

Brad Zinn Comes Full Circle

by Bob Kubota

Brad Zinn has been a professional entertainer for over 30 years. A browse of his resume arches the eyebrow with frequency. His credentials are indeed impressive, especially when his mailing address has never read "Hollywood, Ca". He, with his wife Brenda, has always operated from the "un-show-business-like" city of Phoenix, Arizona. No matter, it seems as if he has done it all. His durability is proven. He has had longevity in an otherwise cruel and unpredictable field.

A trained actor since childhood, Zinn has landed roles in numerous television productions with Columbia Pictures. His rich, versatile voice is familiar to all in the Valley of the Sun due to an abundance of voiceover and commercial work. Hey, not bad considering that these are just his moonlighting activities. Zinn's most consistent bread-and-butter has always been the magic act. It has taken him all over North America and to the Dominican Republic. He has headlined with the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra and was honored by Phoenix to be the first magician to ever appear at the refurbished downtown Orpheum Theater.

A man with his motley assortment of talents ought to have it all together. The perfect career. His memorabilia shows him rubbing elbows with an endless line of celebrities, from Dick Van Dyke to Damon Wayans. But something was eluding him. He felt that he needed to strive further. He needed to find his niche. "I had to find a way to be honest and revealing on stage because that, I think, is the key element of success in any performer. To be self-revealing and for people to know it's honest," Zinn said. "That was very difficult for me. I have always been guarded, cynical, holding my cards close to my chest."

Being a devout student of show business, he sensed that the great entertainers stood for something - that they represented the sublime. Zinn, the ever-passionate disciple, chose to struggle with this concept and accept its' challenge. So he thrust himself backward toward the first talent that he had ever displayed. The impressions - his uncanny ability to sound and behave like celebrities of the past. Perhaps he merely underrated this particular ability in himself. It just needed to get jolted out of him.

A chance meeting with celebrated impressionist Fred Travalena did the trick. His epiphany was now at hand. It was June, 1997, when Zinn accompanied his close friend Paul Lennon aboard a cruise ship that was to trace the periphery of Alaska. Lennon, a terrific comedian/impressionist, was the hired entertainment for the trip and chose to invite Zinn as a guest. More than just a relaxing vacation was at hand for Zinn. He seized the opportunity to investigate a performing venue with which he was not familiar.

With the ship docked, Lennon and Zinn crossed paths with Travalena in a hotel lounge in Juneau. For several hours the three exchanged impressions, voices and the joking patter of celebrities and public figures. From that evening on it was abundantly clear to Zinn what he was missing. Fortunately, it was something that he already had. "Travalena related a story about meeting George Burns backstage," Zinn explained. "George asked, 'Fred, what do you represent when you walk out on stage? I know exactly what I represent to my audience and that's what I am when I walk out on stage.'" It was a profundity that affected Zinn the way it had affected Travalena years earlier. "It was as much an epiphany for Travalena as it was for me in just hearing him relate the story," Zinn said. "In a way, although I'm doing a tribute to George Burns, Fred has probably done more for me than he'd even realize."

The Great Comedians is the result of that chance meeting in Alaska. From those precious moments with Travalena grew Zinn's elusive thread. Some might call it the message. But what it really gave him was a *purpose* for performing for the first time in a quarter century as a professional. He now realized that he could tell his own unique show business story, and could do so utilizing the likes of entertainers past that were the direct inspiration for him in the first place!

So Zinn did the unthinkable. He killed his best friend. Yes, he shaved the beard that protected him for so long, for he knew that the impressionist's canvas - his face - had to be clean and malleable. It had to be ready to create something bold and new.

"There's a whole country out there of people over the age of 45 that are being ignored by the Hollywood mainstream. My small contribution will be to go find those people and try to entertain them and carry my message - which is to remind folks what made these great entertainers' so great. They were funny then, and they're still funny today. And there's a reason for that; their humor was clean, clever, and timeless."

Supporting the notion that developing a performance celebrating the golden age of radio and television would be a godsend to those aged 45 and over, Zinn went straight to work. He started by mastering Burns, then Jack Benny. Then Ed Sullivan. Oh, and Groucho, Durante and Will Rogers. Not just vocal tones, either. He spent the better part of a year learning to spin a rope just like Rogers did. When the left-handed Zinn realized that the spin worked better in his right hand, the recreation became complete. Not to mention his new friend the violin. Zinn can now play it to the tune of "Love in Bloom" as his Benny character. "It's a very difficult instrument to master and Jack always fantasized playing well. I feel the same way. It's been a lot of fun to learn and I intend to keep on learning. Who knows, I might be offered a job at a wedding someday - just like Jack!"

