

Appreciation

As Horshack, Palillo Was An Iconic TV Nerd

BY MEREDITH BLAKE © 2012, Los Angeles Times

Actor Ron Palillo, who died early Tuesday morning of a heart attack at age 63, will be remembered by a generation of Americans as Arnold Horshack, the whiny-voiced lovable loser he played on the hit ABC sitcom, "Welcome Back, Kotter," from 1975 to 1979. Although Horshack was not a star student, he was undeniably a nerd. With his gawky frame, distinctive hyena-like laugh, and habit of exclaiming "oooh, ooohh, oooh" while insistently raising his hand in class, Horshack ranks alongside Screech, Urkel and Sheldon Cooper as one of the most beloved geeks in pop culture history.

So what made Horshack so iconic? "I think everyone had a Horshack in their school, and there's also a little bit of Horshack in all of us," claims series star and co-creator Gabe Kaplan. He fondly recalls how perfectly Palillo embodied the nebbishy character he'd been developing for some time in his stand-up act. "When Ron walked into the audition and did his first line, 'Hello, how are you, I'm Arnold Horshack,' I said, 'That's him. That's the guy I've been talking about for five years.'"

Palillo is said to have modeled Horshack's signature wheezy voice on his late father, who passed away from lung cancer when the actor was still a child. According to "Welcome Back, Kotter" co-creator Alan Sacks, Horshack's famous guffaw was also entirely Palillo's creation. "We had in the script 'laugh,' but we didn't have the strange sound that came out," he says.

It could be argued that Horshack provided a template for all future television: Take some irritating mannerisms, garish clothes, and a catchphrase or two, and you've got yourself a breakout star.

Palillo's death also served as a quiet coming-out for the actor, who was survived by his longtime partner Joseph Gramm. But even before Palillo's death, fans have speculated that Horshack, with his love of movie musicals and exuberant mannerisms, was meant to be a gay character. In a blog post for the San Francisco Chronicle, David Wiegand argued that Horshack "was an important point in the timeline of how LGBT people are depicted on TV."

It's a claim Sacks denies — sort of. "That was never in our minds," he says, adding, "If we did it today, maybe we would have said that." He also says that at one point he and Kaplan were developing a "Welcome Back, Kotter" film in which Horshack was out of the closet and working as a beautician.

Whether or not Horshack was gay, "Welcome Back, Kotter," which Sacks says was inspired by the Sidney Poitier classic "Blackboard Jungle," did put ethnic, urban characters on network television at a time of racial strife in America's big cities. Horshack's background was somewhat ambiguous — many viewers mistakenly assumed he was Jewish — but his fellow Sweathogs were an explicitly diverse bunch: Italian Americans, African Americans, and half-Jewish, half-Puerto Ricans. Especially compared to the more overtly political sitcoms of the era, like the Norman Lear-produced "Good Times," "Welcome Back, Kotter" might seem passe, but its portrayal of a peacefully integrated classroom was edgy enough that ABC's affiliate in Boston, a city then bitterly divided over the issue of school busing, refused to air the first few episodes.

Palillo may be remembered for the naive, inarticulate geek he played on "Welcome Back, Kotter," but he was playing against type, claims Sacks. "He was not that goofball. Everybody loved him."

MONDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT AUGUST 20, 2012. Table with columns for time slots (3:00-1:30) and rows for broadcast stations (PBS, KTV, NBC, etc.) and cable channels (HBO, HBO2, etc.).



Palillo

TUESDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT AUGUST 21, 2012. Table with columns for time slots (3:00-1:30) and rows for broadcast stations (PBS, KTV, NBC, etc.) and cable channels (HBO, HBO2, etc.).

Yankton Print Shop advertisement with logo, phone number 605.665.7811, and address 319 Walnut St., Yankton, SD.