



## ROBERT PRESTON

*Next to acting myself, watching other actors gives me my greatest joy.*

I was born on June 8, 1918, in Newton Highlands, Massachusetts. My full name is Robert Preston Meservey. I was lucky in having young parents, Frank and Ruth Rea Meservey, who married before they were twenty-one. My father now works in the office of a coal-lining business in Los Angeles. I have one brother, Frank, Jr., twenty-two months younger than I am, who lives in Los Angeles, is married, has two children, and works for a beer distributor. When I was two years old, my parents moved from Massachusetts to California, and went to live in my maternal grandparents' house, in Los Angeles. My grandmother was a strongly matriarchal type, and she had decided to move the whole family out to California for the sake of my grandfather's health; he was believed to have tuberculosis. My father was working as a billing clerk for American Express, and it didn't matter to him where he worked. To him, a job was a job. My grandmother bought a large old white frame house in Lincoln Heights, the poorest section of East Los Angeles. She thought a sanatorium was going to be built there, because the region was higher than the rest

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of the city and was considered good for people with respiratory ailments. Eleven people—my grandparents, my parents, my brother and I, and my mother's two brothers and three sisters—moved into this house. The neighborhood was predominantly Mexican, and when I started going to school there, I found I was the only white American. I was also younger than the other children in my class. All in all, I felt strongly that I was a member of a minority group. It made a listener out of me. I hung around bashfully, listening to what everybody else said, and I've been a very careful listener ever since.

Both my parents always worked, and so did my aunts and uncles. We had a fluid household; everyone came and went as he pleased. I'd come home from school and find only my grandmother there, cooking oyster stew or some other New England dish. I'd go out and hang around in the houses of our Mexican neighbors. Poor as they were, they had furniture and other possessions that they'd brought from Mexico, and I loved the way their homes looked—the velvet table scarves with hand-painted designs, and all the rest. There was always a strong, wonderful aroma of tortillas cooking in oil. I got to like their food better than oyster stew. My mother worked at the Platt Music Corporation, one of the leading music stores in Los Angeles, which carried everything from grand pianos to harmonicas. She was manager of the phonograph-records department, and was the foremost authority on records in town. That was before the day of the disc jockey. Every record-company representative or song-plugger who came to town would get in touch with my mother. Sometimes she'd dress up in a beaded gown and pat me on the head and go off to attend a record-company convention at the Cocoanut Grove. A lot of important movie people bought records from my mother, and she knew their tastes. At home, we had a Victrola—one of the early models, with the big horn and the picture of a white puppy dog on it. Mother was a pianist, and could play just about everything. When I was seven, the family bought a second-hand upright piano for me to take lessons on. It cost seventy-five dollars, and had supposedly belonged to Russ Columbo, the singer. I took lessons for four years. There was always music in our house. Both of my uncles tried to play the mandolin. When I was fourteen, my parents took my brother and me and moved into a house in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. I still have a working knowledge of both Spanish and Italian. When

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felt strongly that I was a member of a minority group. It might  
be strange out of me I hung around hardly knowing to what group  
body else said, and I've been a very critical thinker ever since.

Both my parents always worked, and so did my two brothers and  
We had a full household, everyone came and went as they pleased. It  
came home from school and had only one responsibility: doing housework  
overseas or some other. I was a housewife. I did not go to school  
around in the house of our father's neighbors. But as they were  
they did housework and other housework that they'd brought from  
Mexico, and I loved the way their house looked—the white walls  
rooms with hand-painted designs and in the town. There was always  
a strong wonderful aroma of tortillas cooking in the kitchen. I  
looked better than other kids. My mother worked at the Pita Shop  
Corporation, one of the leading major hotels in Los Angeles, which  
turned everything from grand piano to furniture. She was in the  
part of the phonograph record department, and was the business  
authority on records in town. That was before the day of the  
radio. Every record company representative or representative who  
came to town would go in touch with my mother. Sometimes they'd  
stay up in a hotel room and get me on the phone and go on to  
attend a recording company at the Columbia House. A lot of  
important people would come from the studio and the  
city. I was there. At home we had a 7-11 store—one of the first  
when the big man and the picture of a white puppy dog and a flower  
was a picture and could show you about everything. When I was  
seven the family moved to a small apartment in the city. I was in the  
house on it. I was very happy and had a very good education.  
to Los Angeles. The night I was born in the city I was born in the  
was always there. In the night I was born in the city I was born in the  
city. When I was born, my parents took me to a hospital and  
and moved into a home in a first-class Italian neighborhood.  
I still have a working knowledge of both Spanish and Italian. When

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Next to Robert Preston, standing above Robert Preston  
and Robert Preston

I was born on June 3, 1915, in Newborn, New Hampshire. My  
full name is Robert Preston Preston. I was born in having young  
parents, Robert and Ruth Preston, who married before they  
were twenty-one. My father now works in the office of a cost  
living bureau in Los Angeles. I have one brother, Robert, Jr.,  
nearly two months younger than I am, who lives in Los Angeles.  
is married, has two children and works for a firm in Boston. When I  
was two years old, my parents moved from Newborn to California,  
and went to live in my maternal grandfather's home in Los Angeles.  
My grandfather was a strongly individual man and she had  
desired to move the whole family out to California for the sake of  
my grandfather's health. He was destined to have tuberculosis. My  
father, working as a billing clerk for American Express, and the  
family moved to him where he worked. To him, a job was a job. He  
grandfather bought a large old white house on the Lincoln Highway  
the neighborhood of East Los Angeles. For a while a station was  
going to be built there because the region was high. In the end



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I've had to play a Spanish or Italian role, I've never had a problem with the dialect, because I listened so carefully as a kid. Our neighborhood cobbler and barber had wonderful tenor voices. Mr. Bellin, our grocer, played the zither. On warm summer nights, all of us would get together, sitting around on front stoops, and play and sing. I learned to play the guitar and the trumpet, and to belt out arias from operas. I could sing "Vesti la Giubba!" from "Pagliacci," and the tenor part in the quartet from "Rigoletto." I also learned to sing "O Sole Mio" in both Sicilian and Neapolitan dialect. The only one in our family who is not musical is my father, who more or less goes for Lawrence Welk.

