

# Cleavon Little

**Cleavon Jake Little** (June 1, 1939 – October 22, 1992) was an American stage, film, and television actor. He began his career in the late 1960s on the stage. In 1970, he starred in the Broadway production of *Purlie*, for which he earned both a Drama Desk Award and a Tony Award. His first leading television role was that of the irreverent Dr. Jerry Noland on the ABC sitcom *Temperatures Rising* (1972–1974). While starring in the sitcom, Little appeared in what has become his signature performance, portraying Sheriff Bart in the 1974 Mel Brooks comedy film *Blazing Saddles*.

In the 1980s, Little continued to appear in stage productions, films, and in guest spots on television series. In 1989, he won a Primetime Emmy Award for his appearance on the NBC sitcom *Dear John*. He later starred on the Fox sitcom *True Colors* (1991–1992).

## Contents

**Early life**

**Career**

**Later career**

**Death and legacy**

**Filmography**

**Theater**

**References**

**External links**

## Early life

Little was born in Chickasha, Oklahoma. He was the brother of singer DeEtta Little, best known for her performance (with Nelson Pigford) of the vocals on the chart-topping Bill Conti song "Gonna Fly Now", the main theme to *Rocky*. Little was raised in California and attended Kearny High School<sup>[1]</sup>, graduating in 1957. He attended San Diego City College, and then San Diego State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in dramatic arts. After receiving a full scholarship to graduate school at Juilliard, Little moved to New York. After completing studies at Juilliard, Little trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Career

**Cleavon Little**



Little and Jayne Meadows on *Temperatures Rising* (1972)

<b>Born</b>	<span>Cleavon Jake Little</span> <div>June 1, 1939</div> <span>Chickasha, Oklahoma, U.S.</span>
<b>Died</b>	<span>October 22, 1992</span> (aged 53) <div>Sherman Oaks, California, U.S.</div>
<b>Education</b>	<span>San Diego City College</span> <div><span>San Diego State University</span> (BA)<span>Juilliard School</span> (GrDip)<span>American Academy of Dramatic Arts</span></div>
<b>Occupation</b>	Actor
<b>Years active</b>	1960–1992
<b>Spouse(s)</b>	<span>Valerie Wiggins</span> (m. <span> </span> 1972; div. <span> </span> 1974)
<b>Awards</b>	<span>Drama Desk Award</span> ( <i>Purlie</i> , 1970) <div><span>Tony Award</span> (<i>Purlie</i>,</div>



Melba Moore and Little in the Broadway musical *Purlie* (1970)

Little made his professional debut in February 1967, appearing off-Broadway at the Village Gate as the Muslim Witch in the original production of Barbara Garson's *MacBird*. This was followed by the role of Foxtrot in the original production of Bruce Jay Friedman's long-running play *Scuba Duba* which premiered in October 1967.

1970)  
Primetime Emmy Award (*Dear John*, 1989)

The following year, he made his first film appearance in a small uncredited role in *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?* (1968), and his first television appearance as a guest star on two episodes of *Felony Squad*. A series of small roles followed in films such as *John and Mary* (1969) and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970).

Little made his Broadway debut in 1969 as Lee Haines in John Sebastian and Murray Schisgal's musical *Jimmy Shine* with Dustin Hoffman in the title role. In 1970, he returned to Broadway to portray the title role in Ossie Davis's musical *Purlie*, for which he won the Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actor in a Musical.

A year later, Little was hired as an ensemble player on the syndicated TV variety weekly *The David Frost Revue* and he portrayed Shogo in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* on Broadway. In 1971, Little was chosen to portray the blind radio personality Super Soul in the car-chase movie *Vanishing Point*. The same year, he played Hawthorne Dooley in the pilot for *The Waltons* called "The Homecoming: A Christmas Story", helping John-Boy Walton search for his father; then again in season four, in an episode called "The Fighter", about a prizefighter who desired to build a church and be a preacher. He also played a burglar in a 1971 episode of *All in the Family* titled "Edith Writes a Song".

