

Winkler tells jurors about day that Ritter died

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In a cameo courtroom appearance, actor Henry Winkler told jurors Wednesday that his friend John Ritter seemed in top form on the set of his television show Sept. 11, 2003, the day he died.

By that afternoon, however, Winkler said, he had noticed that Ritter “was sweating. He said, ‘You know, I really need to get some water.’ That was the last time I saw him.”

Winkler -- who testified in Glendale civil court on behalf of Ritter’s widow and children, provided a dose of celebrity in a trial grounded in medicine.

Ritter’s family is suing two doctors in a wrongful-death case that will turn largely on dueling medical experts who disagree over whether an emergency room physician properly treated Ritter the day he died.

The defense contends that Ritter exhibited the classic signs of a heart attack and that his treatment was appropriate. He died of a tear in the aorta.

Attorneys for actress Amy Yasbeck, Ritter’s widow, and his four children said in court this week that the actor might have lived had he gone home from the set of his show, “8 Simple Rules,” without seeking medical intervention. Ritter died at Providence St. Joseph Medical Center in Burbank about four hours after walking into the emergency room.

In court Wednesday, Winkler, an author and director as well as an actor, said that he got to know Ritter 30 years ago and that they became close friends. Winkler, who played the iconic role of Fonzie in the television series “Happy Days,” recalled his friend’s “excitement for life.”

On the day Ritter died, Winkler was making a guest appearance on “8 Simple Rules.” Ritter’s family, which has already collected \$14 million from other defendants, says the actor could have earned more than \$67 million over the course of the show, which had just begun a second season.

Winkler told jurors of his friendship with Ritter, and how great a loss his death was to his family. “Every thought that John had included his children, all four children,” Winkler said. “Every conversation we had somehow wrapped around his children. His pride, his love, his worry, his making sure that every one of them was fine.”

Ritter and Yasbeck were “an unbelievable team,” he said. “They were like a perfect whole,” both with an extremely sharp comedic sense.

“I couldn’t keep up with him when he went on a comic tear. The only one who could was Amy,” Winkler said.

Winkler also told jurors that Ritter was thrilled that he had found new success on TV so many years after he rose to fame in the 1970s as Jack Tripper on “Three’s Company.”

“He was, every day, grateful that lightning had struck again,” Winkler said of “8 Simple Rules.” “He loved that cast. They loved him like a second family. He watched over everybody.”

Winkler testified for about 30 minutes before the trial turned to medical issues.

Dr. John Elefteriades of Yale Medical School said Ritter’s medical records show that doctors wrongly thought he was having a heart attack when he was in fact suffering from an aortic dissection, or a rupture in one of the layers of the aorta.

A chest X-ray could have shown the difference, but the hospital records do not show that one was ever made, Elefteriades said. One doctor ordered the insertion of a balloon pump to clear an artery, which Elefteriades said was the wrong treatment. He also ordered blood thinners -- “the last thing you’d want to do, other than put in a balloon pump,” Elefteriades testified.

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