My mother always brought home the latest records and made the rest of us listen to everything she enjoyed, so I heard records of John Barrymore doing passages from Shakespeare long before I could appreciate them. Still, I always liked to listen. I began to prefer listening to records of music to playing my own. My mother started taking me to see plays, put on by touring companies, when I was about eight. She'd hear about the plays in the music store, and she decided that it was important for me to see them, even if I didn't know what they were all about. After school, I'd wait for Mother outside the music store, and when she got through work, off we would go. One of the shows I remember best is the original production of "Tobacco Road," with Henry Hull. When I was ten or eleven, I used to sit around for hours with the school janitor, a former Shakespearean actor, who was about seventy years old. He'd nail me after school and talk on and on about the theatre. I learned a lot from him. About the Broadway theatre in 1918, about the Hungary of Ferenc Molnár's time—things like that. My idea of homesickness isn't for a place to go back to; it's for all the things I've heard about or read about. There are times when I'm not sure whether some of my experience is my own or things I've read or heard about.

Almost every kid takes part in little school plays, and I did that, and also took part in little plays at the Episcopal Church. I started going to movies and vaudeville shows regularly when I was ten. Vaudeville teams—Kolb & Dill, for instance, and Weber & Fields—were in their heyday then. I'd watch them and learn their routines and then do imitations of them for the kids in the neighborhood. A number of us kept little black books of the jokes we heard in vaudeville. Ernie

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Sarracino, who was one of my friends all through school and is now a character actor, still has a fat collection of these jokes. I attended the Abraham Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, and each year, in my English class, I competed in the acting of passages from Shakespeare's plays. Class winners would compete with the winners in the other schools in the city. I had a great advantage, because I'd spent all that time listening to recordings of John Barrymore. I was Shakespearean champ of my school three times—as Julius Caesar, as Polonius, and as Hamlet. When I was a freshman, my English teacher was a man named E. J. Wenig, who also headed the school drama department. His love was Shakespeare, and he imparted his love of Shakespeare to me. He got me to play leads in Shakespearean productions and in "Clarence," "The Goose Hangs High," and a lot of other items in the Samuel French catalogue. E. J. really led me to share his own love of acting. I never thought about doing anything else. He was right for me, and I was an apt learner, and everything went smoothly. I took that for granted. E. J. knew about every acting group or theatre company in or near the city of Los Angeles. He had a sidekick named Hegner, who made our costumes at school and did our makeup. The living room of Hegner's apartment was filled with racks and racks of costumes. He could have outfitted the entire Old Vic Company with them. He and E. J. were both wonderful guys. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, but E. J. wasn't letting go. He told me about the Elizabethan Stock Company, a group headed by Patia Power, Tyrone's mother, which had come up to Los Angeles from San Diego. E. J. told me they were casting for some roles in "Julius Caesar." I was a pretty good Julius Caesar for my age, so E. J. took me over to the company director to read for the role. I had already reached my present height—six foot one. So I read for the role and got it. I played opposite Ty's mother. E. J. had always told me, "In doing Shakespeare, just remember your iambic pentameter." I remembered it, and I played the role for several weeks. I was paid about seven dollars a week, and then, for some sordid reason or other, the company folded.

In 1934, we were hit by the depression. My father lost his job. It never entered my head even then that I could do anything but act. E. J. had contacts all over, and he took me to the Jewish Forum, a theatre group putting on "He That Is Greatest"—a play about a

Stattin, who was out of my friends all through school and is now a character actor with a fat collection of these jobs. I attended the Abraham Lincoln High School in Los Angeles and each year, in my English class, I competed in the reading of passages from Shakespeare's plays. Class winners would compete with the winners in the other schools in the area. I had a great advantage, because I'd spent all that time studying to recordings of John Barrymore. I was Shakespeare-minded. One of my school friends—Julius Caesar, as Polonius and Hamlet. When I was a freshman, my English teacher was a man named E. J. Wright, who also headed the school drama department. His love was Shakespeare, and he inspired the love of Shakespeare in me. He got me to play leads in Shakespearean productions and in "The Good Man of Henley," and a lot of other plays in the summer. I never thought about anything else. He was right for me, and I was an apt learner, and everything went smoothly. I took that for granted. E. J. knew about every acting group or dramatic company in or near the city of Los Angeles. He had a sidekick named Heger, who made our costumes at school and did our makeup. The living room of Heger's apartment was filled with books and racks of costumes. He could have owned the entire Old Vic Company with him. He and E. J. were both wonderful guys. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, but E. J. wasn't leaving yet. He told me that the Elizabethan Stock Company, a group headed by Fats Waller, Tyron's mother, which had come up to Los Angeles from New York, E. J. told me they were casting for some roles in "Julius Caesar." I was a pretty good Julius Caesar for my age, so E. J. took me over to the company director to read for the role. I had already reached my present height—six foot one. So I read for the role and got it. I played opposite Ty's mother, E. J. had always told me, "In doing Shakespeare, just remember your tactile personality." I remember that, and I played the role for several weeks. I was paid about seven dollars a week, and then, for some selfish reason or other, the company folded.

