

Philly's Benmio McCrea made a wise decision when he passed on clown college. He's had a lengthy run in theater, films and TV shows, with more to come. Image | David Zaugh

# 'It all started IN PHILLY'

**Benmio McCrea** talks acting, CAPA and clown college

**P**hiladelphia native Benmio McCrea is an actor and producer, known for roles in "Bosch," "Aquarium" and "Criminal Minds." He also recently starred in an episode of Fox's "911."

But he's far from through, as he has new movies coming out this year and

next.

McCrea studied film at NYU and was a classmate with Aaron Sorkin and Vanessa Williams at Syracuse University.

Growing up in Philadelphia, he attended Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts and made his New York stage debut in Sam Shepard's "The Tooth of Crime" at Ellen Stuart's LaMama ETC Theatre.

PW recently caught up with McCrea to talk about growing up in Philly and his career.

***When did you first become interested in acting? Were there any Philly groups you participated in during your younger days here?***

I've been performing and acting on some level since elementary school. Here in Philly in the early '70s, my sister and I used to go door-to-door giving our neighbors little shows. We'd give you a whole show for a dollar... or a half a show for 50 cents. Mostly song and dance kind of stuff. My mother had a record album of the musical "South Pacific," and I remember doing some of those songs.

Actually, we picked up some of our chops by performing in Purim plays at our syna-

gogue. At Congregation Rodeph Shalom, they would take songs from Broadway musicals and change the lyrics to tell the story of Purim. That's where I first got a taste of being on stage. Later, while in high school, I had a dance scholarship at Philadelphia Civic Ballet, and I also performed with Opera Ebony at the Academy of Music.

Another funny story while in high school:

I was accepted into Ringling Bros Clown College when they came to town looking for talent. Me and my then-classmate and now-cheesesteak kingpin Tony Luke auditioned for it together. I didn't go, though, as it meant I'd have to leave our performing arts high school and travel to Florida.

***How has growing up in Philly, its acting scene, culture, etc., impacted you as an actor?***

Philly is where it all started. The first professional play I ever saw was a 1976 Drama Guild production of Moliere's "The Miser" at the Walnut Street Theatre. I was 14 and truly in awe of that show. It was amazing and gut-bustingly funny. Seeing that play planted a bigger seed in me wanting to act.

As an inner city kid without a father, I was lucky to have the mentorship of a "Big Brother" named David Gutin. We were connected by a Big Brother program run by The Association for Jewish Children. Lucky for me, David was an avid theater-goer and went to all the Broadway shows in New York. Not long after "The Miser," he took me to see the original Broadway production of "A Chorus Line."

And I've enjoyed plenty of other theater outings in Philly. The Forrest Theatre, The

**BY: EUGENE ZENYATTA**



Academy of Music, Freedom Theatre and so many others. Philadelphia is a great town for theater. In 1978 the city opened The Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA). I'm proud to have been in its very first graduating class. Attending a conservatory-type of school like CAPA was a dream come true. I received great training in theater and dance. It really laid the foundation for everything I've done professionally and, to a certain extent, who I am as a person.

**What's been your favorite role and why? Are there any "dream" roles you'd like to play?**

I earned my Equity Card playing the "Ref" in Sam Shepard's "The Tooth of Crime" at LaMama Theater in New York. At the time, I was still a theater student at Syracuse University. We did that show at Syracuse Stage before it moved to New York. And what a mind-blowing experience it was to be so young and travel with it to New York City. It will always mark the moment I became a professional actor. I got to work with an amazing cast and the exceptionally talented and innovative director George Ferencz. Sadly, Mr. Ferencz passed this year. I'm also grateful to have been at LaMama with Ellen Stewart as its artistic director. She was quite a force. As far as dream roles... I haven't had the opportunity to do any of the August Wilson plays yet. So there's that.

**How did you spend your time during the pandemic, when production, like everything else, was pretty much shut down?**

My whole focus these days is film and television. During the early part of the shutdown, I simply used that time to prepare myself for

the changes that happened in the industry. Everything went virtual, including auditions. So I went ahead and upgraded my home studio for that.

**What are some of your most recent roles? What's coming up for you?**

I have a few things in the can for Amazon, Apple and Sony Pictures I can't talk about yet. But recent appearances include roles on Freeform's "Good Trouble" and FOX's "911." Also, my wife and I currently appear together in a national commercial for "ColoGuard." It was fun to work with her for the first time... particularly during the pandemic.

**Any advice for aspiring actors?**

For newcomers aspiring for a career in film and TV, for a quick start, get clear on how you'd most likely be cast – not necessarily how you want to be cast. Play to your essence, play to your strengths. Take an on-camera scene study class and an on-camera audition class. If you don't have any tape, create a short reel on your own. Then use that tape to search for an agent. I have a mentee that I helped get an agent by doing a simple two-person scene at a kitchen table. For aspiring actors that have been at it for a while and for newcomers alike, I'd say "increase your focus, create a clear vision about what you want and take concrete action each day towards that goal."

**What are the best ways for your fans to stay current with what you're doing?**

My website is also going through an upgrade – Bennmio.com will be a one-stop shop of all the latest and greatest info.

**BELOW:** Bennmio McCrea recently appeared in an episode of '911' and has more projects in the works. Image | David Zaugh



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