

This Day in History... January 8, 1912

Birth of José Ferrer

José Vicente Ferrer de Otero y Cintrón was born on January 8, 1912, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He won the first-ever Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play and was the first Hispanic actor to win an Oscar.

Ferrer's family moved to New York when he was two years old. He attended a Swiss boarding school and earned a bachelor's degree in architecture from Princeton University in 1933. He then studied Romance languages at Columbia University before embarking on a career in acting.

Ferrer first worked as a professional actor in 1934. The following year he worked as a stage manager for the Suffern Country Playhouse. He had his Broadway debut in 1935 in *A Slight Case of Murder*. Ferrer appeared in a number of plays over the next few years; some had long successful runs, and some only lasted a few performances. He appeared in *Stick-in-the-Mud* (1935), *Spring Dance*

(1936), *Brother Rat* (1936–38), *In Clover* (1937), *How to Get Tough About It* (1938), *Missouri Legend* (1938), *Mamba's Daughters* (1939), *Key Largo* (1939–40), *Charley's Aunt* (1940–41), and *Let's Face It!* (1943).

In 1942, Ferrer directed his first Broadway play, *Vickie*. From 1943 to 1944, he played Iago in *Othello*. The play ran for 296 performances, a record number for a Shakespearean play in the US. Ferrer took on perhaps his most famous role in 1946 – the title character in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. As solidier/poet Cyrano de Bergerac, he wore a fake nose several inches long, but played the role with devastating wit. His portrayal on both stage and screen was highly acclaimed. He won the inaugural Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play in 1947. He then won the Academy Award in 1950, making him the first Puerto Rican-born and first Hispanic actor to win an Oscar.

Ferrer was born in San Juan and was buried there in 1992.

Ferrer made the jump to films in 1948 with *Joan of Arc*, though he also continued to act and direct Broadway plays, many of which enjoyed long runs. Ferrer's next major role was as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in *Moulin Rouge* (1952). Ferrer was nearly a foot taller than the famous painter, whose leg growth had been stunted by a childhood accident. To compensate, Ferrer bent his legs back and strapped them to his body, playing the artist while "walking" on his knees. His dedication gained him another Oscar nomination in 1952.

Another memorable role had Ferrer playing drunken but passionate defense lawyer Lt. Barney Greenwald in the classic film *The Caine Mutiny* (1954). He also won two more Tony Awards as both actor and director for *The Shrike* (1952), and as director for *The Fourposter* (1951) and *Stalag 17* (1951–52). While Ferrer was famed for his leading roles, his brief appearance in the 1962 epic *Lawrence of Arabia* stands out. Although reluctant to play the part at first, Ferrer later called the five-minute role as a cruel Turkish bey (noble) his favorite performance.



*Ferrer donated his Best Actor Oscar from *Cyrano de Bergerac* to the University of Puerto Rico, but it was stolen in 2000.*



This stamp from the Distinguished Americans Series was issued for Ferrer's 100th birthday.



Ferrer was the first Puerto Rican actor to win an Oscar and a Tony.

Ferrer continued to act and direct plays and films into the 1990s. He also guest starred on several television shows and narrated the children's album *Tubby the Tuba*, which was nominated for the Best Recording for Children at the first Grammy Awards. He also narrated the first episode of *Bewitched* and a documentary on Roberto Clemente.

Ferrer was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 1981 and became the first actor to receive the National Medal of Arts in 1985. Suffering from colorectal cancer, Ferrer died in Florida on January 26, 1992.

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