In 1932, we were high in the department. My father told his job in never entered my head even then that I could do anything but act. E. J. had spoken all over and he took me to the Jewish Forum, a theatre group putting on "The Tenth Muse"—a play about a

I've had to play a Spanish or Italian role. I've never had a problem with the dialect, because I learned to carefully as a kid. Our neighborhood copier and barber had wonderful record voices. He called out great plays the entire day, summer nights, all of us would get together, sitting around a table, and play and sing. I learned to play the guitar and the trumpet, and to belt out what he sang. I could sing "Viva la Guardia," from "Foghorn," and the record part in the quartet from "Nightingale." I also learned to sing "O Sole Mio," in both Italian and Neapolitan dialect. The only one in our family who is not musical is my father, who more or less goes for a guitar with.

My mother always brought home the latest records and made the rest of us listen to everything she enjoyed, so I heard records of John Barrymore doing passages from Shakespeare long before I could reproduce them. Still, I always liked to listen to great listening records of music to playing my own. My mother started taking me to the plays, but on my touring companies, when I was about eight, she'd been about the plays in the mean time, and she decided that it was impossible for me to act them, even if I didn't know what they were all about. After school, I'd wait for Mother outside the music store, and when she got through work, off we would go. One of the shows I remember best is the original production of "Tobacco Road" with Henry Hall. When I was ten or eleven, I used to sit around for hours with the school janitor, a former Shakespearean actor, who was about twenty years old. He'd tell me after school and talk on and on about the theatre. I learned a lot from him. About the theatre way theatre in 1932, about the history of French Modernism—things like that. His idea of modernism isn't for a place to go back to for all the things I've heard about or read about. There are times when I'm not sure whether some of my experiences in my own or things I've read or heard about.

Almost every kid takes part in little school plays, and I did that, and also took part in little plays at the Episcopal Church. I started going to movies and vaudeville shows regularly when I was ten. Vaudeville teams—Kopf & Dill for instance, and Weber & Fields—were in their best years then. I'd watch them and learn their routines and then do imitations of them for the kids in the neighborhood. A number of us kept little black books of the jokes we heard in vaudeville, some

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modern-day Robespierre. The star was a famous old professional character actor named Josef Swickard. He was so old he couldn't hear, and he took his cues by reading lips. Eventually, he committed suicide, jumping off the big "HOLLYWOOD HILLS" sign. Each letter was as big as a building, and I think he jumped off the "D." The play was so far to the left that it was practically anarchistic, but I never asked who was behind it, or even who had written it. My only concern was that my part, that of a young anarchist, was good and I was allowed to play it. From that point on, I began to mingle with all kinds of bohemian and semi-bohemian groups, and also with a lot of wealthy people living in Hollywood Hills who wanted to sponsor plays. I'd go along with groups giving auditions at some of the luxurious homes of wealthy people to raise money for plays. We'd be served a good lunch, take a swim in the pool, and spend some time lying around in the sun, and then we'd do our stuff. It felt good to me just to get out on the lawn and show what I could do.

Then my father went to work for the W.P.A. in San Bernardino, putting up high-tension lines for the government, at much lower pay than he'd been getting, so I had to buckle down and get a job to help out at home. I became a clean-up man at Santa Anita Park, picking up cigarette stubs and sweeping the aisles in the mornings, and parking cars for the patrons in the afternoons. I got ten dollars a week, plus tips. Will Rogers would always give a good tip, and Clark Gable was always a cinch for fifty cents. That was big money in those days, and the other parking attendants would fight with me to get him. He always flipped the coin to me. I spent two seasons at the race track, and toward the end of that time I started going along with some members of my clean-up crew who were rehearsing for readings for plays at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, not far from the race track. There were no performances at the Playhouse on Sunday, and open readings were held then. A director and actor named Thomas Browne Henry gave me my first chance to read. After that, I got one small part after another at the Playhouse. I kept my job at the race track for a while, but finally the acting crowded it out. The Pasadena Community Playhouse and the Pasadena School of the Theatre consisted of five theatres: the Playbox, which was probably the first theatre-in-the-round in the country; the Junior Stage and the Senior Stage, which were used mostly by junior and senior

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students, respectively, in the Playhouse School of the Theatre; the Laboratory Theatre, for trying out new playwrights; and the Main Stage, the largest, which was used primarily by established actors and postgraduates. The community gave the Playhouse wonderful support. I was one of the established actors, and the Main Stage was my hangout. The big ambition of the students at the Pasadena School of the Theatre was to be cast in a play with established actors at the Main Stage. In 1940, I married one of those students, Catherine Feltus, who had come to the school from Indiana. We had met three years earlier in T. S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral," when I played one of four knights and Catherine was one of twelve members of the speaking chorus. Thomas Browne Henry played the Archbishop. Then we acted together in "Night Over Taos," by Maxwell Anderson, in which I played the heavy and Catherine played the ingénue. My wife and I have always had a special feeling for the Pasadena Playhouse. In 1946, we went back there together for a summer festival of its greatest hits and played in Victor Jory's version of David Belasco's "The Girl of the Golden West;" Catherine took the leading part of the girl and I was the bandit.

