

Spell heartthrob

Life

Written by Totel V. de Jesus

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It was two years ago when then 24-year-old **Felix Rivera** was described as "the new heartthrob of local theater," "theater's new golden boy," or, simply, the new "it" boy of local stage. The various labels, however flattering, terrified him.

"I was so terrified when I read these articles in the papers. I was a rookie. I was thinking, what if I don't do well? The expectations were so high," Rivera, giggling, tells the BusinessMirror in that voice that easily reminds us of puppets acting onstage.

We're at a rehearsal studio where the walls are mirrors, the kind of stimuli where people can easily fall prey to vanity, self-admiration and other narcissistic tendencies that the devil loves to thrive in. In a way, it encourages the sloppy and the slob to be conscious about one's physical appearance in all angles. Well, to have that heartthrob appeal.

But our golden boy seems oblivious to these stimuli, having become used to the attention of people and the devil. He embraced "fame" sometime in the last quarter of 2007, when he played the lead for Atlantis Productions staging of the Tony Award-winning musical *Avenue Q*, which had several reruns in 2008, including a 21-show stint in Esplanade Theater in Singapore.

It was a phenomenon, by local standards, and Rivera was

on top it.

Now, Rivera's rehearsing for Atlantis's newest production, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, where he plays one of the lead characters.

"There are nine characters, and all will take the spotlight. No one leads the show," explains Rivera, relaxed and not terrified at all.

The gods of Atlantis—directors Bobby Garcia and Chari Arespacochaga (musical staging)—are as relaxed as the ensemble that includes Cathy Azanza, Pheona Baranda, Johann de la Fuente, Rycharde Everley, Carla Guevarra-Laforteza, Noel Rayos, Thea Tadar Everley and Joel Trinidad.

"Felix is a very good actor and singer. I think he is one of the finest young actors for the stage we have today. He will definitely go places. He is also very professional," says Garcia, looking at the "it" boy of local theater now posing for the BusinessMirror photographer Rhoey Cobilla.

He is very much at ease with the camera.

"More important," Garcia adds, "we love him because he has this habit of coming to rehearsals wearing a shirt with the same color as the chairs." The heartthrob suppresses his laughter and instead flashes a killer smile that Rhoey captures for posterity.

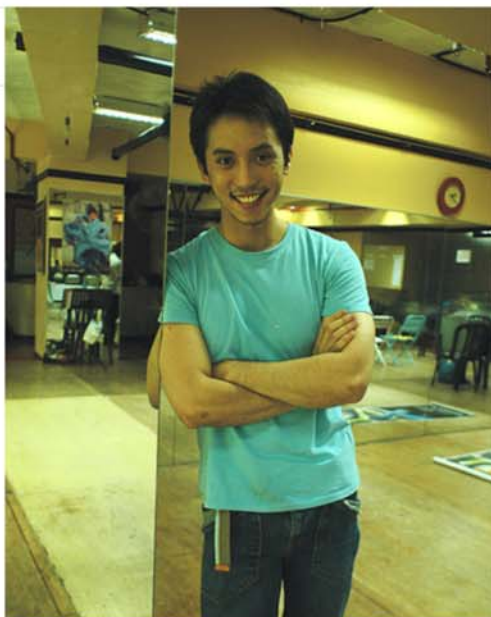
The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is another Tony Award-winning musical-comedy about six adolescents competing in a, well, spelling bee. Each has personal issues to resolve. The excitement also comes with the thought that it involves the audience, with some celebrity guests being called onstage to participate in the spelling contest.

FELIX RIVERA, still a certified heartthrob PHOTOGRAPHED BY RHOY COBILLA

"Every run, we'll invite two members of the audience and two celebrity guests. So this is going to be very exciting for those who will watch. No, we will not pick regular audience members in random. Prior to the show, we'll ask some people to volunteer," Garcia explains.

For Spelling Bee, Rivera plays Chip Tolentino, a Filipino-American Boy Scout and spelling champion. The character was played by Jose Llana in the Broadway version. Rivera describes Tolentino as intelligent and athletic, who is dealing with the realities of puberty.

How different is Tolentino from his dual roles in *Avenue Q*, he told Boy Abunda in an earlier interview. "The challenge with *Avenue Q*, aside from puppetry, was differentiating two roles. For *Spelling Bee*, the challenge is to create an organic character of a boy in



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puberty without trying too hard to act like a kid and end up irritating the audience."



Speaking of puberty, we found out that Rivera, though he studied in De La Salle-Greenhills, considered Angono, Rizal, as the biosphere he grew up in. He didn't join any spelling-bee contest when he was a child but the lakeside town where he learned to walk and speak has been helpful to his artistic growth.

Because of well-known visual artists like Carlos "Botong" Francisco and musicians like Lucio San Pedro, who lived there and heavily influenced the generations that followed, Angono has earned the title "Artists Village."

