

Editor's note: One of the most versatile talents in the theatre world, José Ferrer, who must be as old as we are, shows no sign of letting up or even slowing down. With a world-wide reputation as an actor and as a director, he has starred not only in numerous Broadway productions but in films and on television. In addition to his Academy Award and five Tony awards, Joe, as we knew him, has received several honorary degrees, has been elected to the Theatre Hall of Fame and in 1985 became the first actor awarded the National Medal of the Arts by the President of the United States. We asked him to recall for us what propelled him on his life's path and some amusing or embarrassing moments of his 57 plus years on the stage.

Aside from the obvious and traditional benefits a student derives from a Princeton education, I received a serendipitous bonus that still stands me in good stead.

Because of my Hispanic heritage my education was more typically European than American, particularly stressing the arts and the humanities. Thus, as an undergraduate, my three main interests were literature, music and painting. At the Princeton of 1928 (I was originally in the Class of '32, and I still, to some extent, claim dual citizenship) there was plenty of instruction on many literatures, but officially none in music and painting. So for music I started something called The Pied Pipers, my own private little dance band, and for painting I majored in Architecture where I could at least learn rendering, and where it happened we also received instruction in landscape painting and in life classes.

As it turned out, I did not devote my life to literature or music or architecture, for the president of the Triangle Club in 1933 was Bert Brush, also a student of architecture, and he talked me into trying out for his show, thereby providing me with my own addictive drug, the theatre.

So I became an actor, and eventually a director, and here's where the bonus comes in. In this latter capacity I had to deal with scenic designers, and having been an architecture student, I was able, in an amateur but educated way, to converse with a designer with some understanding of style and of blueprints and ground plans and elevations and cross-sections and so on.

During more than half a century of acting, I have participated in a number of incidents, which, in retrospect, may seem amusing. They certainly didn't possess any element of humor at the time.

There was, for instance, the time in 1935 when, for a cool \$25 a week, I played the role of SECOND POLICEMAN in my first Broadway production. One night I rushed on the stage, gun in hand, as I was paid to do, but this time I fell flat and the audience laughed. I got up, they roared. I noticed that my cap had fallen off my head, so I picked it up. They howled. I realized that my gun was still on the stage floor, so I picked it up. They screamed. I waited until they had quieted down and I recited my one line in the play: "What's going on here?" They got hysterical as I made my exit to the biggest round of applause I have received in my entire career.

Then there was the time I was playing CYRANO DE BERGERAC on Broadway when, don't ask me how, I forgot to put on my big false nose. As soon as I made my first entrance, when I could no longer do anything about it, I realized my mistake, and as I looked at the 35 other actors who made up the cast, I observed, to my horror, that all their noses seemed to be bigger than mine. I still bear the psychic scars of that performance.

One summer, working in stock, with Bretaigne Windust '29 and Joshua Logan '31, I had to speak the line "Did she get what she come for?" Unfortunately, they had told me that another actor who had played this same role with them in an earlier stock production had one night said "Did she come what she get for?" From then on, I was

compelled to pause before I uttered those immortal words, for by a quirk of memory, the wrong line sounded right and vice versa. The audience must have thought that I was, like Hamlet, given to introspection.

During the second year of Othello with Paul Robeson, I played IAGO, and for six weeks in the middle of the run, I forgot the same two lines at every performance. The fact that they constituted part of a lengthy rhyme scheme made it impossible to fake them, but somehow I got through the agony of that month and a half, at the end of which period, my memory of those two lines returned as mysteriously as it had disappeared. I have since learned from other actors that this sort of thing often happens in long runs, but I do not recall that period with joy.

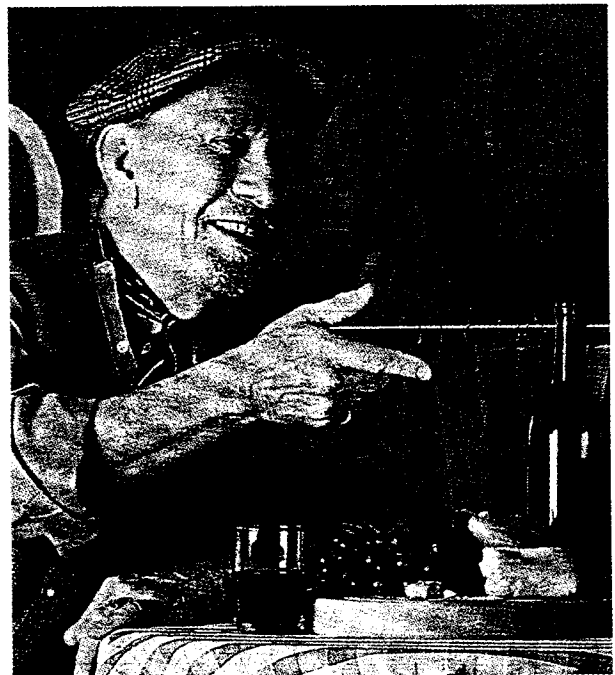
In 1952, during the run of that year's Pulitzer Prize winner THE SHRIKE, the first scene took place in one of the mental wards of Bellevue Hospital and I made my first entrance supposedly unconscious on a gurney. I was at the time producing two other plays and I was perpetually tired from overwork. One night I was truly unconscious for I had fallen asleep out of sheer fatigue; it didn't help that I snored loudly a couple of times. I'm not too proud of that one.

Opening night of THE MAN OF LA MANCHA in New Haven, as I started to sing "To dream the impossible dream" I was so busy giving a "great" performance that I couldn't think of the word "dream".

And so forth... Well, there you have it. In retrospect, fun and laughs on the stage. At the time, agony.



Dressed for a board meeting



As César in a revival of Fanny this spring at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey.