

The Unusual Case of HENRY FONDA

There was always a place for him in the theater, but they didn't want him to act

by JOEL EDWARDS

RECENTLY, at Madison Square Garden in New York, the Boy Scouts were about to put on an exposition, and they had asked one of America's best actors to buy the first ticket. He was supposed to drop by at 2 P.M. and pose with Scouts for news photographers.

Nobody expected the actor to arrive on time, since actors seldom do—except for their own performances. And this was an especially famous actor, just doing a favor for a group of boys.

Yet promptly at 1:50 P.M. the actor walked in, all alone, unaccompanied by press agent or admirers. Indeed, he appeared so unobtrusively that for a few minutes nobody even noticed him.

The Scouts, never dreaming that the great man would be so punctual, arrived red-faced at ten after two! Did they find the actor in a tantrum because he had been kept waiting? Not at all. They found him standing by patiently, willing to take all the time needed to make sure the pictures were right.

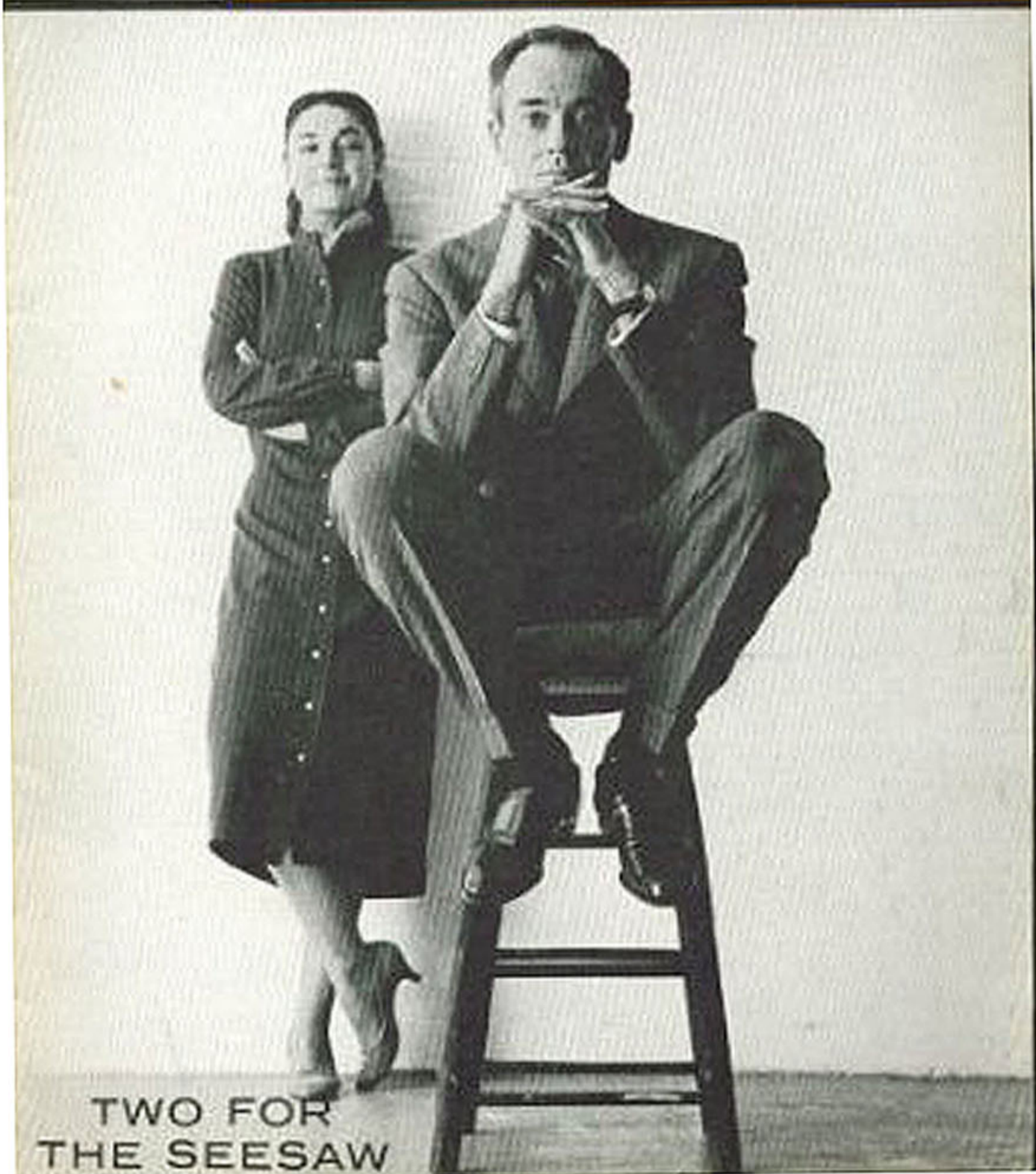
The actor was Henry Fonda, perhaps the most unusual man who



The Booth
Theatre

PLAYBILL

a weekly magazine for theatricians



ever made a movie or appeared on Broadway. Here is one actor who looks—and behaves—just like your neighbor next door. Despite his starring roles in 41 movies, and his tremendous success in such plays as *Mister Roberts* and *Point of No Return*, he is still essentially the bashful young man who left Nebraska twenty-odd years ago to seek his fortune in the theater.

