

# Calendar

## Tales from the Cryptic

### Edgar Allan Poe Night

**'T**here are rumors," the actor John Astin said by phone from Baltimore, "that Poe was crazy. People thought he was a drug addict, a scoundrel, a drunkard. They thought he was unethical. And we deal with most of that in the play, attacking the principal rumors of his life. As Poe himself says, 'In order to understand the truth, you have to go beyond mere facts.'"

Poe — Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) — is the subject of Astin's one-performer play that comes to San Diego this weekend.

#### LOCAL EVENTS

Once upon a midnight dreary,  
while I pondered,  
weak and weary,  
Over many

a quaint and curious volume of forgotten  
lore —

While I nodded, nearly napping,  
suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of someone gently rapping, rapping  
at my chamber door —

The rapper is, of course, the raven, central symbol (to use many an English teacher's favorite phrase) of Poe's famous poem.

Some of Poe's other greatest hits include "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Pit and the Pendulum." Inventor of the modern horror tale (Stephen King should thank him) and the science-fiction genre

(ditto the many practitioners of that form), Poe also created what we know today as the detective story.

As for Astin, he is best known for his role as Gomez Addams, Morticia's Latin lover/husband on the original TV series *The Addams Family* (1964–66).

Astin would seem to be out of his element in Baltimore. What was he doing there in mid-December instead of L.A., his home? The 73 year old had just finished his fourth semester as a visiting professor of drama and directing at Johns Hopkins University. It was a logical hire. Hopkins is Astin's alma mater (B.A., '52). His hirer was Poe scholar John Irwin, author of *Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytical Detective Story*.

It's also true that Baltimore is the place where Poe lived and died and where he is buried.

The son of minor stage actors, Poe was born in Boston. At age three, he was orphaned after his father abandoned him and his mother died of tuberculosis. A string of important women in his life would succumb to that disease, including his wife and first cousin, Virginia, whom he married when he was 27. She was 13.

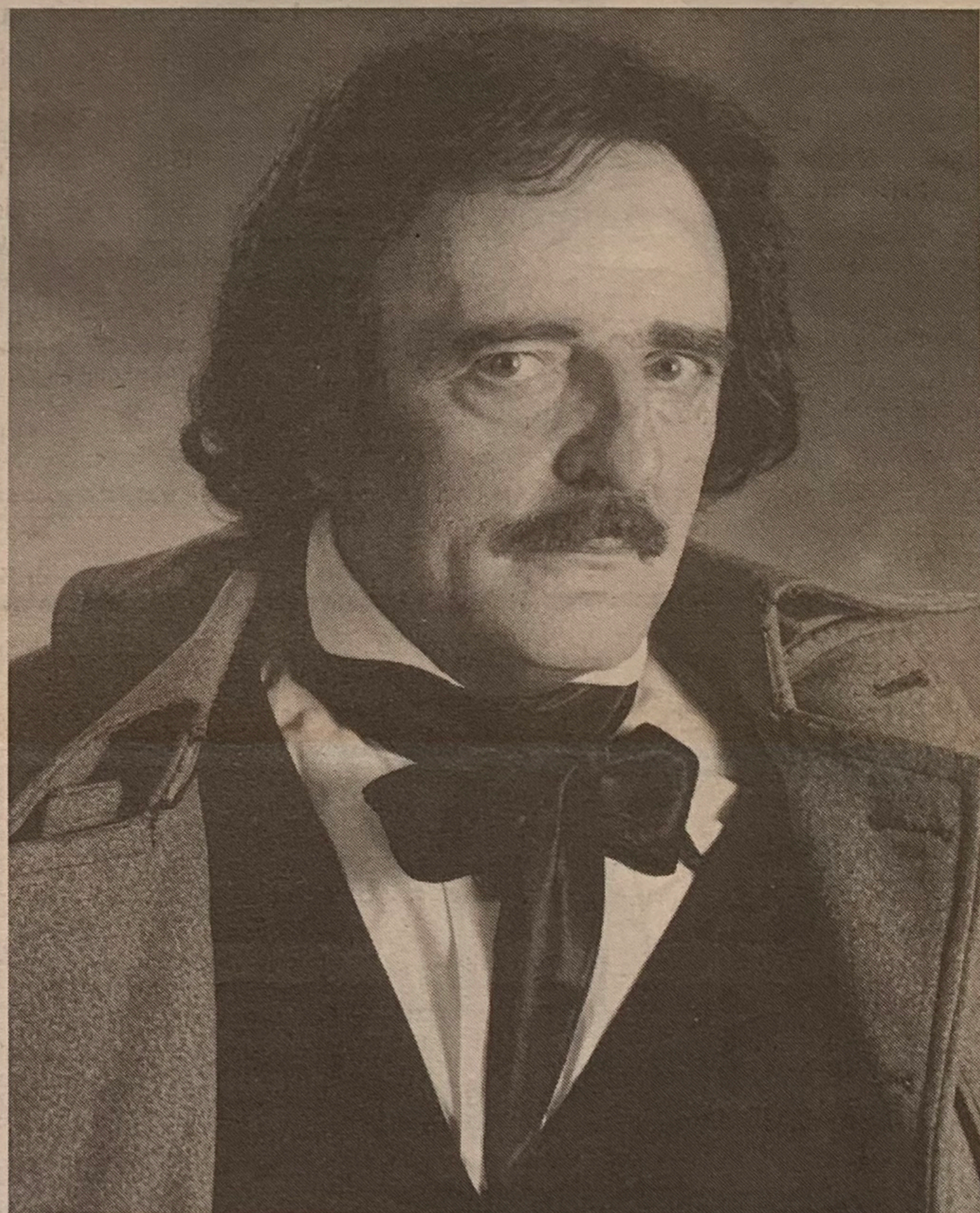
"It wasn't all that unusual to get married so young in those days," said Astin. "Nor was it so unusual to marry one's first cousin."

