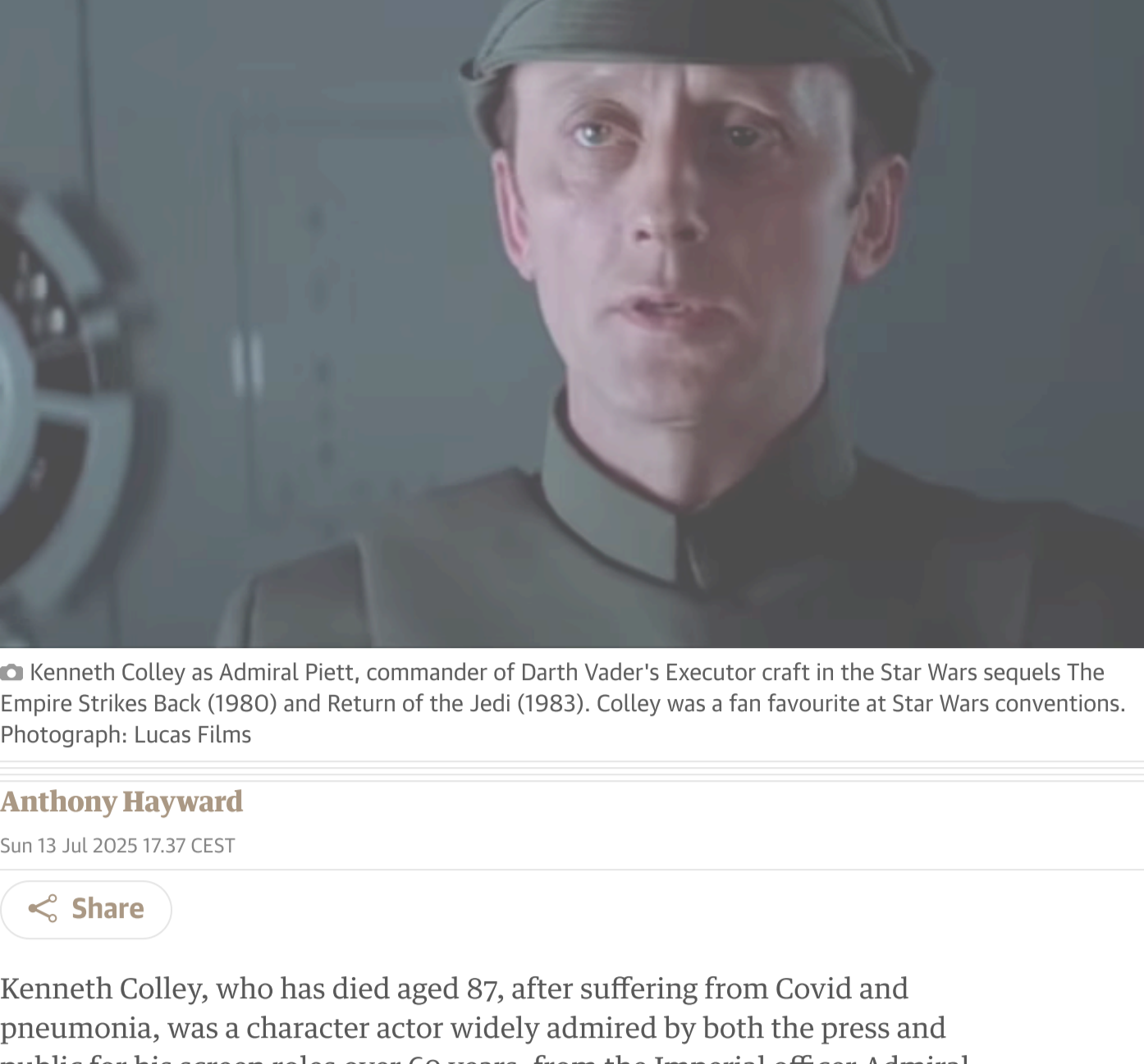


Film

Obituary

Kenneth Colley obituary

Actor known as Admiral Piett in the Star Wars movies, and for his many roles in the films of Ken Russell