He even looks like a serious, modest, self-effacing youngster from the Midwest. He is 47 now, but his face still has a boyish eagerness. His gangling six-foot frame is slim and lithe. He has no trouble, when called upon to play a 22-year-old during part of *Point of No Return*, in making the audience believe it.

In fact, Fonda has no trouble, whatever part he plays, in making the audience believe that the character on the stage is real. He himself has to believe in the roles, or he is unable to perform them. He never pretends; he *lives* his roles. He radiates a sincerity which goes across the footlights and into the heart. And it is this quality which audiences recognize and love.

Unlike most actors, Fonda hates to appear in public, make speeches or go on the radio. Broadway night life holds no attractions for him; his life outside the theater revolves around his home. His lovely young wife is the former Susan Blanchard, stepdaughter of Oscar Hammerstein II of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame. He has two children—Jane, 15, and Peter, 13—by a previous marriage.

When weather permits, the family lives in Huntington, Long Island, where a boat and fishing tackle are always available. Fonda drives into New York for his performances in faded old khakis left over from his

FONDA

wartime days in the Navy. Immediately after the show he dons the khakis and drives home again—often going out on an all-night fishing trip with Peter.

He is a man of many hobbies. He likes music and art galleries; he is himself an expert painter who spends hours at the easel. He is a fairly good sculptor. And he has enjoyed building model planes ever since he and Jimmy Stewart, while rooming together as struggling young actors, began doing it to fill long hours between jobs. In the baseball season he is an ardent New York Giant rooter.

FONDA first became a Broadway star in 1934, in a play called *The Farmer Takes a Wife*. Then he spent ten years in Hollywood, becoming one of the nation's top movie stars.

He has appeared in everything from a drawing-room drama to a Western. His own favorites are *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *Young Mr. Lincoln*. If he wanted to make another movie today, he could easily command \$250,000 for a single motion picture.

Hollywood, however, was not really for Fonda. He missed the thrill of being close to an audience, of living through the drama night after night. He wanted to *act*, day in and day out.

So as soon as he found the right play, Fonda left the easy money of Hollywood for the hard work of Broadway. The play was the famous *Mister Roberts*, in which he had the role of an idealistic young lieutenant aboard a Navy supply ship in the Pacific. It was a great show and Fonda gave a great performance,

Fort Apache (1948)



FONDA

reveling in the grueling job eight times a week.

As the play continued on its fabulous success—three years on Broadway, another year on the road—Fonda, instead of tiring, seemed to grow younger, trimmer and more enthusiastic by the day.

He was suffering at the time from a damaged leg tendon, result of an injury during his stint in the Navy. It caused considerable pain, but his doctor could never persuade him to take time out for an operation. Not until just before the road tour did Fonda consent to leave the play long enough for the operation—and then only because the doctor forbade him to make the trip without having it.

It may be that Fonda enjoys acting so much because the stage is the one place in the world where he feels completely at ease. In private life, he is painfully shy at times. He hates being the center of attention; he always stays in the background at parties.

“I get the same kick out of acting,” he says, “as I did out of playing cops and robbers when I was a boy. When I’m on the stage, I feel that I’m playing a game. I am someone else, not me at all. The audience isn’t looking at me—but at another person whose mask I am wearing.”

In preparing for a stage role, however, Fonda struggles and worries. He studies every smallest detail of the character he must play. While he was Mr. Roberts, he could have described in detail how the young Navy lieutenant would act in any conceivable situation.

FONDA WAS BORN in Grand Island, Nebraska; his family later moved to Omaha. His father owned a printing shop that never made much money. Young Henry had to work eight hours a day on the side while attending the University of Minnesota, and after two years, decided it would be better to drop out of school than kill himself.

He went back to Omaha and quite by accident found himself working with a Little Theater group. As soon as he had saved up \$150, he set off for New York and theatrical fame. But New York was not quite what he expected. Young actors were a dime a dozen and fame was elusive.

By good luck, he caught on with a Summer group known as the University Players, who operated one of the first summer theaters on Cape Cod. With the University Players, Fonda got a lot of experience but in



the Autumn, when the season's profits were prorated among the young actors, his share was only \$75—a pitiful stake with which to face cold Winters in New York.

Sometimes he earned a little by working as understudy for a Broadway star; often he made no money at all. In fact, it was hunger that accounted for what he still believes was his finest acting performance—put on for an audience of one in the dismal Depression year of 1933.

