Arts & Humanities

12 Famous Columbians Played by Hollywood Stars

By
Santiago Barraza Lopez '21LAW
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Columbia affiliates have gone on to become US presidents, Supreme Court judges, literary icons, and world-class athletes, so it isn't surprising that Hollywood has come calling to tell their stories. Over the years, alumni and faculty have been portrayed by Academy Award winners, an EGOT, comedy stars …and even other Columbians.

Alexander Hamilton

Alexander Hamilton, the first US secretary of the treasury and a familiar face on the ten-dollar bill, entered King's College in 1774, but he left his studies to fight the British in the American Revolution. He later helped revive the school as Columbia College and served as a trustee until he was famously killed in an 1804 duel with Aaron Burr.

George Arliss and Doris Kenyon in *Alexander Hamilton*. (Warner Bros. / IMDb)

Generations later, during the early years of sound cinema, Hamilton received his first major onscreen portrayal in the 1931 drama *Alexander Hamilton*, which stars British actor George Arliss as the title character and features a subplot involving Hamilton's adulterous liaison with Maria Reynolds — an affair widely considered America's first political sex scandal.

Hamilton was later immortalized in the 2008 Emmy-winning HBO miniseries *John Adams*, in which he was played (ironically) by another British actor, Rufus Sewell, who currently stars in the Netflix series *The Diplomat*. Robert Livingston 1765KC, a less-famous Founding Father who did graduate from Columbia, is also featured in the series and played by Alex Draper.

Lin-Manuel Miranda in Hamilton. (© 2020 Lin-Manuel Miranda and Nevis Productions, LLC. All Rights Reserved. / IMDb)

In 2015, Hamilton had his starriest pop-culture moment when Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* became a Broadway sensation. A filmed version of the show featuring the original theatrical cast — including Miranda himself as Hamilton — premiered on Disney+ in 2020.

Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt

Although both US presidents with the last name Roosevelt dropped out of Columbia Law School before entering politics, they were each granted a posthumous degree by the school in 2008.

Ben Stiller and Robin Williams in Night at the Museum. (© 2006 Twentieth Century Fox. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

A native New Yorker, Theodore Roosevelt 1882LAW started his career in the state assembly before serving as US president from 1901–1909. His father, businessman Theodore Roosevelt Sr., had cofounded the American Museum of Natural History in 1869, and Theodore Jr. donated numerous artifacts to the institution throughout his life. In 2006, the fantasy film *Night at the Museum*, which takes place at the museum, featured Robin Williams as a wax sculpture of the reformer, conservationist, and future president who comes to life in his Rough Riders uniform.

Bill Murray in Hyde Park on Hudson. (Photo by Nicola Dove / © 2012 Focus Features / IMDb)

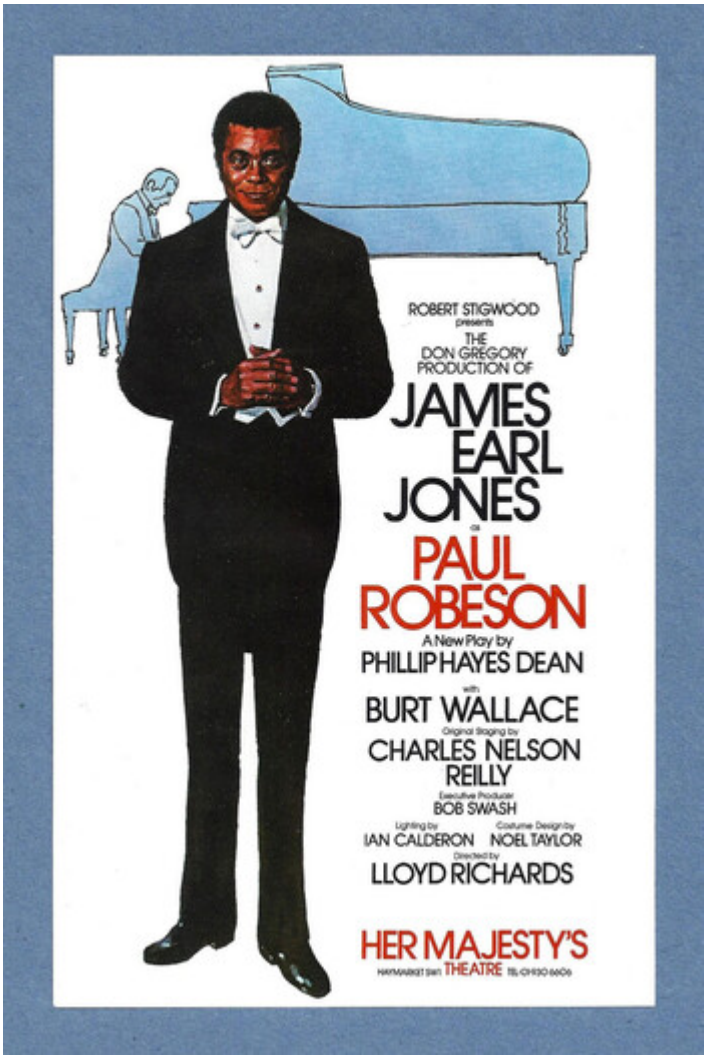
While his distant cousin was in the White House, Franklin Delano Roosevelt 1907LAW left his Columbia studies in 1907 after he passed the bar exam, a decision that allowed him to kickstart his career in New York State politics and eventually become US president (serving from 1933–1945). America's leader through the Great Depression and World War II, Franklin has been portrayed by actors such as Edward Herrmann in the 1982 musical film *Annie*, Jon Voight in the 2001 war drama *Pearl Harbor*, and Bill Murray in the 2012 film *Hyde Park on Hudson*.