He then starred on the ABC sitcom *Temperatures Rising*, which aired in three different iterations from 1972–74, with Little's character of Dr. Jerry Noland as the only common element. In 1974, he starred in the television disaster film *The Day the Earth Moved*, opposite Jackie Cooper and Stella Stevens. Little made a minor appearance in the Six Million Dollar Man episode, "Population: Zero", as one of the NASA deliveryman handing Colonel Steve Austin his space suit. He was also cast as Sheriff Bart in the comedy film *Blazing Saddles* (1974), after the studio rejected Richard Pryor, who co-wrote the script. Studio executives were apparently concerned about Pryor's reliability, given his reputation for drug use and unpredictable behavior, and thought Little would be a safer choice. This role earned him a nomination for the BAFTA Award for Most Promising Newcomer to Leading Film Roles.

In 1975, Little returned to Broadway to portray the role of Lewis in the original production of Murray Schisgal's *All Over Town* under the direction of Dustin Hoffman. The following year, he appeared as Willy Stepp in the original production of Ronald Ribman's *The Poison Tree* at the Ambassador Theatre. He played a supporting role to Richard Pryor in the racing movie *Greased Lightning* (1977), based on the true life story of Wendell Scott, the first black stock car racing winner in America.

## Later career

In the years after *Blazing Saddles*, Little appeared in many less successful films, such as *FM* (1978), *Scavenger Hunt* (1979), *The Salamander* (1981), *High Risk* (1981), *Jimmy the Kid* (1982), *Surf II* (1984) and *Toy Soldiers* (1984). He also made guest appearances on *The Mod Squad*, *The Rookies*, *Police Story*, *The Rockford Files*, *The Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *ABC Afterschool Specials*, *The Fall Guy*, *MacGyver*, *The Waltons*, and a special Christmas episode of *ALF*.

He co-starred opposite Lauren Hutton and Jim Carrey in the horror comedy *Once Bitten* (1985). He returned to the New York stage in 1981 in the off-Broadway production *The Resurrection of Lady Lester*, a "poetic mood song" by OyamaO, playing the legendary jazz saxophonist Lester Young. In 1985, Little returned to Broadway to appear as Midge in Herb Gardner's Tony Award-winning play *I'm Not Rappaport*, reuniting with *Dear John* star Judd Hirsch in New York and later on tour. The Broadway cast also featured Jace Alexander and Mercedes Ruehl.

In 1989, he had a role in *Fletch Lives*, the sequel to *Fletch* (1985). The same year, he appeared in the *Dear John* episode "Stand by Your Man", for which he won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Comedy Series, defeating Robert Picardo, Jack Gilford, Leslie Nielsen, and Sammy Davis Jr.<sup>[3]</sup>

Little was slated to star on the television series *Mr. Dugan*, where he was to play a black congressman, but that series was poorly received by real black congressmen and was cancelled before making it to air. In 1991, he replaced Frankie Faison as Ronald Freeman, a black dentist married to a white housewife, on the Fox sitcom *True Colors*. The same year, he also had a supporting role on the television series *Bagdad Cafe*, appearing in 12 episodes. Later that year, he was cast as a civil-rights lawyer in the docudrama, *Separate but Equal*, starring Sidney Poitier, who portrayed the first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall, NAACP lead attorney in the 1954 Supreme Court case that desegregated public schools. He also appeared in the television series *MacGyver* as Frank Colton, one half of a bounty hunter brother duo.

Little's last appearance as an actor was in a guest role on a 1992 episode of the television series *Tales from the Crypt* entitled "This'll Kill Ya". Eleven years after his death, he appeared in the music video for "Show Me How to Live" by Audioslave, through archive footage from *Vanishing Point*.

## Death and legacy

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Often afflicted by ulcers and general stomach problems throughout his life, Little died of colorectal cancer at his home in the Sherman Oaks area of Los Angeles on October 22, 1992.<sup>[4]</sup> His body was cremated and the ashes were scattered into the Pacific Ocean.

