

Paul Ford—He Found It's Never Too Late

He began acting at 40 after failing at everything else; now,
at 61, he's one of entertainment's biggest successes

By JACK RYAN

PAUL FORD is the balding actor with the perplexed expression and querulous voice, and you might say he came by both naturally.

Fate has dealt him a life no script-writer would dream up—and while it might amuse an audience, it only baffled Paul. He's 61 now, star of the Broadway comedy hit, "Never Too Late" (which also might be the title for his life story), and costar of the movie, "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World." Movie audiences first acclaimed him as the colonel in "Teahouse of the August Moon," and tv audiences remember him as another colonel in Phil Silvers' "Sergeant Bilko" show.

But at the age of 40, Ford was cooking fudge and peanut brittle in a Brooklyn apartment and selling it on used-car row during lunch time. His wife was working as a practical nurse. "Nell had to," he says. "How else could our five kids eat?"

At that time Ford never had acted professionally nor had any training for the stage. But an idea was slowly hatching. "I didn't mention it to Nell," he recalls nowadays. "She would have thought I was crazy."

One night in 1941 Nell Ford forced the issue. "You can get the job of superintendent of this building," she said. "It pays \$60 a month and free rent. For once we can feel secure." Security to Nell was a dead end to Paul who, despite a history of failures, was certain he'd "hit it big."

"No super's job for me," Ford said. "I'm going to be an actor. I'll be making \$100 a week soon."

"You're crazy," Nell said positively. Today Ford looks back and observes: "I respect my wife's opinions, but I don't let them interfere. I went and got an audition for radio under my full name, Paul Ford Weaver."

Nervous, he botched his first tryout. A producer's assistant scratched his name off the list. "Sorry, Mr. Weaver, no second chances," he said. Nobody at home was surprised at Pop's failures; that's the kind of guy he was.

In earlier years, Paul Ford's future had seemed bright enough. His father, a well-to-do Baltimore businessman, sent him to Dartmouth and envisioned an affluent career for him in law. Then his father's new soft drink, Gypsy Cola, went flat and so did the family fortune.



Ford left school to become a newspaper proof-reader. "Even today," the actor says sadly, "I find myself correcting typos in scripts." Next came a long-term job as chief of a group of traveling magazine salesmen. In 1923 Ford entered Horn's Department store in Altoona, Pa., and gave his magazine pitch to a pretty salesgirl. She in turn countered with some hard sell on perfume.

"That's how I met Nell," Ford reminisces. "It was a contest of selling wills, and I won!" Then that famous perplexed expression clouds his slack face. "But we ended up getting married, and she never did pay for the subscription."

Five children and about 12 years later, Ford was weathering the depression selling magazines in the Midwest. But traveling from city to city was no way to raise youngsters, now of school age, and Ford felt increasingly certain he was destined for bigger things—somehow, somewhere. "I just never knew where my talent was," he explains, "but anyway we moved to New York, settled down, and I looked around for my niche."

He was a gas-station attendant until his boss found it took him four hours to lubricate an automobile. ("I am very thorough," he says earnestly.) He was a nightwatchman in a Brooklyn garage until his supervisor caught him napping on truck seats placed on the floor for comfort. Next he decided to be a "serious writer."

"I teamed up with a fellow who was good with words. I would act out the story line, and he'd write it. We never sold anything, but I learned that I was better telling a story than trying to write it."

Frustration and failure played havoc with Ford's nerves and stomach, so he went to a psychiatrist. "You're always acting," the doctor said. "Why don't you be yourself? Go out on Long Island—do some farming—stop being somebody else."

Ford dismissed the farming advice, but the word acting intrigued him. "If I were always acting, I thought, why not get paid for it? But I hesitated, and I think it was because of my father. He had no use for actors. When he thought a man was no good, he'd say—'That one is an actor!' I still remember the disgust he put into the word."

Ford dabbled in small theater productions, became adept at puppeteering, and also learned that show-business people are just that—people, no better or worse than other people. He decided to take the plunge—and promptly sank.

A FEW DAYS after that first audition failure, however, Paul showed up at the studio again. This time he registered as Paul Ford. "Ever auditioned here before, Mr. Ford?" the assistant asked.

"No." As Paul points out, this was true. Mr. Ford hadn't auditioned, just Mr. Weaver. Paul got the job, and others followed.

"I never had stomach trouble or bad nerves again," Ford concludes.

Ford beat his own money-making prediction by earning \$300 a week within six months. Established as a radio performer, he next sought Broadway roles. "The fact that I had no experience didn't matter," he recalls. "Producers figured anybody my age *must* have experience and never questioned me. When I finally got a Broadway part, it was for \$85. I'll never forget the look on Nell's face when I told her I was dropping big radio money for that!"

Today he regularly rings the cash register in movies, television, and plays, and he and Mrs. Ford live in one of New York's glossiest New York co-operative apartments in the Greenwich Village area. Mrs. Ford's main interest is her 13 grandchildren; she doesn't share her husband's deep interest in the theater except, as Paul says, to "keep me informed on who is marrying who. Sometimes I suspect she might still think that superintendent's job was the best thing."

A placid man off stage, Ford riles slightly when people seem amazed that an "old man" of 40 should have taken on a whole new challenge. "There's a kind of tradition in this country," he says, "that after you finish school you shouldn't attempt to learn anything more. Your capacities are set, and you stick to them."

"I don't think there is any time in life when a person can't learn something new, develop a new talent. All you need is the nerve to do it and to forget that business about being 'too old.'"