Lou Gehrig

Before dropping out of school to join the New York Yankees in 1923, baseball icon Lou Gehrig attended Columbia, where he played for the Lions baseball and football teams. Nicknamed "the Iron Horse," Gehrig broke numerous records over seventeen MLB seasons before his early death in 1941 from ALS.

Babe Ruth and Gary Cooper in The Pride of the Yankees. (© Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

Gehrig's life and career were celebrated in the 1942 film *The Pride of the Yankees*, which starred Hollywood royalty Gary Cooper as Gehrig — a role that would earn the actor his second Oscar nomination (he had won the previous year for *Sergeant York*). Cowritten by Columbia alumnus Herman J. Mankiewicz 1916CC, the film includes a scene based on the popular campus legend that Gehrig shattered a window of the building now called Pulitzer Hall (home to the journalism school) with one of his knockout home runs. That myth has since been debunked.



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Paul Robeson

Known for starring in Broadway and West End productions of *Showboat* and *Othello*, as well as the 1936 film version of *Showboat*, actor and singer Paul Robeson 1923LAW was an All-American football star who graduated from Columbia Law School before he entered show business full-time.

Robeson's career was derailed when his vocal support of civil rights and the Soviet Union landed him on the Hollywood blacklist, a saga featured in the 1978 one-man play *Paul Robeson*, by Phillip Hayes Dean. The Broadway show, which starred EGOT awardee James Earl Jones (known for voicing Darth Vader in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, among many other roles), was filmed and broadcast on television in 1979.

Roy Cohn

Before becoming a notorious prosecutor of the McCarthy era, Roy Cohn ’46CC, ’47LAW graduated from Columbia College and Columbia Law School. Cohn’s final days and death from AIDS were dramatized in the 2003 HBO limited series *Angels in America* (based on the play by Tony Kushner ’78CC, ’10HON), in which he was portrayed by Al Pacino, who won an Emmy for his performance.

Al Pacino in *Angels in America*. (HBO / IMDb)

In 2024, Jeremy Strong took on the role of the controversial attorney in *The Apprentice*, a biographical film about Cohn’s early mentorship of businessman and future US president Donald J. Trump.

Jeremy Strong and Sebastian Stan in *The Apprentice*. (© Scythia Films / IMDb)

Amelia Earhart

Aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart studied at Columbia from 1919 to 1920 and briefly returned in 1925, intending to pursue medicine. She left her studies to focus on flying, eventually becoming the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic without stopping. In her 1932 memoir, *The Fun of It*, Earhart wrote about exploring the Morningside Heights campus as fearlessly as she would later explore the skies, once even climbing to the top of Low Library's dome. In 2009, Earhart's life was brought to the screen in the biopic *Amelia*, which starred Hilary Swank as the aviator.