After we were married, Catherine had no burning ambition to keep on acting, so we decided to have just one career in the family. My wife enjoys what I do. We live in an old converted carriage house on two and a half acres of land in Rye, New York, on Long Island Sound. We take care of the grounds ourselves, and we enjoy our privacy. I have my own woodworking shop, and my wife is an excellent cook. We have no children. Catherine's judgment of plays and movie scripts is unusually good, and I depend on her opinions. We may argue about the merits of a script, but I've never done anything she hasn't approved of.

In the spring of 1938, when I was playing the part of Harry Van, singing and dancing, in Robert E. Sherwood's "Idiot's Delight," at Pasadena, a Paramount lawyer named Sidney Justin, who lived in Pasadena and saw most of our plays, suggested that I try out for the movies. Everett Crosby, Bing's brother, who knew my mother and was sort of my agent, took me to see a talent expert at Paramount. The talent man took one look at me and said to Everett, "I told you to stop bringing me truck-drivers." So I went home and decided to forget about the movies. But the next day I received a call from the executive

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After we were married, Catherine had no burning ambition to keep on acting, so we decided to have just one career in the family. My wife enjoys what I do. We live in an old converted carriage house on two and a half acres of land in West New York, on Long Island Sound. We take care of the grounds ourselves, and we enjoy our privacy. I have my own bookkeeping shop, and my wife is an excellent cook. We have no children. Catherine's judgment of plays and movie scripts is unusually good, and I depend on her opinion. We may argue about the merits of a script, but I've never done anything she hasn't approved of.

In the spring of 1938, when I was playing the part of Harry Van Houten and dancing to Robert E. Shaw's "Black, White, and Tan" in Paramount's Paramount, I met a woman named Susan, who lived in the Playhouse and gave me one of our plays. I try out for the movie "Fanny Brice," Bing's brother, who knew my mother and was sort of my agent, took me to see a talent expert at Paramount. The talent man took one look at me and said to Everett, "I told you to stop bringing me trouble-makers." So I went home and decided to forget about the movie. But the next day I received a call from the executive

modern-day Robespierre. The man was a famous old professional character actor named Jack Swartz. He was so old he couldn't hear and he took his cues by reading the. Eventually, he convinced me that jumping off the big "MOLLYWOOD HILLS" sign. Each letter was as big as a building, and I think he jumped off the "D." The play was so far to the left that it was practically unwatchable, but I never asked who was behind it, or even who had written it. At only sixteen was I that my part, that of a young anarchist, was good, and I was allowed to play it. From that point on, I began to mingle with all kinds of celebrities and semi-celebrities, and also with a lot of wealthy people living in Hollywood Hills who wanted to sponsor plays. I got along with groups giving readings in some of the luxurious homes of wealthy people to raise money for plays. We'd be served a good lunch, take a swim in the pool, and spend some time lying around in the sun, and then we'd do our stuff. It felt good to me, but I got out on the lawn and show what I could do.

Then my father went to work for the W.P.A. in San Bernardino, putting up high-rented flats for the government, so much lower pay than he'd been getting, so I had to bubble down and get a job to help out at home. I became a chauffeur, as in Santa Anita, but picking up cigarette stubs and washing the dishes in the morning and parking cars for the patrons in the afternoon. I got ten dollars a week plus tips. Will Rogers would always give a good tip, and Cliff Gable was always a pinch for fifty cents. That was big money in those days, and the other parking attendants would fight with me to get him. He always tipped the coin to me. I spent two seasons at the two weeks and toward the end of that time I started going along with some members of my class-up crew who were rehearsing for readings for plays at the Playhouse Community Playhouse, not far from the main track. There were no performances at the Playhouse on Sunday, and open readings were held then. A director and actor named Thomas Browne Henry gave me my first chance to read. After that I got one small part after another at the Playhouse. I kept my job at the race track for a while, but finally the acting overtook it and The Playhouse Community Playhouse and the Race Track School at the Theatre cancelled all the theatre, the Playhouse, which was probably the first theatre-in-the-round in the country, the Junior Stage, and the Senior Stage, which were used mostly by junior and senior

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producer of B pictures at Paramount, asking me to come back for a test, which I did—the day after that. It turned out that there was a feud going on between the producer of B pictures and the talent man, and the producer wanted to use me to prove that the talent man was incompetent. For my test, I did a comedy scene from "Idiot's Delight" and a Killer Mears sequence from "The Last Mile." I did tests all day long. The result was the best thing I've ever done for the movies. I wound up with a contract for six months, with options, at a hundred dollars a week. The producer of B pictures had proved something or other, and the talent man was fired. But I wasn't given anything to do. Paramount might have forgotten all about me and dropped my option after six months, but I decided not to just sit around waiting. I did another show at Pasadena. Whenever actors talk about how important it is to be in the right place at the right time, I always think it is better to be in *some* place at *some* time, doing *something*. Late in 1938, I heard that Robert Florey, Paramount's best cameraman, was going to direct a movie called "King of Alcatraz," with J. Carrol Naish, and was looking for someone to play a sailor. I went after the part and got it. Lloyd Nolan and I played two sailor buddies, brash young guys, on leave. It was a good part for me, and I was lucky to have a good man to act with. Nolan is generous and kind, both as a man and as an actor. We spent eighteen days shooting the film. By the second day, I felt so much at home I forgot all about the camera. B pictures in those days were very much in demand. Very often, people going to a double-feature bill, which was the usual thing, would like the B movie better than the more expensive A movie. Many of the B products had very good actors and turned out to be sleepers. People would sit through the A and enjoy the B. For me, the acting in the movies was the same kind of acting I'd always done. The main difference was that I had to learn how to stay within range of the camera. Acting wasn't a big problem then, and, actually, I've never made a big problem of it. In the early days, there was nothing to fear. You'd usually have another movie to make after you'd finished one. In my early movies, there wasn't much difference between me and my parts. In "King of Alcatraz," Lloyd Nolan and I were rivals for the hand of Gail Patrick; we went ashore, went to a bar, got drunk, returned drunk to our ship, and were chewed out by the captain, played by Harry Carey. As an actor, I was simply the author's means of getting

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to an audience. I knew what my character said and thought and did, because I knew what I said and thought and did.