"There are paintings everywhere. For me it's such a nice town to grow up in, there's fresh air and there's nature all around you."

Rivera remembers the Masses celebrated and the processions during the Lenten season. He describes them as akin to major stage productions, especially the choral music. The streets were filled the now-famous giant puppets from Angono, simply called the *Higantes*.

"For many kids, going to church and joining the processions that follow could be boring and tiring, but for me, it was exciting because of the choir and the *Higantes*. In a way, yes, I guess, choral music influenced me." His mother, a school teacher-administrator, would also make him and his two sisters watch classic Broadway musicals at home. He also remembers watching plays by Repertory Philippines and considers *The King and I*, with Joy Virata, as an "eye-opener."

"I've seen the movie version before I saw the play and so when I saw real actors onstage, the feeling was really indescribable. Then again, I never imagined myself being an actor back then."

In De La Salle-Greenhills high school, Rivera was part of Kundirana, the famous choral group whose alumni include Gary Valenciano, Randy Santiago, Carlo Orosa and Ogie Alcasid, among others.

"I never imagined myself going to theater. I was a singer and I was supposed to be a medical doctor because my father is a doctor. I was supposed to continue the family tradition. But I was late for the entrance exam in the Ateneo [de Manila University], so I ended up taking economics in the University of Asia and the Pacific."

Still, Rivera was never a part of any theater group in college. A baritone who shifted to being a tenor, he was a member of the UA and P Chorale. He eventually founded Ignis Men's Chorale Manila, which became part of Freddie Santos's *II Divino The Musical*.

"The production that led me to the stage was Lam-ang the Musical, written by JB Capino and my mentor Von de Guzman. It was produced by Tanghalang Ateneo back in 2004. Their lead backed out; JB and Von asked if maybe I should try out for it and despite my objections, they convinced me in the end. That was the start of my theater life."

Rivera was soon appearing in various musicals like Trumpets' *Footlose* in 2005, which was directed by Arespacochoaga; and Stages' Joseph The Dreamer. He also acted for Tagalog musicals like Dulaang UP's *Basillica ng Malolos*.

"I made it a point to act in a Tagalog play once a year. Of course, I am a Filipino. I should be comfortable doing local plays."

Prior to *Avenue Q*, Rivera acted in *Fiddler on the Roof* by Repertory Philippines, playing the communist student. Last year he returned to Rep for its season-opener, the punk-gothic masterpiece that was *Hamlet*. He played Guildenstern, a minor role, but it didn't matter to him, coming in fresh from the Singapore run of *Avenue Q*.

"As the saying goes, there are no small roles, only small players. Actually, I heard that a lot from my fellow actors in Rep. And I totally agree," Rivera says, giggling at the thought that because many describe him as a theater heartthrob, he must always play the lead.

Getting thrust into the arms of fame via *Avenue Q* hasn't gotten into his head. When they were in Singapore, people on the street would approach and shake his hands for a job well done. Not surprisingly, around here theater aficionados and first-timers would always remember him as Princeton, the fresh college-graduate puppet who found his purpose in life.

Then again, around here a theater actor can ride taxis and the MRT without being mobbed or asked for autographs. Unlike in Singapore, nobody approaches theater actors and shake their hands if they are strolling in Glorietta or SM Mall of Asia. Not even if you're a Bart Guingona or a Michael Williams or a Leo Rialp. Unless you played Judy Ann Santos's alcoholic uncle or spoiled brat suitor, or Bea Alonzo's dying lolo, you'll be recognized by a few and, naturally, called by your character's name.

True enough, if people recognize Rivera, it's because of a TV commercial he did recently for an instant-noodle brand.

"Which is actually great. Because I'm just a regular guy when I am not doing theater. I'm with my family on Sundays. We eat out. *Ganun lang*. I go to the gym three times a week," says Rivera, whose aura radiates that of a man at peace with himself and the world.

As for his future plans, Rivera would like to study more about musical theater. He eyes a London school known for that genre. He also mentions about acting for film, out of curiosity, though he has no dream role yet.

Ah, film. The realm of Piolo Pascual and Dingdong Dantes.

And for the burning question that begs an answer: Is he still terrified if people refer to him as the theater heartthrob or the golden boy of local theater?

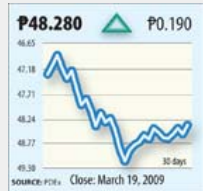
"Yes, yes and yes. Oh, and have I said yes? Yes."

***The Manila run of Spelling Bee marks Atlantis Productions' 10th anniversary, with set design by Tuxqs Rutaquio, lighting design by Johnsy Reyes, costume design by Twinkle Zamora, vocal coaching by ManMan Angsico and musical direction by Jojo Malferari. Spelling Bee runs from March 20 to April 4 at Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Makati. For tickets: Atlantis Productions, 892-7078 or 840-1187.

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