Hilary Swank and Richard Gere in Amelia. (Mirabai Films / 2S Films / Avalon Pictures / AE Electra Productions / IMDb)

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Before becoming America’s 34th president, Dwight D. Eisenhower was a decorated military general who helped lead the Allied forces to victory in World War II. Several years later, Eisenhower stepped into the quieter role of Columbia University president, a position he held from 1948 until 1953 when he relocated from the President’s House on Morningside Drive to the White House in Washington, DC.

Robin Williams in The Butler. (© 2013 The Weinstein Company / IMDb)

Eisenhower has been portrayed in several films, including *The Longest Day*, a 1962 epic in which the general was played by Henry Grace; *Ike: Countdown to D-Day*, a 2004 made-for-television film starring Tom Selleck; and the 2013 drama *The Butler*, in which Robin Williams makes an appearance as then-President Eisenhower. Most recently, Eisenhower's World War II years were dramatized in the 2026 film *Pressure* , which stars Oscar winner Brendan Fraser as the general during the tense three days leading up to D-Day.

Branden Fraser in Pressure. (© Focus Features / IMDb)

Bella Abzug

Known for her signature wide-brimmed hats, Bella Abzug ’44LAW — often called “Battling Bella” — was a lawyer, politician, and Women’s Movement leader who cofounded the still-active National Women’s Political Caucus with Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan, and Fannie Lou Hamer in 1971. A Columbia Law School graduate who had edited the *Columbia Law Review*, Abzug served three terms in the US House of Representatives, representing New York, and oversaw the pivotal National Women’s Conference of 1977.

Margo Martindale as Bella Abzug in Mrs. America. (FX / Hulu / IMDb)

In 2020, Emmy-winning actress Margo Martindale played the activist in *Mrs. America* , a limited series on FX and Hulu about the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment.

Allen Ginsberg

Actor James Franco ’11SOA was a writing student at Columbia’s School of the Arts when he donned a pair of horn-rimmed glasses to play fellow alumnus Allen Ginsberg ’48CC in *Howl*. The film, released in 2010, focuses primarily on the 1957 obscenity trial surrounding the poet’s most famous work.

James Franco as Allen Ginsberg in Howl. (Werc Werk Works / IMDb)

Two years after *Howl*'s premiere, the Beat Generation would return to the screen in *Kill Your Darlings*, a 2012 film set and shot partially on the Morningside Heights campus. Daniel Radcliffe, who at the time was fresh off starring in the final installment of the *Harry Potter* series, traded Hogwarts for Columbia to play Ginsberg, with one noteworthy scene showing the actor in 1940s tweed on College Walk. Other cast members include Jack Huston as Jack Kerouac, Dane DeHaan as Lucien Carr, Michael C. Hall as David Kammerer, and Elizabeth Olsen as Barnard student Edie Parker.

Michael C. Hall and Daniel Radcliffe in Kill Your Darlings. (Photo by Jessica Miglio / © 2013 Sony Pictures Classics / IMDb)

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

In another instance of a Columbian playing a Columbian, comedian Kate McKinnon ’06CC sported black robes and a lace collar for her recurring *Saturday Night Live* parody of Ruth Bader Ginsburg ’59LAW, a graduate of Columbia Law School who was also the school’s first female tenured professor. Frequently appearing as the Supreme Court Justice on the sketch show’s “Weekend Update” segment, McKinnon’s Ginsburg was known for her searing insults, known as “Ginsburns.” In 2019, the real-life Ginsburg met her famous impersonator after an off-Broadway performance of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which they had attended separately.

Kate McKinnon on Saturday Night Live. (NBC)

Barack Obama

As the 44th US president and the first Columbia graduate to reach the White House, Barack Obama ’83CC has been the subject of two feature films, both released in 2016.

Devon Terrell in Barry. (Photo by Linda Kallerus / Netflix / IMDB)

The Netflix drama *Barry*, which stars Devon Terrell and features scenes shot in Morningside Heights, follows Obama during his junior year at Columbia as a recent transfer student. Anya Taylor-Joy plays Charlotte, a fictional student inspired by the future political leader’s college girlfriends.

Parker Sawyers and Tika Sumpter in Southside with You. (Miramax / Roadside Attractions / IMDb)

Obama graduated from Columbia in 1983 and went on to study at Harvard Law School. While working as a summer associate in Chicago, he met and began dating his future wife, Michelle — an early romance captured in the drama *Southside with You* starring Parker Sawyers and Tika Sumpter.

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