My second movie, "Illegal Traffic," had me cast as a criminal. In my third, "Disbarred," again starring Gail Patrick, I was an assistant district attorney. My next one was "Union Pacific," with Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea, and in that one I got started playing the role of a charming Western rascal. I've played all kinds of villains in the twenty-four years I've spent acting in movies. Very often, I've found it more satisfying to play villains than to play heroes. I made four movies with Alan Ladd—"This Gun for Hire," "Wild Harvest," "We Are All Heroes," and "Whispering Smith." I understood and enjoyed all the villains I played. The only villain I ever refused to play was the one in the Cecil B. deMille picture "Unconquered," because the part had no shadings; he was just a villain. After my villain period, I made about a dozen other movies in fairly quick succession, including "Beau Geste," in which I was one of three brothers—Gary Cooper and Ray Milland were the others—who joined the French Foreign Legion, and I got to play a bugle and die in the end; "Moon Over Burma," in which I was on a teak plantation somewhere east of Rangoon, fighting with Preston Foster over Dorothy Lamour; and deMille's "Northwest Mounted Police," with Gary Cooper and Madeleine Carroll, in which I was in love with Paulette Goddard. Then, there was "Reap the Wild Wind." One sequence was an old ship on the high seas. John Wayne and Paulette Goddard were on the ship, along with Raymond Massey, the chief heavy, and me, the assistant heavy, who were interested in the ship's cargo in an underhanded way. About the only role I've ever played that I didn't believe in but let myself be talked into doing was in "Typhoon," with Dorothy Lamour. She wore a sarong, and I had to wear one, too. It didn't feel right. It embarrassed me. I played a rum-soaked rotter left on an island by mutinous members of a pearl-fishing expedition, and was discovered by a beautiful maiden. I didn't like any of that. The only reason the movie was called "Typhoon" was that another company had already made one called "Hurricane." I received the most fan mail for "Typhoon" I had ever got in my life. It made me wonder. In 1942, soon after making "Reap the Wild Wind," I went into the Army as a private. I eventually served as a captain in Army Air Force Intelligence, in the European theatre of war, and I came out in 1945.

to an audience. I knew what my character said and thought and did, because I knew what I said and thought and did.

My second movie, "Hogan's Heroes," had me cast as a criminal. In my third, "Dillinger," again starring Gail Patrick, I was an assistant district attorney. My next one was "Union Pacific," with Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea, and in that one I got started playing the role of a charming Western hero. I've played all kinds of villains in the twenty-four years I've spent acting in movies. Very often, I've found it more satisfying to play villains than to play heroes. I made four movies with Alan Ladd—"This Gun for Hire," "Wild Harvest," "We Are All Women," and "Kings of Alcatraz." I understand and enjoyed all the villains I played. The only villain I ever refused to play was the one in the Carl B. DeMille picture "Uncompromised," because the part had no shading; he was just a villain. After my villain period, I made about a dozen other movies in fairly quick succession, including "Born Again," in which I was one of three brothers—Gary Cooper and Ray Milland were the other two—who joined the French Foreign Legion, and I got to play a boyie and die in the end. "Moon Over Borneo," in which I was on a test plantation somewhere east of Saigon, right along with Preston Foster over Dorothy Lamour and Dennis Morgan. "Kings of Alcatraz," with Gary Cooper and Michael C. Carr, that was in love with Patricia Goddard. Then, there was "Rage the Wild Wind." One sequence was an old ship on the high seas. John Wayne and Patricia Goddard were on the ship along with Raymond Massey, the chief heavy, and me, the reluctant heavy. We were interested in the ship's cargo in an understated way. About the only role I've ever played that I believe in but let myself be talked into doing was in "Typhoon," with Dorothy Lamour. She wore a satiny and I had to wear one, too. I didn't feel right, it embarrassed me. I played a time-worned sailor, let on an island by numerous members of a pestiferous expedition, and was discovered by a beautiful maiden. I didn't like any of that. The only reason the movie was called "Typhoon" was that another company had already made one called "Typhoon." I received the most fan mail for "Typhoon." I had ever got in my life. It made me wonder. In 1947, soon after making "Rage the Wild Wind," I went into the Army as a private. I eventually served as a captain in Army Air Force Intelligence in the European theatre of war, and I came out in 1945.