The prolific Poe died at 40, exemplar of another commonality of the period: early death. "No one really knows his direct cause of death," said

Astin. "He went into a decline during his last three months. There was a sense of desperation about him. And there were some elements that one might describe as paranoid. He claimed to a friend that he was being followed. In fact, he shaved his moustache in order to avoid detection."

Astin worked for years on the Poe material with playwrights Paul Day Clemens and Ron Magid, studying it as closely as they did. He travels the show now, when he isn't teaching.

To judge by his publicity photo, Astin looks remarkably like the well-known daguerreotype of Poe, in which the writer's moustache is intact. Besides getting into his costume and makeup, how else does Astin prepare for this role on the day of a performance?



John Astin as Edgar Allan Poe

"Because there are so many events of a serious nature in Poe's life, I have to spend quite a few days preparing for it," he said. "And I usually take the entire day of the performance to prepare. I lock myself up and simply work on the play." Technically? Emotionally? "In a way, I'm not sure I separate the technical aspects from the emotional ones," he said. "It's all one package. Many people think a performance is made up of many separable elements, but ideally they are one fabric, with everything woven together."

The macabre seems to attract a certain kind of recognizable fan. Are there Poe fans that show up at his performances? "Yes, we do have a number of groupies. They wear dark capes and black hats and long evening dresses in black." He said he has seen them at "scores of shows." The same people? "No, but similar ones. And if I'm in an area where I've generally played before, yes, there are a number of repeaters. In fact, in some areas,

