

# Character actor Sean McCann played gruff lieutenant on Night Heat

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Sean McCann and the cast of *The Last Mass*. From left: Billy McLellan, Tabby Johnson, Frank Orsini (passed away), Sean McCann and Nick Mancuso.

TIM LEYES/HANDOUT

The blue-eyed, shaggy-browed Canadian character actor Sean McCann played almost as many kinds of roles in life as he did on the screen. The ubiquitous Mr. McCann, who had more than 160 television and film credits to his name – from such Hollywood hits as *Chicago* to the seminal Canadian crime series *Night Heat* – was also a poet and playwright, a student of theology, an aspiring politician and a part-time Major League baseball scout.

More discreetly, he was a longstanding – and outstanding – member of Alcoholics Anonymous, who gave his support to scores of fellow addicts. They included the late, hard-living *Saturday Night Live* star Chris Farley, with whom he appeared in the Toronto-shot 1995 comedy film *Tommy Boy*.

“He loved Chris Farley,” recalled Andrée Paquet McCann, Mr. McCann’s wife. “Chris would come to [AA] meetings in Toronto and he tried a lot to help him.”

Mr. McCann, who died on June 13 of heart failure at the age of 83, was always ready to help – whether it was talking a good friend through a life crisis, reassuring a young actor in a difficult role, giving back to his North Toronto community or spotting talent for his beloved Blue Jays. A man who early on had nearly destroyed, not only a promising career, but his own life, he spent his 57 years of sobriety quietly encouraging others not to give up.

At one time, Mr. McCann, a Roman Catholic, had considered becoming a priest. Later, his ministerial qualities – along with the charismatic presence and gift for oration that made him such a successful actor – came into play as a speaker at AA gatherings throughout North America.

“When he started telling stories, he would lock you in,” his admiring son Jonas McCann said. “But at the same time, there was a real honesty and humility to him. He made you feel that you could achieve what he had achieved.”

When people speak of Mr. McCann, “humility” is a word that comes up again and again. “He was a very humble man,” said his agent and friend Karen Law Wanstall. “He didn’t gloat about his accomplishments. I’m not even sure that they registered

with him.”

Born on Sept. 24, 1935, in Windsor, Ont., William Leonard Sean McCann was the seventh of eight children in a large Irish family. His father John (Jack) McCann, employed in the construction industry, was quiet and practical. His mother Alta (née Tobin) was the one who sang songs, cracked jokes and played the piano. “Dad always spoke fondly of her,” Jonas McCann said, “and how she brought energy and life to the family.”

Sean’s older brothers served during the Second World War and one of his sisters became a nun. He came close to taking holy orders as well, studying at St. Peter’s Seminary in London, Ont., but the lure of the stage won out. After early successes as an amateur actor, he turned pro and joined the Sun Parlor Players, a summer theatre troupe in Leamington, Ont., whose members included future Stratford Festival star Martha Henry.

But already his drinking was getting out of hand. Forced to leave the troupe, he and a friend decided to seek their fortune in New York. Mr. McCann landed an acting gig immediately, doing summer stock in the Catskills. He also met a young actress, Nadia Salnick, who became his first wife. The couple relocated to London, England, where Mr. McCann got some acting work and did a backstage stint as a lighting operator at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Within six months, the marriage was over, and Mr. McCann eventually returned to Canada.

Back home, his battle with the bottle continued. It finally ended in a sanitarium, where he was given insulin shock treatments. “He was institutionalized and told that he was never going to leave,” Jonas McCann said. Instead, he embraced AA’s 12-step program.

He was five years sober and no longer acting when he met Andrée Paquet, a migrant worker from Quebec, at a pizza joint in Windsor. They fell in love, were married in 1968 and moved to Toronto, where Mr. McCann took a job as a salesman at a radio and television store. At the same time, he was itching to get back on stage. Ms. Paquet McCann encouraged him. “He often said he was grateful

that I let him go back to acting,” she said, “but I didn’t want him to have a life where he would regret not having done what he wanted to do.” At her urging and that of his old acting colleagues, he took the plunge and never looked back.



McCann and the cast of *The Baxters*. From left: Marianne Mclsaac, Megan Follows, Sean McCann, Sammy Snyder and Terry Tweed.

