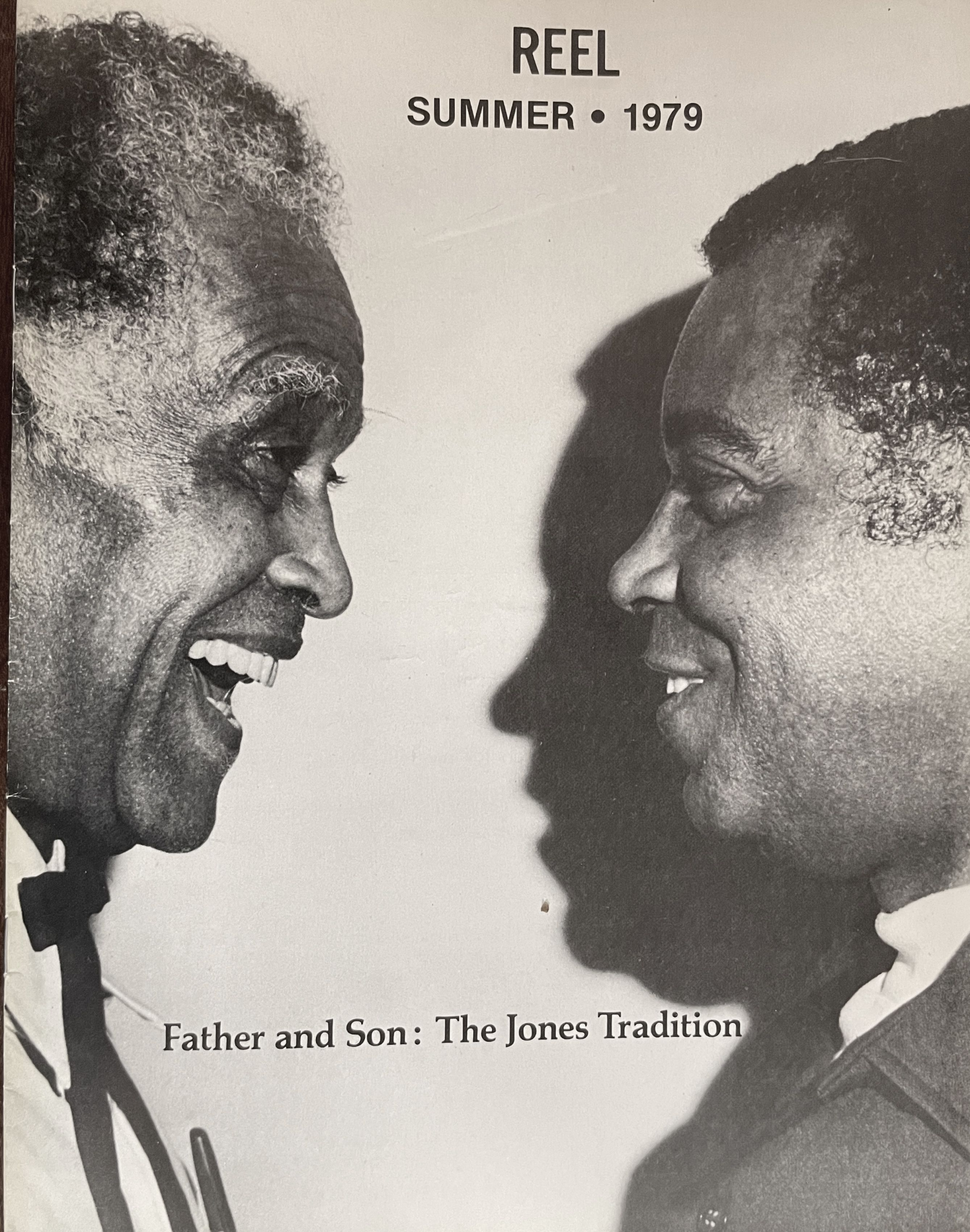


REEL

SUMMER • 1979



Father and Son: The Jones Tradition

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For our cover story REEL reporter **Lila Levant** interviewed two distinguished members of the Screen Actors Guild.

ROBERT EARL JONES has been an acting professional since the early 1930s. To name a few of his Broadway credits: *Strange Fruit*, *Hasty Heart*, *The Iceman Cometh*. In films: *The Sting*, *One Potato, Two Potato*, *Wild River*, and the soon to be released *Cold River*. He starred in *Othello*, and on TV has appeared on *The Defenders* and *Lou Grant*.