producer of B pictures at Paramount, asking me to come back for a part which I did—the day after that. It turned out that there was a feud going on between the producer of B pictures and the talent man, and the producer wanted to use me to prove that the talent man was incompetent. For my part, I did a comedy scene from "Hogan's Heroes" and a killer scene from "The Last Mile." I did that all day long. The result was the best thing I've ever done for the movie. I wound up with a contract for six months, with options, at a hundred dollars a week. The producer of B pictures had proved something or other, and the talent man was dead. But I wasn't given anything to do. Paramount might have forgotten all about me and dropped my option after six months, but I decided not to put it around waiting. I did another show at Paramount, Westerns, and talk about how important it is to be in the right place at the right time. I always think it is better to be in some place at some time doing something. Late in 1945, I heard that Robert Florey, Paramount's best cameraman, was going to direct a movie called "Kings of Alcatraz," with J. Carrol Nash, and was looking for someone to play a sailor. I went into the part and got to know Nolan and I played two killer buddies, both young guys, on leave. It was a good part for me, and I was lucky to have a good man to act with. Nolan is generous and kind, both as a man and as an actor. We spent eighteen days shooting the film. By the second day, I felt as much at home as home. I forgot all about the camera. B pictures in those days were very much in demand. Very often, people going to a double-feature bill, which was the usual thing, would like the B movie better than the more expensive A movie. Many of the B producers had very good actors and turned out to be sleepers. People would sit through the A and enjoy the B. For me, the acting in the movie was the same kind of acting I'd always done. The main difference was that I had to learn how to stay within range of the camera. Acting wasn't a big problem then, and actually, I've never made a big problem of it in the early days. There was nothing to fear. You'd usually have another movie to make after you'd finished one. In my early movies, there wasn't much difference between me and my partner. In "Kings of Alcatraz," Lloyd Nolan and I were both for the hand of Gail Patrick. We went about, went to a bar, got drunk, returned drunk to our ship, and were chewed out by the captain, played by Henry Jones. As an actor, I was simply the author's means of getting

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After the first blush of enjoyment at seeing myself on the screen, I gradually became more objective about myself. When I'd go to see myself in a movie, it would be almost like watching another actor. Luckily, I've never had a burning desire to exercise absolute control over what I do. Movies are the director's medium and his fun. It's the director who cuts and pastes and makes you come out one way or another. I've heard some directors say, "Give me So-and-So and let me shoot two hundred and fifty thousand feet of film and cut it the way I want to cut it, and I'll give you the performance." People in Hollywood still talk about the way John Ford took over Victor McLaglen in "The Informer" and got what he wanted out of that wonderful face. Generally, you have to trust your director, even though you know he makes mistakes. As a movie actor, you really have no choice. Still, it helps in the movies, as well as on the stage, when you work with actors who know exactly what they're doing. I loved working with Gary Cooper. People refer to Cooperisms and Cooper tricks, but I always found him to be a tremendous actor. In "Beau Geste," I was supposed to discover him dead. I was so convinced by his acting that I kept saying, "Speak to me, Coop! Speak to me." I wasn't bored while I was making most of my movies, because there was always some little thing I could do with a part. My first movie after I got out of the Army was "Wild Harvest," in which I played a member of Alan Ladd's wheat-harvesting gang. After that, I did two and occasionally three movies a year, including "The Macomber Affair"—based on Ernest Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"—in which I played Francis Macomber, and Joan Bennett, who played my wife, shot me instead of a lion, because she was in love with the guide, played by Gregory Peck; "Blood on the Moon," with Robert Mitchum and Barbara Bel Geddes, in which I was a Western heavy again; and "Big City," in which I played a Protestant minister, Danny Thomas played a cantor, and George Murphy played an Irish Catholic cop, and we all became fathers to Margaret O'Brien, a foundling. As Thomas's mother, Lotte Lehmann sang "God Bless America." Some of my later Westerns were "Tulsa," with Susan Hayward a female wildcatter, in which I helped her bring in a gusher; "The Sundowners," in which I was a talented heavy who sang and played the guitar; "My Outlaw Brother," in which I played a Texas ranger; and "Best of the Badmen," in which I framed Robert Ryan on a murder

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charge as a reward-hungry detective. In "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" episode of the film "Face to Face," I was a small-town sheriff; in "The Last Frontier" I was a colonel at an old Western fort, and Anne Bancroft, hidden under a blond wig, played my wife; in "How the West Was Won" I was a wagon master in Cinerama, and everything that had ever happened in any other Western ever made happened again, good or bad—wagon trains crossing the country, fights with Indian tribes, camping out, and vying with Gregory Peck for the hand of Debbie Reynolds. I had sporadic relief from Westerns in "When I Grow Up," in which a little boy thought his parents were too severe and ran away from home, and I was his father who drove out into a storm to find him and later died of pneumonia trying to show the boy that he loved him; and also in "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," with Dorothy McGuire as my wife, in which I was a harness salesman who lost his job because of the horseless carriage. In 1961, I made the movie version of "The Music Man," playing the role I created on Broadway—the con man selling musical instruments to the townspeople of River City, Iowa, and getting his foot caught in the door for the first time in life because he'd fallen in love with the local music teacher.

By 1951, I'd begun to feel I was in a casting rut. I wasn't under contract to any studio, so I came to New York to do some television. Then I was offered a part in an English film called "Cloudburst," and I grabbed the chance to work in England. While I was there, I somehow began to feel more confidence in myself as an actor, and when my wife and I returned to New York, it seemed to me that the city was teeming with vitality, and we decided to stay here. Since then, I have appeared in ten plays. The first of them was a revival of Ben Hecht's and Charles MacArthur's "Twentieth Century," in which I replaced José Ferrer as Oscar Jaffe, in 1951. After that, I opened as Joe Ferguson in a revival of "The Male Animal" at the City Center, with Elliott Nugent and Martha Scott, and we were such a hit that we moved to Broadway and played there for the next eight and a half months. I then played in "Men of Distinction," by Richard Condon, a flop that closed after four performances; in "His and Hers," by Fay and Michael Kanin, with Celeste Holm; "The Magic and the Loss," by Julian Funt, which was another flop; "The Tender Trap," by Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith, with Kim Hunter; "Janus," by Carolyn Green,

