CSI*. “I’m in good shape and consider myself very lucky.”

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Risk Factors for Stroke

The National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke notes that some of the more treatable risk factors for a stroke include:

- ▶ **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE**, also called hypertension: If your blood pressure is consistently high, your doctor may prescribe medication. Never stop taking medication without the approval of your physician.
- ▶ **CIGARETTE SMOKING**: If you smoke, quit.
- ▶ **HEART DISEASE**: Have your cholesterol and triglycerides checked. If your numbers are high, talk to your doctor about lifestyle changes and/or medications.
- ▶ **DIABETES**: Have your blood glucose levels checked on a regular basis. Many people with diabetes have no symptoms.

Experts say that up to 80 percent of strokes can be prevented. While some risk factors such as age, ethnicity, and family history can’t be controlled, lifestyle changes such as controlling your high blood pressure and diabetes risk, maintaining a healthy weight, and quitting smoking can go a long way to reduce your risk of sustaining a stroke.