JAMES EARL JONES is the winner of Tony, Vernon Rice, Daniel Blum Theater World awards and an Obie. He has also been an Oscar and Emmy nominee. Broadway appearances have included *The Great White Hope*, *Of Mice and Men*, and his one-man show as Paul Robeson. At the Shakespeare Festival he has starred in *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Emperor Jones*, *Macbeth* and *Henry V*. His movies have included *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Comedians*, *Star Wars*, *Claudine* and *The Greatest*—and on TV memorable performances in *East Side*, *West Side* and *Roots*.

REEL: You started acting in the '30s. Was it by accident?

ROBERT EARL: I was encouraged to act. I never had the tenacity to be an actor like James Earl has: taking care of business, being in the field, being exposed. I didn't care about it. In *EMPEROR JONES* I carried a spear. I didn't allow my hopes to get too high, because I might be disappointed. Then Langston Hughes' aunt helped me to read my first poem: "I am a Negro, black as the night is black! Black like the depth of my Africa!" This became part of a poetic drama which included several Langston Hughes poems presented under the title *DON'T YOU WANT TO BE FREE?* I felt the skill, artistry and recognition of Langston Hughes would make the play a success. We did two performances downtown and won an award. That started me off and made me recognized as one of *the* black actors. Oodles of community and natural theater groups were putting on predominantly black shows across the country up until the '30s. By 1938, Community Repertory Theater for Blacks was gone. Radio had put it out ten years before. All you could get was vaudeville at the Apollo Theater. That's all we had. Radio and talking pictures had struck and it knocked us out.

REEL: James Earl, when you came into the theater, were you motivated by your father?

JAMES EARL: Yes! There's nothing like being able to walk into a producer or director's office and say, "Yes, I'm Robert Earl Jones' son."

REEL: That didn't bother you? There are sons of famous fathers who've changed their names!

JAMES EARL: Good God, no! I entered Actors Equity under the name of Todd Jones. But the minute I came to New York, I changed it to my real name which is closer to my father's name.

REEL: Didn't you feel you were living off his reputation?

JAMES EARL: (*laughing*) I wanted to.

REEL: It didn't bother you?

JAMES EARL: No, No!

ROBERT EARL: Just like it doesn't bother me now, when they ask "Are you James Earl's father?"

REEL: In doing so many of the same roles, your careers have become so paralleled.

JAMES EARL: Yes, in fact, I think we can probably compete for the same kinds of roles these days because my dad looks as young as I do.

ROBERT EARL: I just told Nora Duntze, I'm going to study speech because I'm going to do *OTHELLO* and if

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“ . . . simplicity is what film acting requires.”

James Earl is around and free, I'm going to club him-into doing Iago, because he's the best Iago yet. He did an Iago that excited me so much, I couldn't get my syllables out correctly.

REEL: Robert Earl, it's wonderful to see how you've continued to grow as an actor.

ROBERT EARL: The only thing that I contribute to my two sons is that I still can grow, that I still have hope. If I can do it myself, that's the greatest legacy I can give to them. I can work and feel that I still can be active and never retire and never say never.

REEL: Do too many young actors today think of becoming stars and making money before they really learn their craft?

JAMES EARL: That's ass backwards, but there is nothing wrong with it. Your wealth in terms of notoriety and money should be a by-product of working at your craft. That sounds corny perhaps, but it should be a by-product.

REEL: The whole point is that actors should be paid for their efforts and very often are so underpaid. Robert Earl, you worked at a time when actors were *really* underpaid.

ROBERT EARL: When you are not in demand, you're more likely to be underpaid, but that's part of the hazards of this business.

REEL: What influence was Robert Earl on you as an actor?

JAMES EARL: It's all very subjective. His presence in the craft—and the art. I can't really spell it out beyond that. I had never seen him work when I decided to join the theater. I had heard about him, read about him.

REEL: Did you study acting when you came here?

JAMES EARL: I am still studying acting!

REEL: When you first started, where did you study?

JAMES EARL: The American Theatre Wing. Then, a number of workshops. One I'm still working with is Lee Strassberg's private classes. I'm observing at the Actor's Studio.

REEL: How come you never became a member of the Actor's Studio?

JAMES EARL: Oh, I auditioned, I think, seven years in a row. Don't ask me! Ask them! I tried! I'm very fond of

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those people and they had their own reasons, I suppose. Maybe I was lucky not to become a member, because it left me free to develop in my own way.

REEL: You both became *film* actors much later in your career.

JAMES EARL: Dad is a born film actor because his whole approach to acting is simplicity and that is what film acting requires. I'm just learning film acting. I've done a handful of films and consider it just a beginning process.

