

ZERO MOSTEL

If musical comedy is larger than life, Zero Mostel was larger than musical comedy. He was one of the greatest, most unique, and definitely irreplaceable talents to grace the American stage

The son of an itinerant rabbi, Samuel Joel Mostel was born in the poor Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville in 1915. Sammy attended Seward Park High School. Surrounded by old-style tenement buildings in the heart of the Lower East Side, Seward Park High School has a history of serving New York City's immigrant population. Sammy developed his talent for painting and drawing at art classes provided by the Educational Alliance, an institution serving Jewish immigrants and their children. Sammy dreamed of becoming a painter and often would go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to copy the paintings.

Sam Mostel attended and graduated from the City College of New York, and then entered a master's program in art at New York University in 1935. He dropped out after a year and worked at odd jobs before being hired in 1937 by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project to teach drawing and painting at the 92 nd Street "Y", the famous Young Men and Young Women's Hebrew Association. While still teaching, to supplement his income he took another job for the WPA as a museum tour guide. During his museum tours, he would break into bizarre improvisations, pretending to be Picasso or a coffee percolator. He was soon offered jobs to entertain at private parties.

Mostel auditioned as a comedian at a downtown jazz club in late 1941. Initially rejected, he was hired after Pearl Harbor when the owner figured his patrons, now at war, could use some laughs. It was the club's press agent who gave Sam Mostel the nickname Zero, explaining, "Here's a guy who's starting from nothing." Zero married a former Radio City Music Hall Rockette in 1944, an act that ruined his relationship with his Orthodox Jewish parents since his new wife was a gentile.

Zero had long been a leftist politically, and had made contributions to progressive causes. When he was named by Jerome Robbins before the House Un-American Activities Committee as being a communist, Zero was subpoenaed to testify by HUAC on October 14, 1955. In a playful mood, he told the Committee that he was employed by "19th Century-Fox." Zero denied he was a Communist, but refused to name names. He told the Committee that he would gladly discuss his own conduct but was prohibited by religious convictions from naming others. Consequently, he was blacklisted during the 1950s. Shut-out from the movies, he also lost many lucrative nightclub gigs, and he had to make due by playing gigs for meager salaries and by selling his paintings. Luckily, there was no blacklist in the theater and little by little he increased his work there and it is as a stage actor he is best remembered today.

Mostel's onstage energy was prodigious . . . he could bellow like a bull; sing like a choirboy; dance about the stage with the grace of one of Disney's dancing hippos; fawn like a coquette; and roll, bulge, or cross his eyes. His sight gags and ad-libbing would drive his fellow cast members crazy; yet, he could also project thoughtfulness. This served him well in his most famous part . . . Tevye, in "Fiddler on the Roof."

Mostel was an extremely well-read man. He was an ardent fan of Sholem Aleichem and brought dignity to the role of Tevye in addition to his clowning. His comic elaborations enraged the creative staff and, to Mostel's amazement, his nine-month contract was not renewed. He revived the role several times (including a 1976 national tour, for which he was paid an impressive \$30,000 a week). He was not chosen for the film, a source of great disappointment to him.

Mostel died suddenly in 1977 during a Philadelphia tryout of a new play centered on Shakespeare's character, Shylock. Mostel played Shylock. To the end, he was usually out of favor with his director and cast members for his improvisations that disrupted the context of this serious show.

One of his most often mentioned quotes is:

**"The freedom of any society varies proportionately
with the volume of its laughter."**