

NEWS

Singer Michael Burgess was a 'Canadian gem'

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If you're a theatre person, he played the character Jean Valjean for more than 1,000 performances of the Toronto production of *Les Misérables*.

In the sporting world, he would blow the roof off the arena when he sang *O Canada* before many a Toronto Maple Leafs game.

Or, better yet, he was the first person to sing our national anthem at the 1992 World Series when the Toronto Blue Jays began their historic matchup against the Atlanta Braves.

No matter what accomplishment is used to describe Michael Burgess, one thing is for sure: he had a set of pipes that gave you chills.

Burgess died of cancer Monday in a Toronto hospice.

He was 70.

Born in Regina, Sask., the famed tenor was a longtime Applewood Acres resident before moving to Etobicoke nearly a decade ago.

"He was a Canadian gem," said Patti Jannetta Baker, a Mississauga resident and friend of Burgess. "I feel like we've lost a national treasure."

Jannetta Baker's ties to the late tenor stretch back to the 1970s when her aunt, Carmella Jannetta, worked with Burgess in the Canadian Opera Company. Her father, Louis Jannetta, also befriended Burgess through his connection to the Royal York Hotel's Imperial Room where he booked big-

name stars from Tony Bennett to Ella Fitzgerald.

It wasn't until Jannetta Baker saw Burgess play Valjean at the Royal Alexandra Theatre when the show debuted in 1989 that they became friends.

"I've never heard a voice like his. It was more than remarkable. It was truly unique ... strong, powerful, but so pure in its tone and quality," the fellow vocalist said of the first time she heard Burgess sing in *Les Mis*.

"He had a very unique voice - you always knew it was Michael singing."

Longtime friend Bruce Bowser also knew the voice before the man.

The pair bonded during a chance meeting at a celebrity golf tournament about 22 years ago.

Initially disappointed that he didn't get matched up with an NHL player, Bowser admitted he was unfamiliar with Burgess.

While talking with him in the golf cart, Bowser learned that Burgess performed in musicals.

So Bowser decided to share that he had just moved here from Halifax and his wife talked him into seeing *Les Mis* and how it "changed him forever."

Burgess said that was the musical he was in.

Gobsmacked, Bowser insisted that he relay a message to one of his co-workers: "Promise me, tell the guy who plays Jean Valjean that I've never seen anything more powerful in my life."

And so began a life-long friendship, said the president of the Mississauga company AMJ Campbell Van Lines.

Musical talent aside, Bowser noted that Burgess was an avid golfer as well as a devout hockey fan.

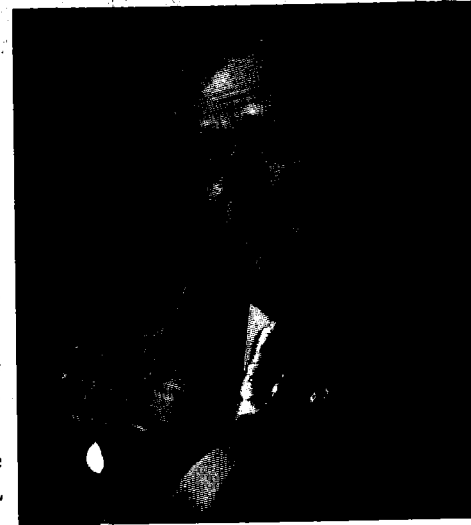
Another dimension to Burgess that can't go without saying is his philanthropic work.

While continuing a professional career after *Les Mis*, with roles in *Man of La Mancha*, *Blood Brothers* and *Ten Lost Years*, Burgess also gave many charitable performances locally for the likes of Credit Valley Hospital and Peel Children's Aid.

Regardless of whether it was a theatre stage or a charitable event, Jannetta Baker said Burgess did not disappoint the crowd.

"Whenever he was on, anything he did, he always brought the house down," she said.

The funeral will be held Monday at Blessed Sacrament Church in Toronto.



Singer Michael Burgess, who famously played Jean Valjean in the Toronto production of *Les Misérables*, died earlier this week.