For Little's contribution to motion pictures, he was posthumously honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on February 1, 1994.<sup>[5]</sup> The star is located on the south side of Hollywood Boulevard near El Cerrito Place.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Filmography

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Year	Title	Role	Notes
1968	<i>What's So Bad About Feeling Good?</i>	Phil	Uncredited role
1969	<i>John and Mary</i>	The Film Director	
1970	<i>Cotton Comes to Harlem</i>	Lo Boy	
1971	<i>Vanishing Point</i>	Super Soul	
1971	<i>The Waltons - The Homecoming: A Christmas Story</i>	Hawthorne Dooley	
1974	<i>The Day the Earth Moved</i>	Harley Copeland	
1974	<i>Blazing Saddles</i>	Bart	
1975	<i>The Waltons</i>	James Trevis Clark a/k/a The Ebony Flash	Episode: <i>The Fighter</i>
1977	<i>Greased Lightning</i>	Peewee	
1978	<i>FM</i>	Prince	
1979	<i>Scavenger Hunt</i>	Jackson	
1981	<i>The Salamander</i>	Major Carl Malinowski, USMC	
1981	<i>High Risk</i>	Rockney	
1982	<i>Jimmy the Kid</i>	Herb	
1982	<i>Double Exposure</i>	Police Chief	
1984	<i>Surf II</i>	Daddy O	
1984	<i>Toy Soldiers</i>	Buck	
1984	<i>E. Nick: A Legend in His Own Mind</i>	Edmundo	
1985	<i>Once Bitten</i>	Sebastian	
1985	<i>The Gig</i>	Marshall Wilson	
1989	<i>Fletch Lives</i>	Calculus Entropy	
1990	<i>Murder by Numbers</i>	David Shelby	
1991	<i>Goin' to Chicago</i>	Edward Sr.	

## Theater

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- Purlie, Broadway play. (1970)
- All Over Town, Broadway play. (1974)
- I'm Not Rappaport, Broadway play. (1985)

## References

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1. "1957 Kearny High School Yearbook Online, San Diego CA" (<http://www.classmates.com/yearbooks/Kearny-High-School/3456?page=34>). *Classmates.com*. Retrieved 14 July 2014.
2. "Biography: Cleavon Little" (<http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=2:42706~T0>). *Allmovie*. Retrieved 2008-06-07.
3. The 50th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards (1989) (<https://www.imdb.com/event/ev0000223/1989/1>). Retrieved 2018-02-24.

4. "Cleavon Little, Award-Winning Actor, Dies at 53" (<https://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F1061FF63E580C708EDDA90994DA494D81>). *The New York Times*. October 23, 1992. Retrieved 2010-10-28. "Cleavon Little, the actor best remembered for his role as a black sheriff hired to save a redneck town in Mel Brooks's 1974 comedy *Blazing Saddles*, died yesterday at his home in Sherman Oaks, Calif. He was 53 years old. He died of colon cancer, said David C. Pollick, his publicity agent in Los Angeles."
5. "Cleavon Little | Hollywood Walk of Fame" (<http://www.walkoffame.com/cleavon-little>). *www.walkoffame.com*. Retrieved 2015-11-11.
6. "Cleavon Little - Hollywood, CA - Citizen Memorials on Waymarking.com" ([http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMHDW8\\_Cleavon\\_Little\\_Hollywood\\_CA](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMHDW8_Cleavon_Little_Hollywood_CA)). *www.waymarking.com*. Retrieved 2015-11-11.

## External links

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- [Cleavon Little \(https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001476/\)](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001476/) on [IMDb](#)
  - [Cleavon Little \(https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/49910\)](https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/49910) at the [Internet Broadway Database](#)
  - [Cleavon Little \(http://www.lortel.org/Archives/CreditableEntity/11561\)](http://www.lortel.org/Archives/CreditableEntity/11561) at the [Internet Off-Broadway Database](#)
  - [Cleavon Little \(http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/participant/participant.jsp?participantId=114800\)](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/participant/participant.jsp?participantId=114800) at the [TCM Movie Database](#)
  - [Cleavon Little \(https://www.allmovie.com/artist/p42706\)](https://www.allmovie.com/artist/p42706) at [AllMovie](#)
  - [Cleavon Little \(https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5795901\)](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5795901) at [Find a Grave](#)
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