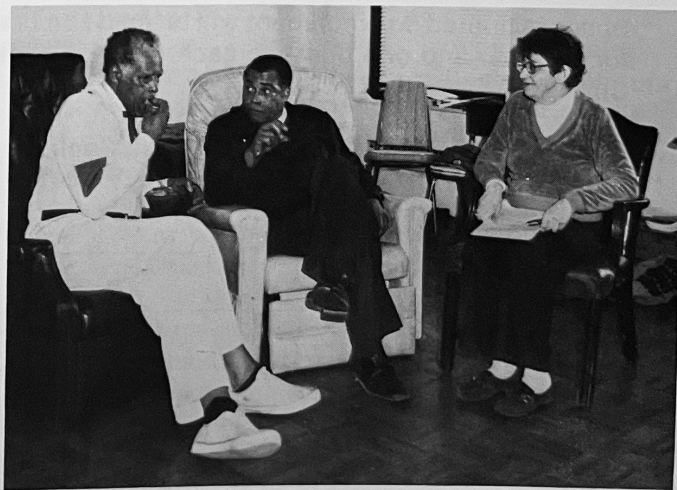
REEL: Do you think stage energy is different from film energy?

JAMES EARL: I don't think that stage energy is any different from film energy, it's just focused differently. More internally, but of no less intensity.

REEL: Is there a difference in the way the two of you approach roles?

ROBERT EARL: My approach is just getting the lines out of the way. Thinking of what the author is saying; what I feel the character is after and that's all.

JAMES EARL: What I do with the most serious roles or even comedic roles when I am lucky enough to get them, is simply this: When I am in the wings or off camera, I relax and think of something that makes me feel a real feeling; usually something sad enough to cry about. That loosens me up. Being physically relaxed and emotionally in touch, then I walk on and do the work.



REEL Reporter Lila Levant interviewing the Joneses.

REEL: When did you first work together?

JAMES EARL: My dad and I first worked together in a play called MOON ON A RAINBOW SHAWL by Erroll John, and George Roy Hill directed. The gimmick, then, was to prove you could do an Off-Broadway play on the petty cash budget of a Broadway play. Once we proved it, it became a hit, a total smash. Unanimous raves! And we ran it for awhile.

REEL: What would you like to do together now?

JAMES EARL: I'd like to play father and son, or brothers. Maybe I might be his father!

ROBERT EARL: You're very nice!

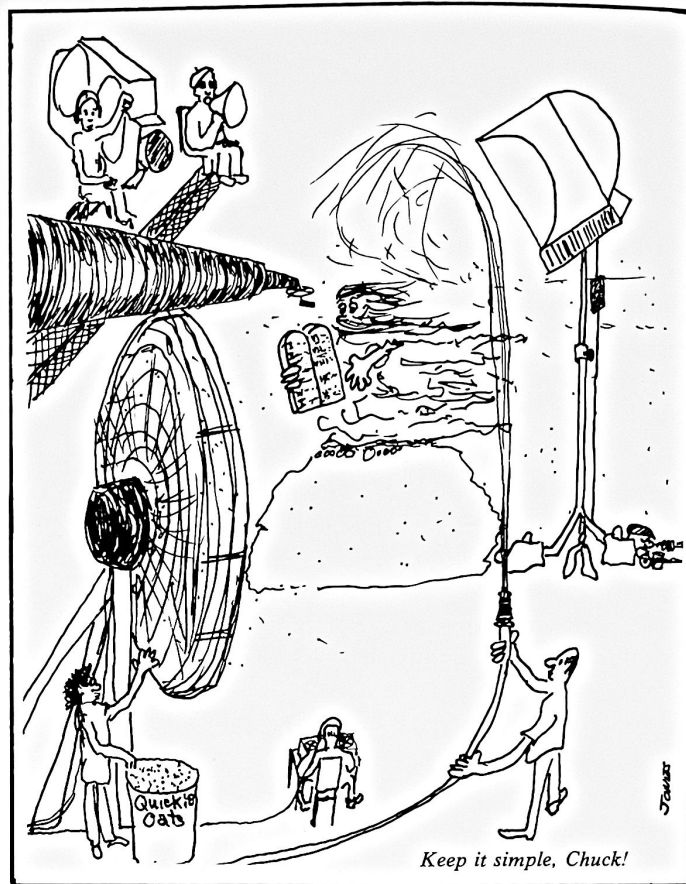
REEL: It's wonderful that you came to New York and found this identification with your father.

JAMES EARL: Oh, the identification was there all along. I knew he was an actor. He wrote and kept me aware of his career. I was so proud when I saw his picture in *Look Magazine*. He was in STRANGE FRUIT on Broadway then.

REEL: What advice would you give to young actors?

ROBERT EARL: Think of the work every day. Work at it—it will come to you. If you don't understand, watch and then go back to work.

JAMES EARL: Bless the playwrights, but the words are only guidelines, touchstones to any spirit you have to evoke between yourself and the audience. □



Cartoon courtesy SAG member John Raymond Jones

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