

# Performer found 'Fame' he was looking for

By KAREN ROSEN  
Staff Writer

Ever wonder how those kids in *Fame* got away with a party every day in the school cafeteria? Were you jealous because you never had a "Hot Lunch Jam?" Actually, lunchtime was just a form of detention hall, but Mel Johnson Jr. wasn't complaining.

Johnson, who plays the roustabout Coe in PRC's current production of *Life on the Mississippi*, was senior class president at the High School of the Performing Arts in New York City.

"The school was in an old, dilapidated building," Johnson said. "They could only serve stone peanut butter sandwiches and gook soup, so they had to let us go out to lunch. To get us back into the building, they let us have a party every day. Each month a different kid was the DJ. You couldn't hear during lunch. It was absolutely wonderful."

For his crack at fame, Johnson had to go through the infamous auditions, and he picked out two monologues to blow the panel away. "Everybody picks the two most dramatic things they can find," Johnson said. "Either you're in the potter's field over a grave, or you have a 'brute force' piece where you're on your deathbed. Every kid did a ripping-the-hair-out scene."

Two senior students serve on the panel which judges auditions and act with the applicant in a scene as a part of the audition. "They're handed three scenes as they're waiting to go on," Johnson said. "It can be between two boys, two girls, or a girl and a guy. My entire time, no guy ever picked a scene with the opposite sex. They're junior-high students and don't feel the security to work with a girl."

If they think that's tough, next comes improvisation, when they have to talk about why they want to be in the theatre. If they just want to spice up their high school years, they've come to the right place. The High School of the Performing Arts turns even such hum-drum activities as fire drills into spectacles.

"We'd go out in the street and people would say, 'What kind of a school is this?' I used to come out dressed up like Winnie the Pooh. Or we'd be dressed as bunnies because we were doing animal impressions."

Johnson said that the school was half studio, half academic and all energy. "You could not fail," he said. "But you had to toe the line. After each semester, you constantly had the pressure going. With academics, there was always someone there to help. If you were expelled, heaven help it wasn't for math. But if you couldn't dance, you were gone."

In the case of the senior prom, the school said the students couldn't dance. But they ignored the decree. "Our prom was hysterical," Johnson said. "The school canceled it, but we threw it anyway. I said, 'I'm going to have one.' There was no theme, we just did the prom. We had it on a Thursday night and the school said we had to be in class the next day. So we went to class in our prom clothes and slept."

As president of that mutinous bunch, Johnson was supposed to organize the 10-year reunion. He was three years late. "We had a 13th-year reunion. The 10th slipped by and the 15th was too far away."

Of his classmates who didn't go into the theatre, some became doctors, assistant DA's, or started their own businesses. They have one thing in common: high visibility.

Johnson is probably the most visible of them all. He was featured in two Broadway musicals, *On the Twentieth Century* and *Eubiel*, and earned rave reviews for the latter. He has also appeared in several off-Broadway shows and — even farther from the Great White Way — in regional theaters all over the nation. For the soap opera addict, Johnson is a familiar face on *The Guiding Light*, *One Life to Live* and *All My Children*.

That's not to mention his numerous television commercials.

It looks like Mel Johnson Jr. got what everyone goes to the High School of the Performing Arts for: Fame.



Mel Johnson Jr. explains things to co-star John Daggan... a scene from new PRC show 'Life on the Mississippi'

Photo courtesy of Playmakers Repertory Company

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