📍 Kenneth Colley as Admiral Piett, commander of Darth Vader's Executor craft in the Star Wars sequels The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Return of the Jedi (1983). Colley was a fan favourite at Star Wars conventions. Photograph: Lucas Films

Anthony Hayward

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Kenneth Colley, who has died aged 87, after suffering from Covid and pneumonia, was a character actor widely admired by both the press and public for his screen roles over 60 years, from the Imperial officer Admiral Piett in two of the original Star Wars films and Jesus in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* to historical figures such as Nelson and Napoleon, and two Adolfs, Hitler and Eichmann.

He described his parts as “mad and bad”, while critics variously commented that the sad-eyed actor had “a defeated look if ever there was one” and he could “make your spine tingle with pleasure”.

He is embedded in the minds of sci-fi film fans as Firmus Piett, a role he landed after [Irvin Kershner](#), director of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the second in the first Star Wars trilogy, said he was “looking for someone that would frighten Hitler”. Piett was the commander of Executor, Darth Vader's flagship super star destroyer employed in the Empire's quest for galactic control.

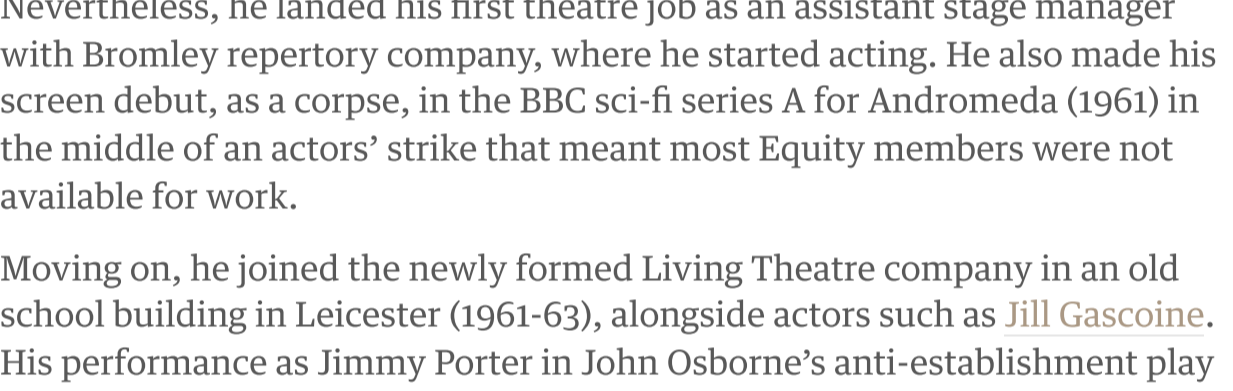
George Lucas, the [Star Wars](#) creator and producer, had not intended to feature an Imperial officer twice in the first trilogy, but Colley made the character of Piett human - “You can't just play a uniform,” he said - and Star Wars fans wrote in demanding to see him again. So Lucas brought him back for *Return of the Jedi* (1983), adding scenes to the original script. But Colley's run ended there, with Piett commanding the entire Imperial fleet at the Battle of Endor and perishing when a Rebel starfighter destroys the Executor's command bridge. He remained a firm fan favourite at Star Wars conventions over the following decades.

Colley also gained cult status as Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount in the 1979 film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. He had previously appeared with individual members of the Monty Python team in the movie *Jabberwocky* and on TV in *Ripping Yarns* (both in 1977).

He was also much admired by [Ken Russell](#) and was part of the flamboyant director's unofficial repertory company for 22 years. Colley started as Hitler in *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), a BBC musical biopic that outraged Richard Strauss's family with its sex scenes and depiction of the composer as a Nazi sympathiser.