The Great Comedians is musically intensive, a previously unexplored frontier, but Zinn chose to take it head on. Not only has he conquered the violin, he sings for the first time and writes and performs an original closing number entitled *The Great Comedians*. The song was a collaboration with good friend and musician Bill Swayze. "A lot of time on music," Zinn related. "Writing the song, getting the charts done, finding little snippets of music that are appropriate to the character, and finding a way to make it all blend together took over a year to complete."

A prodigious amount of research also lay at hand, as evidenced by Zinn's utterly massive collection of radio shows, television shows, specials, movies, theatrical performances and show business history books. "A decision I made early on was that all of the material for the script was to be culled from research on the lives and performances of my comedy heroes. All of the material is that performer's authentic material. Will Rogers' gags and jokes are Will Rogers', and so on."

It's even gotten to the point where Zinn feels that some otherworldly flow is aiding and abetting his attempts to recreate the past. When out and about in hot pursuit of authentic-looking props, memorabilia, or recordings of his favorite subjects, an impossible-to-find copy of a George Burns Christmas album fell into his fingertips in a discount rack. A much needed but long out of print piece of sheet music turned up in an antique store. After several of these fortuitous findings, Zinn responds reverently and gingerly, "Coincidence?"

Undertaking a project like this for the solo performer is daunting and meticulous at best. Zinn keeps his eye on the goal that serves his purpose. "My goal would be that people don't see Brad Zinn on stage. The goal is for people to feel they have spent a few minutes with that comedian - again. In much the same way when you see Hal Holbrook in *Mark Twain Tonight*, after awhile you don't feel like you're watching Hal Holbrook give a performance, you feel like you're in the room with Mark Twain. That's the goal I've set for myself."

As Zinn's early talent for voices came full circle, so did his unsatiated lifelong desire to fully flex his previously dormant acting muscles. His many years of experience in films, community theater, and school productions resurfaced immediately. His touch, that was polished under the tutelage of the Advanced Actor's Workshop, would shine again. "It goes back to the fact that I started out to be an actor. This is for me as much an acting exercise as it is anything else," Zinn said fervently. "To be able to act, do voices, play violin, juggle, spin a rope, do a little bit of magic, kind of combines all those things. That, to me, is more satisfying, ultimately."

Zinn simply cannot escape the idea that the future is indeed the past. In order to perform *The Great Comedians*, he must mix his oldest talents amongst his newest. It's dawned on him that his move through the future would be ground to a halt if it were not for the past. Maybe it is his duty to bring the past along with us into the next millennium, because he may be of the last generation capable of it. Zinn was born into the transitory wave of baby-boomers when many of the most popular entertainers were already firmly iconized in the culture.

He harbors a strong concern that a seminal portion of our popular culture is being forgotten. "Part of my message is that we could do a better job of passing our cultural heritage on to our next generation. My parents made me aware of these people. They pointed out the Red Skeltons, the Danny Kayes and introduced me to them. This is my 'Thank You' to my inspirations in show business, as well as my parents and their generation for making it possible for me to do what I love."

Sadly, both of Zinn's parents passed on in a dispiriting month of February, 1999. *The Great Comedians* is as much a dedication to them as it is to the personalities that he portrays. Zinn believes that he is one generation removed from the rock-concert going generation that was concerned with assuring the audience was as loud as the performers on stage.

"The rock concert is a whole different experience than what I grew up with - seeing a dinner show in Vegas, seeing an individual solo performer like Wayne Newton, Danny Kaye, Liberace or Red Skelton," Zinn said with reflection. He fears that the whole genre of entertainment that raised him will become extinct in years to come. Burgeoning technology, the internet, three hundred cable channels and satellite feeds are shrinking attention spans and dividing up the pie into too many disparate pieces. "When people watched Milton Berle it was a communal experience," said Zinn, lamenting, "Everything stopped on that night and everybody watched Milton Berle. On Sunday nights usually everybody watched *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Monday morning when you went to work you had something to talk about that you know your neighbor, your coworker, your friend probably also saw."

Zinn feels that this fragmentation of entertainment reflects our fragmented societal bonds: "We currently don't have many happy communal experiences that bind us together as a culture, either as a nation, or as American." He has hope that one day the pendulum will swing back and people will seek out those shared experiences once again.

According to Zinn, this is a prime reason why establishing future national icons may be a prohibitive task. "It takes ten times the money, ten times the hype and ten times the media exposure to get known today. It used to be one or two appearances on national television and you could have a serious career. Now you have to use an atomic sized cannon to get a career started. It's getting more and more difficult to get the American people's attention."

Getting attention should not be a problem for Zinn. He already knows that his audience was steeped in the classics. They should hang on every word. Anyway, it's just compelling watching a man who has found passion again after too many years without it. How can you not watch a man that has finally come full circle?

For more information, visit www.greatcomedians.net