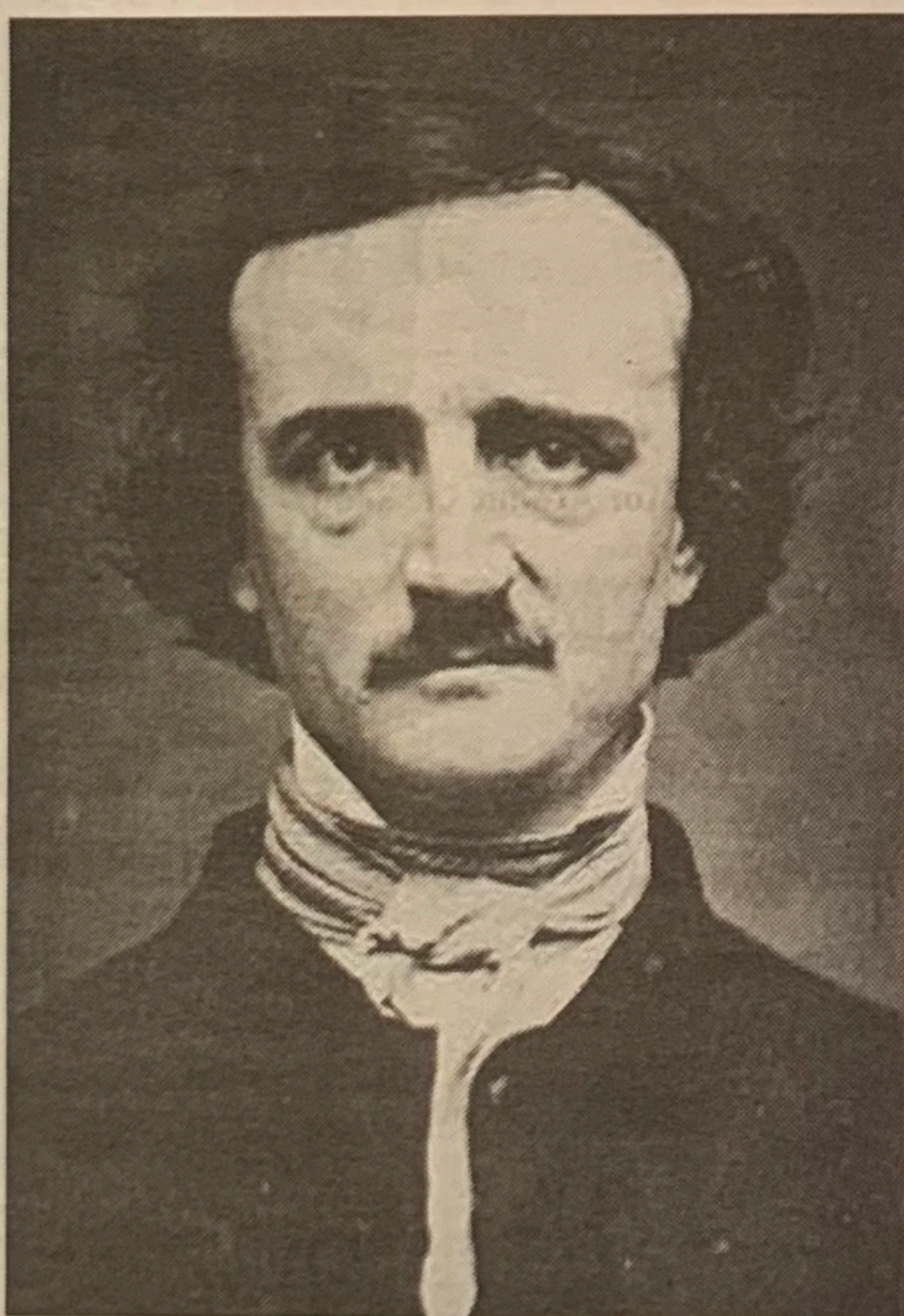
we've had people come back five, six, seven times."

Are there John Astin fans, as well? "Sometimes the way they're dressed, we're not sure whether they're there for Poe, for John Astin, or for a combination."

Astin's answer to a final question — what are the special challenges of acting in a one-person play as opposed to other kinds of drama? — is appropriately cryptic. "I rarely think of it as a one-character show," he said, "because for me, all those other people are there with me on the stage."

— Jeanne Schinto

**"Edgar Allan Poe:  
Once Upon a Midnight"**  
**Saturday, January 10, 8:00 p.m.**  
**Poway Center for the Performing Arts**  
**15498 Espola Road, Poway**  
**\$32-\$35, general;**  
**\$18, 18 years old and under;**  
**box office charge: \$2 per ticket**  
**858-748-0505**



Edgar Allan Poe

**Local Events**  
page 71

**Classical Music**  
page 82

**Art Museums  
& Galleries**  
page 84

**Theater**  
page 85

**Pop Music**  
page 89

**Restaurants**  
page 113

**Movies**  
page 126