



Remembering Zero

(Zero's Self Portrait)

Zero Mostel owned a home on Monhegan Island, off the coast of Maine, as did the parents of a high school friend of mine. My friend had had a younger brother who had died from cancer years before, and his parents had set up a charity in that brother's name to support cancer research. They had held a series of benefit weekends in Monhegan until one year they decided to change it to a benefit cocktail party at their home on the north shore of Long Island (I was from the south shore, as was my friend – his father was the world wide supplier of Mickey Mouse hats, and when business had gone really well, he moved to the north shore, to a bigger house he named the Chateau Chapeau). Zero agreed to be a guest at the party, to meet and entertain those who contributed to the charity, and they asked me to be Zero's pianist for the afternoon.

It was the Sunday of the Thanksgiving weekend of my freshman year, I was home from Michigan for the weekend. I was 18 and, as the photograph shows, bearded. I was very excited to meet Zero, I certainly knew how to play "Rich Man" and any other song that he might throw my way. But that morning, I woke up feeling ill, an upset stomach and headache. I made my way up to my friend's house, got there early, and asked my friend if I could take a nap in his room. Soon enough, the doorbell rang, and that large voice, so familiar to me from FIDDLER and FORUM and THE PRODUCERS, rang through the hallways. I went out to meet him – he was enormous – not obese, but big, tall (seemed taller than the 5'11" he was) – big face, big voice. I introduced myself, he said, "Hello Beardsley, I'm going to go piss in the sink."

Zero's salutation notwithstanding, I was still not feeling well. Zero had come to the party with his wife Kate, and, as it happens, with a man I recognized as the doctor from my high school (also the owner of a house on Monhegan). I asked if he could suggest something for an upset stomach, he suggested I take a gelusil, I did (the first and only one I've ever had) and immediately got violently ill and ran to, fortunately, the other bathroom (near the one Zero occupied). After the ordeal, I took another short nap in my friends' room, and then, feeling somewhat better, wandered back through the party preparation.

There was a lot of great food, I had no appetite, as I walked through the kitchen, Zero, big mouth and all, was eating a big open-faced sandwich. I quickly settled in the rather small den near the kitchen, chatted with Kate Mostel, and soon Zero joined us. Learning I was a (albeit young) composer/musician, we talked about Mozart and other things, to my delight he was enjoying himself, and as guests arrived, little old Jewish ladies, he crossed the room and sat next to me, conspiratorially insulting the newcomers, insisting he preferred to stay in the den and talk to me, rather than go to the much bigger living room and talk with any of them – fine and pretty heady for me, to be in with Zero.

Finally we went to the larger room, where I accompanied him as he sang "Rich Man" and "Sunrise, Sunset" and another cool bit where I played the Maxwell House theme and he imitated a coffee pot. The party lasted another hour or so, Zero wished me luck, told me to stay in touch. And I did, though I never saw him again.

As years have passed, my regret as I think back was that I'd known nothing of his being blacklisted, in fact at the time I don't think I even knew that it had happened or even what it was or how it had effected an entire generation of artists, grandparents essentially to my generation. Though we've lived through tough times since and today is no picnic, I honestly don't think that sort of oppression will happen again, not in the same way, at least I don't think so – other things may happen, not that. In the years before the day I met Zero, I'd marched against the Vietnam War, Al Lowenstein was my congressman and a great model for me at the time, and in that spirit I wish I'd known that day about what Zero had gone through years before. And about his relationship with Jerome Robbins, everything from calling him "Namesley" to agreeing to work with Robbins because, as he put it, in words that ring very strongly, "We on the left don't blacklist."

Call those words naïve or even inaccurate if you like, but they are brave words to live by. And they put FIDDLER into a very different context politically for me. So I wish I'd known, not that I would have talked about it with him, who knows, but it would have made my admiration for him even more all-encompassing. I can't really think of anyone like him now, in theatre or pop music, who would be such an interesting gadfly (if that's the word...) – who would stand up to and survive his own oppression, do work that was as honored as it was outrageous, and tolerate and work with someone who had, for whatever reasons, done so many of his friends an outrageous wrong, knowing that it was the right thing to do, as it would be wrong to, and will always be wrong to ... blacklist.