One morning, his eye came upon the words: WANTED: experienced florists to work during Easter rush. Goldfarb Flower Shops, 160 East 57th Street.

Fonda had never been inside a florist shop, but he hurried over to 57th Street. There he found himself in a line of 75 anxious men, moving slowly toward a door behind which Goldfarb was interviewing the applicants.

When he finally found himself in Goldfarb's presence, he knew that something spectacular was called for. Swallowing hard, he called upon every trick he had learned as an actor.

“Mr. Goldfarb, I won't try to deceive a man of your perception. I have never had any experience. Actually, I am an actor—but I realize now that there is no future in acting and I want to get into a new profession.”

(This was untrue. Fonda would rather have died than leave the theater.)

“Mr. Goldfarb, what I want most in the world is to become a florist.”

(Also untrue. The thought had never occurred to him.)

There was a lot more, all delivered with dramatic eloquence and appropriate gestures. Out of the 75 men, Goldfarb hired four. Fonda

FONDA

was one of them, and thus was able to keep body and soul together until the Summer theater season.

There were a few compensations for those early years of struggle, but not many. Once he was able to write home that he had talked to the great Tallulah Bankhead. What he did not say was that he had applied for the job as understudy in one of her plays, and had been summoned into her presence for an inspection. At the time, he looked even younger than his 28 years, and Miss Bankhead was not impressed.

"How old are you, sonny?" she asked haughtily.

Flustered, he blurted out the truth. "Twenty-eight."

"My friend," said the cynical Miss Bankhead, "you're a liar!"

Five years passed, during which Fonda vainly pursued success. One Summer, the best he could find was a job with a struggling little theater group in Surry, Maine. Was he to be leading man, or second lead, or even juvenile? By no means! His job was to drive a station wagon—picking up luggage and props.

To avoid being completely disregarded, Fonda began doing charcoal sketches of the actors and actresses, to be displayed outside the theater as advertisements. The lifelike sketches caught the eye of the producer. When the scenic designer walked off the stage one day in a temperamental huff, the producer quickly gave Fonda the job. For the rest of the season Henry was a little more contented, designing and painting sets.



The following Summer, he joined a group at Mt. Kisco, New York, and faithfully painted sets. Again he watched enviously from the audience while the actors performed.

But at last—as perhaps it must to anyone so dedicated to his work—the big chance finally came his way.

FONDA

In mid-season the producer faced an emergency. A Broadway star, scheduled at the theater for a week, was taken ill.

The theater would be dark for a week—unless some inexpensive substitute show could be found.

“How about it, Fonda?” the producer asked. “Do you know something we could do with just one set, and a cast of no more than four or five actors?”

Fonda thought fast. There was a play called *It's a Wise Child*, which he had once done with the University Players. It all took place in a living room, so that no scenery had to be shifted. It had only four big speaking parts, plus one important bit part involving an Irish iceman who appeared briefly near the beginning and again near the final curtain.

“Yes, sir,” said Fonda. “I know just the play. You'll only need two men and two women. There's another little bit part, but I know it so well that I can play it and save you the money for an extra actor.”

“Sold!” said the producer.

What Fonda had not said was that the part of the iceman, though small, was the feature of the play. The iceman had all the best lines; he was the one character who convulsed the audience.

As the iceman, Fonda drew the biggest laughs ever heard in the Mt. Kisco theater. His career as a scenic designer was over; his career as an actor was resumed.

Once he had his chance, in a place where important theater people could see him, there was no stopping him. A prominent actress named June Walker played a week at Mt. Kisco, saw him and was entranced. It just so happened that she was signed to appear on Broadway that Fall in *The Farmer Takes a Wife*—and nobody but Fonda would do as her farmer.

Fonda went to Broadway as the farmer and has been going onward and upward ever since.

As to where the career will go from here, no one knows. Fonda is always looking for another *Mister Roberts* and is loath to settle for anything less. If the playwrights will oblige him, he will perhaps create a whole gallery of memorable portraits. He may even return to the movies, but only on his own terms.

As one friend has said, “The movies will never get Fonda back by offering big money. But if an impoverished producer comes along with a great script that Fonda likes, you may see Henry work in Hollywood for room and board.”

FONDA

Meantime, he is happy working on Broadway and taking his plays around the country. It takes very little, beside his joy in his work, to keep this unusual actor happy.

One night recently, while his play was still in New York, a few people passing a music store on a quiet street not far from Broadway saw Fonda under circumstances that are typical for him—and almost unthinkable for most actors.

It was past midnight; the after-theater parties were just getting started; the nightclubs were warming up. Yet there stood Fonda, staring into a music-store window like any other man you might see. Nothing about his bearing indicated who he was. He looked in the window for several minutes, sighed contentedly and started home.

His day's work over, Henry Fonda had done a little window shopping and was heading back to his home, his family and his hobbies.

Coronet

Endless Variety in Stories and Pictures

March, 1953

p. 40



OldMagazineArticles.com