

PETER GRAVES
Biography

Peter Graves has combined an enormously successful film acting career, spanning the classic “Staglag 17” to the hilarious “Airplane,” with an equally rewarding TV career encompassing more than a half-dozen series, several major mini-series and numerous movies-for-television.

Signing on to head the “Mission: Impossible” force for six of the seven years the original series ran on CBS-TV (1966-73) firmly established Graves as a star international importance; a status that continues undiminished.

When ABC-TV decided to bring “Mission: Impossible” back to the home screens, they chose Graves to head the all new cast. He also continues with his hosting chores for the Arts & Entertainment Network’s popular “Biography” series.

His other series credits include “Court Martial,” “Whiplash,” “Fury” and “The Rebels,” plus two Time-Life series, “Discover: The World of Science,” in national syndication and on PBS-TV. Additionally, he created the role of Palmer Kirby on ABC-TV’s “The Winds of War” mini-series and reprised that role for “War and Remembrance.”

Since his film debut in “Rouge River,” Graves has starred in a legion of leading roles in such motion pictures as “The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell,” “A Rage To Live,” “The Raid,” “The Ballad of Josie,” “The Long Grey Line,” “Texas Across the River,” “Five Man Army,” “Number One With a Gun,” “Airplane II” and others.

Success has always been the rule rather than the exception for the Minneapolis-born actor. Early in his youth, he developed an affinity for music and, at the age of 15, became one of the youngest full-fledged members of the Musicians’ Union.

Peter began building his bank account while still in high school by playing clarinet and saxophone with local dance bands and occasionally sitting in with big-name bands visiting Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Peter Graves is still an accomplished musician and would certainly have become a major name in the music world had he not focused his energies on an acting career. He was equally adept at athletics, winning the Minnesota State hurdle championships during his last two years of high school.

In addition to his studies, music and athletics, Peter found time to take on yet another interest: radio announcing. At the precocious age of 16, he joined the announcing staff of radio station WMIN in Minneapolis. Upon high school graduation, Peter enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, eager for adventure, excitement and overseas duties. To his disappointment, he never left the States during his two-year tour of duty.

Military services had given him the something he hadn’t planned on, through: the G.I. Bill of Rights. He enrolled at the University of Minnesota as a drama major and won leading roles in college productions of “The Wild Duck,” “Macbeth,” “Death Takes a Holiday” and “Of Mice and Men.”

He found strong encouragement from Dr. Frank Whiting, the famed director of drama and speech at the University, and spent his summers appearing in stock productions at the Plantation Playhouse on the outskirts of Minneapolis. Much later the University would give him their Outstanding Achievement Award and name him a Trustee of the University of Minneapolis Foundation. During college, he continued the vigorous pace he had set in high school, participating in the athletic program—and courting a vivacious and lovely coed, Joan Endress.

With college behind him, Peter lost no time in heading for Hollywood, which he astutely felt offered greater potential for his talents than New York. Joan followed him soon afterwards. He was preceded by two years to Hollywood by his older brother, Jim, who enjoyed no small degree of success as Marshall Matt Dillon on “Gunsmoke” series. Jim shortened the spelling of his real name Aurness to Arness, while Peter decided to adopt Graves, his maternal grandfather’s name, on his arrival in Hollywood.

Joan, was like a good luck charm; no sooner was Peter married than producer Frank Melford, who had seen Peter's characterization on his first television show, signed him to co-star with Rory Calhoun in "Rouge River." Then his career really began to catch fire. He co-starred with Dane Clark in "Fort Defiance" and was cast by Billy Wilder for the key role of the German spy, Prince, in the now-classic "Staglag 17."

Producer Leonard Goldstein signed Peter for "The Raid" and with Edward G. Robinson in "Black Tuesday." Graves was so impressive that Goldstein signed him to a long-term personal contract, which ended with the producer's death in 1954.

Grave's motion picture career continues to surge ahead, however; among the numerous films he made in quick succession was "The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell." Television audiences first became acquainted with Graves as the ranch owner in the "Fury" series, a youngster-orientated show which enjoyed a six-year life on NBC-TV and was re-titled "Black Stallion" for syndication.

The age range of his fans expanded sharply upward when he began his second series, "Whiplash," in which he starred as Cobb, an Australian immigrant in the 1870s who operated one of the first stage and freight lines. The show took Graves to Australia, where it was produced for a year and aired in national syndication.

On his return to Hollywood, Peter added a new dimension to his career when he was signed to star in his first important legitimate theater production, "The Captain and the Kings." The play which also starred Dana Andrews, Charles Ruggles and Conrad Nagel, brought Graves strong critical approval during its three-month pre-Broadway national tour, as well as its run on the Great White Way.

When the play closed, Peter found a host of motion picture and television guest-star offers waiting. Having carefully invested his salary from his series, he was able to pick his own shots. One of them was "A Rage to Live," a Mirisch Corporation motion picture for United Artist release co-starring Suzanne Pleshette, Ben Gazzara and Bradford Dillman. Among the television guest roles he accepted was a two part Kraft Suspense Theater, "The Case Against Sgt. Ryker." The Kraft Production launched Graves into his third series, "Court Martial." Again, the Graves family packed up their belongings and bade farewell to Hollywood. This time they went to England, where the mid-season (1966) replacement series was produced by MCA-TV of England and Associated Television for ABC-TV.

Soon after he finished the final show in the series, Universal rushed him back to Hollywood to co-star with Dean Martin in "Texas Across the River" and next with Doris Day in "The Ballad of Josie." It was filming the latter, a romantic comedy, that Paramount Television asked him to do "Mission: Impossible." Although he was under contract to Universal, the studio's Sid Shienberg graciously gave Peter a release from his contract to accept his new "assignment."

His six-year starring role in the Emmy-winning "Mission: Impossible" firmly established him as one of television's superstars, while his series has taken its place on the list of top-ranked shows of all time. In addition to its long run on CBS-TV, the Paramount Television show is currently being seen in more than 80 foreign countries, as well as on stations from coast to coast. In fact, Metromedia Television brought the syndication rights in six major cities for 14 years, and it is even playing in China under the title of "Target: The Impossible."