strange as a contemporary document in "The Birds Come to Yellow Sky" episode of the film "Tomb Raider". I was a small-town sheriff in "The Last Frontier". I was a colonel in an old Western film, and Anne Bancroft, hidden under a blood-red wig, played my wife in "How the West Was Won". I was a wagon master in "Guns, Sails, and Everything That Had Ever Happened in Any Other Western Ever Made Happened Again", good or bad—wagon trains crossing the country, fights with Indian tribes, camping out, and vying with Gregory Peck for the hand of Debbie Reynolds. I had sporadic roles from Westerns to "When I Grow Up", in which a little boy thought his parents were too severe and ran away from home, and I was the father who drove out into a storm to find him and later died of pneumonia trying to show the boy that he loved him and also in "The Day at the Top of the Stairs", with Dorothy McGuire as my wife, in which I was a barman who refused to let his job become of the barman's wife. In 1961, I made the movie version of "The Music Man", playing the role I created on Broadway—the con man selling musical instruments to the townspeople of River City, Iowa, and getting his foot caught in the door for the first time in his career held light in love with the local music teacher.

By 1961, I'd begun to feel I was in a creative rut. I wasn't under contract to any studio, so I came to New York to do some television. Then I was offered a part in an English film called "Cloudburst", and I grabbed the chance to work in England. While I was there, I somehow began to feel more confident in myself as an actor, and when my wife and I returned to New York, it seemed to me that the city was coming alive again, and we decided to stay here. Since then, I have appeared in ten plays. The first of them was a revival of Ben Hecht's and Charles MacArthur's "Twentieth Century", in which I replaced Joe Fortes as Oscar Jaffe. In 1961, after that, I opened as Joe Fortes in a revival of "The Music Man" at the City Center, with Ethel Mergent and Martin Scott, and we were such a hit that we moved to Broadway and played there for the next eight and a half months. I then played in "Men of Distinction", by Richard Gordon, a play that closed after four performances in "His and Hers", by Fay and Michael Katin, with Colleen Holmes. "The Magic and the Love", by Julian Bond, which was another flop. "The Tender Trap", by Mark Shalman, and Robert Paul Smith, with Kim Hunter. "Juno", by Carolyn Green,

After the first blush of enjoyment at seeing myself on the screen, I gradually became more objective about myself. When I'd go to see myself in a movie, it would be almost like watching another actor. Luckily, I've never had a burning desire to exercise absolute control over what I do. Movies are the director's medium, and his fan. It's the director who cuts and pastes and makes you come out one way or another. I've heard some directors say, "Give me 20 minutes and let me shoot two hundred and fifty thousand feet of film and out it the way I want to cut it, and I'll give you the performance." People in Hollywood still talk about the way John Ford took over Victor McLaglen in "The Informant", and you know what he turned out of that wonderful face. Generally, you have to trust your director, even though you know he makes mistakes. It's a movie scene, you really have no choice. Still, it helps in the matter as well as on the stage when you work with actors who know exactly what they're doing. I loved working with Gary Cooper. People refer to Cooper as the "Cooper myth", but I always found him to be a real human being. In "Red Gears", I was supposed to discover him dead. I was so convinced by his acting that I kept saying, "Thank you very much, Cooper, you're a man." I was making most of my money, because there was always some little thing I could do with a part. My first movie after I got out of the Army was "Wild Harvest", in which I played a member of Aldo Ladd's wilderness gang. After that, I did two and occasionally three movies a year, including "The Absent-Minded Waiter"—based on Ernest Hemingway's story "The Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs"—in which I played Ernest's brother and John Bonarville. He played my wife and was married to a lion because she was in love with the giant played by Gregory Peck. "Blood on the Moon", with Robert Mitchum and Barbara Bel Geddes, in which I was a Western heavy again, and "Big City", in which I played a Protestant minister. Danny Thomas played a cantor, and George C. Scott played an Irish Catholic cop, and we all became fathers to Margaret O'Brien's foundling. As Thomas' mother, Louise Latham sang "God Bless America". Some of my later Westerns were "Tomb Raider" with Susan Hayward as the male villain, in which I helped her bring in a grader. "The Gun Downers", in which I was a talented heavy who sang and played the guitar. "My Outlaw Son", in which I played a young cowboy and "Ben of the Badland", in which I learned Robert Ryan on a murder.

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with Margaret Sullayan—later replaced by Claudette Colbert and Imogene Coca—which played for two hundred and fifty-one performances; and “The Hidden River,” by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, with Lili Darvas. I also made appearances in Philadelphia one summer in “Boy Meets Girl” and “The Front Page.”

When I’m on the stage, the one thing I never lose sight of is that I’m an entertainer first of all. When I replaced José Ferrer in “Twentieth Century,” I went to see him in the show the last night he played it. I realized that he was a powerhouse in the role, and that there were certain things he had established in the part that I couldn’t change. I had to play almost an imitation of him, because the others in the cast were so dependent on every little thing he did. If I had changed things, it would have thrown the whole show off. My main obligation was to see to it that the audience was entertained. However, in December of 1957 I created the role of Harold Hill in “The Music Man” on Broadway. He’s my character. Other actors may be playing him in musical tents across the country for the next ten years, but I have the satisfaction of knowing that I created him. I played Harold Hill for two years and one month, which was the longest run I’d ever been in. It was also the first musical comedy I’d ever done. When the author and composer and lyricist, Meredith Willson, and the producers, Kermit Bloomgarden and Herbert Greene, started looking for someone to play the part, they tried several well-known musical-comedy performers and found that each one wanted to add something of his own to each scene—something characteristic. So they started getting actors to read for the role. At the time, I was doing “Boy Meets Girl” in Philadelphia. One night after the show, Kermit Bloomgarden came backstage and asked me if I’d like to try out for the lead in “The Music Man.” It didn’t surprise me in the least to have this visit from Bloomgarden; I’m never surprised to see him in the audience anywhere in the country. I found the part of Harold Hill very comfortable to fit into. After the kind of training I’d had as a kid, the songs in “The Music Man” seemed simple and easy to do. The minute I hit the opening number for Willson, he loved it. Harold Hill was just right for me. He was a slugger, a one-punch guy, not the kind of fellow who has to pile up points in round after round. I thoroughly enjoyed being in “The Music Man.” I knew I was in a hit, and it gave me a feeling of security, which must have shown up in my performance. Playing to