CHCH-TV

As a theatre actor in early-1970s Toronto, he did everything from Shakespeare at the St. Lawrence Centre to contemporary work at the Tarragon. It was at the latter theatre in 1973 that he starred in *A Quiet Day in Belfast*, a powerful play about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Its success launched his film career, when he co-starred in the subsequent movie version alongside Margot Kidder.

He went on to appear in many Canadian TV movies and series, eventually winning the 1989 Earle Grey Award for lifetime achievement in television acting – ironically, only halfway through what would be a five-decade career. At that point,

however, he was at his zenith, co-starring in the hit Canada-U.S. cop show, *Night Heat*.

As Lieutenant Jim Hogan, Mr. McCann portrayed the crusty superior to police detectives Kevin O'Brien and Frank Giambone, played by series stars Scott Hylands and Jeff Wincott, respectively. Hogan was the kind of veteran cop who called the shots but wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty as well.

The series was conceived by legendary New York City policeman-turned-producer Sonny Grosso and shot in a gritty documentary style. Mr. McCann loved its workaday realism and it brought out the best in him. "There was something so layered to his performance," recalled Laura Robinson, who played the show's lone female detective, Christine Meadows. "He made his character so believable."

Filmed in Toronto with an all-Canadian cast, *Night Heat* became the first homegrown series to run simultaneously on a Canadian network (CTV) and an American one (CBS). Its cross-border success raised Mr. McCann's profile, leading to roles in such prominent films as David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, Paul Schrader's *Affliction*, with Nick Nolte, and the Oscar-winning crime musical *Chicago*, in which Mr. McCann played the judge.

There was also an offer of long-term work in Los Angeles, but he chose to stay firmly planted in Canada. He and Ms. Paquet McCann raised their four children in North Toronto, where he coached baseball at Trace Manes Park in Leaside and in 1977 ran as a Liberal candidate in the Ontario general election. He lost to Progressive Conservative incumbent Roy McMurtry but made a strong showing.

Consolation of sorts came a decade later, when he got to play Prime Minister Mackenzie King in Donald Brittain's three-part mini-series *The King Chronicle*, which aired on CBC in 1988. "That was his favourite part, hands down," Ms. Law Wanstall said.

Baseball, like politics, was a lifelong obsession, going back to his boyhood in Windsor, when he was a Detroit Tigers fan (and best friends with future Tigers

player Reno Bertoia). Later, as a Blue Jays devotee, he made a habit of showing up early for pregame batting practices, which is how he met Jays general manager Gord Ash in the 1990s. Mr. Ash was so impressed with his knowledge that he brought him on as an amateur scout. “Dad had a great eye for pitching,” Jonas McCann says, “which a lot of the other scouts didn’t have.”

The same man who could sniff out a promising pitcher was equally adept at parsing the philosophy of such theologians as Thomas Merton and Bernard Lonergan. John Dadosky, a theology professor at the University of Toronto’s Regis College, spent hours discussing those intellectual heavyweights with Mr. McCann. “He had a keen interest in spiritual and philosophical issues,” Prof. Dadosky said of his longtime friend.

When not acting, Mr. McCann found a creative outlet writing poetry – one of his poems was published in venerable literary journal *The Fiddlehead* – and, in recent years, writing a play, *The Last Mass*. A drama about a priest dealing with alcoholism and past transgressions, it had a workshop production in 2012, with Mr. McCann in the lead role.

Even as he approached his 80s, his appetite for work was undiminished. In 2012, he also flew to Switzerland and climbed a mountain for the short film *Terminal*, a drama about assisted suicide. “He wasn’t afraid to do anything,” recalled his co-star, Rachel Wilson. “He was a real artist.” He was also a pillar of strength for the young actress. “It was a really hard part: I was dying of a terminal disease and he was my father who had to watch me being euthanized,” she said. “But Sean was very kind and generous. He had this calming energy.”

Those qualities belied a gruff demeanour that could be intimidating and a hair-trigger temper. “He used to blow his top all the time,” Ms. Paquet McCann said, laughing. But she said his sense of humour always won out: “We had a marriage where laughter was as good as tears.”

His family was by his side when Mr. McCann died at Toronto Western Hospital from the heart disease that he had dealt with for most of his life. He leaves his

wife, Ms. Paquet McCann; his children, Jeff Telford and Marie, Bridget, Jonas and Jeremiah McCann; sisters, Mary Lou Spickett and Rita St. Pierre; and 10 grandchildren.