Then came film parts as Modest, Tchaikovsky's younger brother, in *The Music Lovers*; Legrand in *The Devils*, brilliantly cinematic, but controversial - and censored - for its tale of a philandering 17th-century French Catholic priest, witchcraft, nudity and sexually repressed nuns; and a bearded king for a fantasy sequence in *The Boy Friend* (all 1971).

In further Russell musical biopics, Colley was Krenek, a journalist posing challenging questions, in *Mahler* (1974) and Frédéric Chopin in *Lisztomania* (1975). He played the dour teacher Mr Brunt in Russell's film version of *The Rainbow* (1989) before returning to TV as Alfred Dreyfus, a wrongly jailed 19th-century French officer, in *Prisoner of Honor* (1991) and the composer John Ireland in *The Secret Life of Arnold Bax* (1992).



📍 Kenneth Colley as Hitler in Ken Russell's *Dance of the Seven Veils*, 1970. Photograph: BBC/RGR Collection/Alamy

Colley was born in Manchester, to Jessie (nee Hughes) and Ernest Colley, a labourer. When he was 14, a teacher at South Hulme secondary modern school asked him about his career ambitions, and he said he wanted to act. On leaving school, he went through jobs as a commercial art assistant, bus conductor and warehouse operative, but his dream never faded. “One day, I told myself that I was 23 and I had to stop wasting my time,” Colley recalled. In 1961, he headed for London and knocked on theatrical agents' doors, but failed to impress.

Nevertheless, he landed his first theatre job as an assistant stage manager with Bromley repertory company, where he started acting. He also made his screen debut, as a corpse, in the BBC sci-fi series *A for Andromeda* (1961) in the middle of an actors' strike that meant most Equity members were not available for work.

Moving on, he joined the newly formed Living Theatre company in an old school building in Leicester (1961-63), alongside actors such as [Jill Gascoine](#). His performance as Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's anti-establishment play *Look Back in Anger* led one critic to write: “Kenneth Colley burns with sardonic rage.”

While television quickly recognised his talents as a character actor, with appearances in dramas such as *The Avengers* (1963), as well as the role of a fellow steel worker playing pranks on Dennis Tanner in *Coronation Street* (1964), Colley continued on stage with the company at the Unity, a London East End venue with roots in the workers' theatre movement.

He played Wick there in another “angry young man” play, *Little Malcolm and His Struggle Against the Eunuchs* (1965), written by [David Halliwell](#) and directed by Mike Leigh. He reprised the role at that year's Dublin theatre festival and in the West End of London the following year at the Garrick, before taking small parts with the National Theatre company at the Garrick in 1968.

📍 Kenneth Colley, left, with Bob Hoskins in the BBC's *Pennies from Heaven*, 1978. Photograph: Radio Times/Getty Images

Later stage roles included Cleet in *Cromwell* (Royal Court, 1973) and Benedick on tour with the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#) in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1979). In films, he played Michael Crawford's chauffeur in *The Jokers* (1967) and a Soviet colonel in *Firefox* (1982), alongside Clint Eastwood.

He first played Hitler on television in Jean Benedetti's BBC play *These Men Are Dangerous* (1969). His other small-screen parts included Charles I in *Revolution: Cromwell* (1970), the “accordion man” in *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), an SS officer in the 1983 TV movie *The Scarlet and the Black*, starring [Gregory Peck](#), Eichmann in *Wallenberg: A Hero's Story* (1985), and the title roles in *I Remember Nelson* (1982) and *Napoleon's Last Battle* (1990).

Colley also gave a standout performance as the manipulating Duke of Vienna in the 1979 BBC Shakespeare production *Measure for Measure* and enjoyed a starring role as Ken Uttley, owner of a removals firm, in the comedy-drama *Moving Story* (1994-95). In 2016, he played the doomed mob boss Vicente Changretta in *Peaky Blinders*.

In 1962, Colley married Mary Dunne; she died in 2018.

Kenneth Colley, actor, born 7 December 1937; died 30 June 2025

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