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an audience coming to see a comedy has certain advantages. They come expecting to laugh, so they help you do the part. You don’t have to work so hard to get them. But you have to play each show as a separate performance; there’s no way of tape-recording what you did the night before. I never allowed my performance to become mechanical.

If you face each new character you play with new understanding, you become a better actor. When I begin learning a part, I don’t know exactly what I’m going to do until rehearsals start. I use externals a lot in creating a character. If you have to play an old man, you put on an old man’s underwear and a shawl, and sit in a rocker, and, by God, you’re going to feel like an old man. If I’m aware of a feeling of discomfort in myself, I know there’s something wrong with me in the part. Sometimes talking to the director can help me overcome this feeling of discomfort. But I try not to think a lot or talk a lot about a role. Too much talking can kill it. You can talk a character right out of existence. Sometimes I lock myself in a room and go through a whole part in front of the only person I can’t lie to—myself. Starting from the fact that no matter what role I play, it has to be fun, untrammelled fun, I try to find out what’s wrong. One way or another, I get to feel comfortable in the part. I like to arrive at the theatre early. Usually, I can’t wait to go on. All the trepidation is just fine. A little nervousness simply adds to the excitement. All that kind of thing serves to bring the playing to its peak. I love actors, and I follow everything the other actors do. I go to most of the shows on Broadway. I find something good in every show. No show is all bad. I enjoy what I do, and feel lucky that I can do it.

an audience coming to see a comedy has certain advantages. They come expecting to laugh, so they help you to the part. You don't have to work as hard to get them. But you have to play each show as a separate performance. There's no way of rehearsing what you did the night before. I never allowed my performance to become mechanical.

It was late each new character you play with new understanding you become a better actor. When I began learning a part, I don't know exactly what I'm going to do until rehearsal time. I am extremely nervous about a character. If you have to play an old man, you put on an old man's undershirt and a bow tie, and in a locker, and, by God, you're going to feel like an old man. If I'm aware of a feeling of discomfort myself, I know there's something wrong with me in the part. Sometimes relating to the director can help me overcome this feeling of discomfort. But I try not to think a lot or talk a lot about a role. Too much talking can kill it. You can talk a character right out of existence. Sometimes I lock myself in a room and go through a whole part in front of the only person I can't lie to—myself. Starting from the fact that no matter what role I play, it has to be fun, uncommitted, fun, I try to find out what's wrong. One way or another, I get to feel comfortable in the part. I like to arrive at the theatre early. Usually, I can't wait to go on. All the excitement is just fun. A little nervousness simply adds to the excitement. All that kind of thing serves to bring the playing to its peak. I have never, and I follow everything the other actors do. I go to most of the shows on Broadway. I find something good in every show. No show is all bad. I enjoy what I do, and feel lucky that I can do it.

with Margaret Sullivan—later replaced by Claudette Colbert and Ingeborg Berg—each played for two hundred and fifty-one performances and "The Hidden River," by Rank and Augustus Cochrane, with Lili Darvas. I also made appearances in Philadelphia one summer in "Boy Meets Girl" and "The Firm Grip."

When I'm on the stage the one thing I never see right or is that I'm an entertainer part of all. When I replaced Lord Dunsany in "Seven Years' Goodbye," I went to see him in the show the last night he played. I realized that he was a powerhouse in the role, and that the way he did it was a powerhouse in the part. I couldn't change. I had to play almost an imitation of him, because the object in the part was to depend on every little thing he did. If I had changed things, it would have thrown the whole show off. My main obligation was to see to it that the audience was entertained. However, in December of 1937 I played the role of Harold Hill in "The Music Man" on Broadway. He's my character. Other actors may be playing him in musicals all over the country for the next ten years, but I have the satisfaction of knowing that I created him. I played Harold Hill for two years and one month, which was the longest run I'd ever been in. It was the first musical comedy I'd ever done. When the author and composer and lyricist, Meredith Willson, and the producer, Sam H. Broderman and Herbert Gold, started looking for someone to play the part, they tried several well-known musical-comedy performers and found that none wanted to add something of his own to each scene—something characteristic. So they started looking actors to find the role. At the time I was doing "Boy Meets Girl" in Philadelphia. One night after the show, Edmund Wilson, an actor, backstage and asked me if I'd like to be out on the road in "The Music Man." He didn't surprise me in the least to play him with Lord Dunsany. He never expected to see him in the audience any more in the country. I found the part of Harold Hill very comfortable to fit in. After the kind of training I'd had in a kind of song in "The Music Man," it was a simple and easy to do. The night I did the opening number for Willson, he loved it. Harold Hill was just right for me. He was a singer, a dancer, a comedian, the kind of fellow who fits in with the points in round after round. I thought of it and sang in "The Music Man." I knew I was in a bit, and it gave me a feeling of security, which must have shown up in my performance. Playing to