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Patrick Billingsley, probability theorist and actor, 1925-2011

By [Steve Koppes](#)  
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Patrick Billingsley, an influential probability theorist who also became an accomplished actor of stage and screen, died Friday, April 22 in his Hyde Park home after a short illness. He was 85.

“He’s most known for his series of books in advanced probability theory,” said Steve Lalley, UChicago professor in statistics. “They are all models of exposition. They really are fine works of mathematical writing. Several generations of graduate students in both probability and statistics have learned their basic probability from these books. They continue to be used, and they continue to be cited.”

Billingsley, professor emeritus in statistics and mathematics, first took the stage in fifth grade, when he played Robin Hood, according to a 1970 article published in the *Chicago Maroon*. He later performed in “The Revels,” the annual faculty review.

He began acting in earnest in 1966 at the University’s Court Theatre, back when the professional company was an amateur company staging open-air plays in Hutchinson Courtyard.

Billingsley held leading roles in more than 20 productions at Court Theatre and Body Politic Theatre in Chicago. His roles included the Captain in *We Bombed in New Haven* (1970); Alonzo in *The Tempest* (1977); Dysart in *Equus*, (1980); and Petey in *The Birthday Party* (1978 and 1985).

A talent scout saw Billingsley perform in *The Lover* in 1977, which led to his successful audition for a part in the 1978 Kirk Douglas film *The Fury*. Billingsley never met Douglas, but they appear on screen together during a car chase on Wacker Drive and Van Buren Street in Chicago. Billingsley played a bad guy who ended up dying in a fiery crash.

Billingsley went on to appear in seven more films and in nine television shows. His movie roles included playing a biology teacher in *My Bodyguard* (1980), the professor in *Somewhere in Time* (1980) and the bailiff in *The Untouchables* (1987).

“When you teach, you perform in front of an audience. That’s much like acting. As a teacher you’re used to being on stage,” Billingsley told the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* in 1978.

Family members and friends knew Billingsley as a man with a zest for life, good cheer and a wry sense of humor, said his daughter Marty Billingsley, a teacher at UChicago’s Laboratory Schools. “He was the type of guy who read *Mad Magazine* along with *The New Yorker* and watched ‘Monty Python’ as well as the PBS ‘NewsHour on TV,” she said.

Her father lived a life of both mind and body, she noted. He worked out daily in the Henry Crown Field House on campus for 40 years, served on the athletic board and even helped run the football scoreboard.

“A true Renaissance man, he also painted, did woodworking, sung Child Ballads as lullabies to his children — echoes of which have made their way into his daughter Fanny Billingsley’s young-adult novels — and read *Beowulf* in the original Old English,” Marty Billingsley said.

Billingsley was born May 3, 1925 in Sioux Falls, S.D. He earned a bachelor’s degree in engineering from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1948, then served in the U.S. Navy until 1957. As a Navy officer he lived for a year in Japan, where he earned a black belt in judo.

He attended Princeton University for graduate studies and received a master’s degree in 1952 and a doctorate in 1955, both in mathematics. Billingsley worked as a National Science Foundation Fellow in Mathematics at Princeton in 1957-58.

Billingsley joined the UChicago faculty as an assistant professor in statistics in 1958, attaining the rank of professor in statistics and mathematics five years later. He served as department chairman from 1980 to 1983 and retired as professor emeritus in 1994.

A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a fellow of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics, his honors also include the Mathematical Association of America’s Lester R. Ford award for mathematical exposition.

Billingsley was a Fulbright Fellow and visiting professor at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark (1964-65) and a Guggenheim

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Patrick Billingsley, professor emeritus in statistics and mathematics

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Fellow and visiting professor at the University of Cambridge, England, in 1971-72. He served as editor of the *Annals of Probability* from 1976 to 1979, and as president of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics in 1983.

He was the author or co-author of five books, including *Statistical Inference for Markov Processes* (1961), *Ergodic Theory and Information* (1965), *Convergence of Probability Measures* (1968), *The Elements of Statistical Inference* (1986). His *Probability and Measure* (1986) was translated into Polish.

He delivered numerous lectures internationally, addressing students and colleagues in England, India, Scotland, Sweden and Italy. In 1970 he gave an invited address at the American Mathematical Society's annual meetings.

Billingsley is survived by his children Franny, Patty, Julie, Marty and Paul, who is an assistant project manager with UChicago's Facilities Services; and by his companion, Florence Weisblatt. His late wife of nearly 50 years, social activist Ruth Billingsley, died in 2000.

The family is planning an event in June to celebrate Billingsley's life.

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