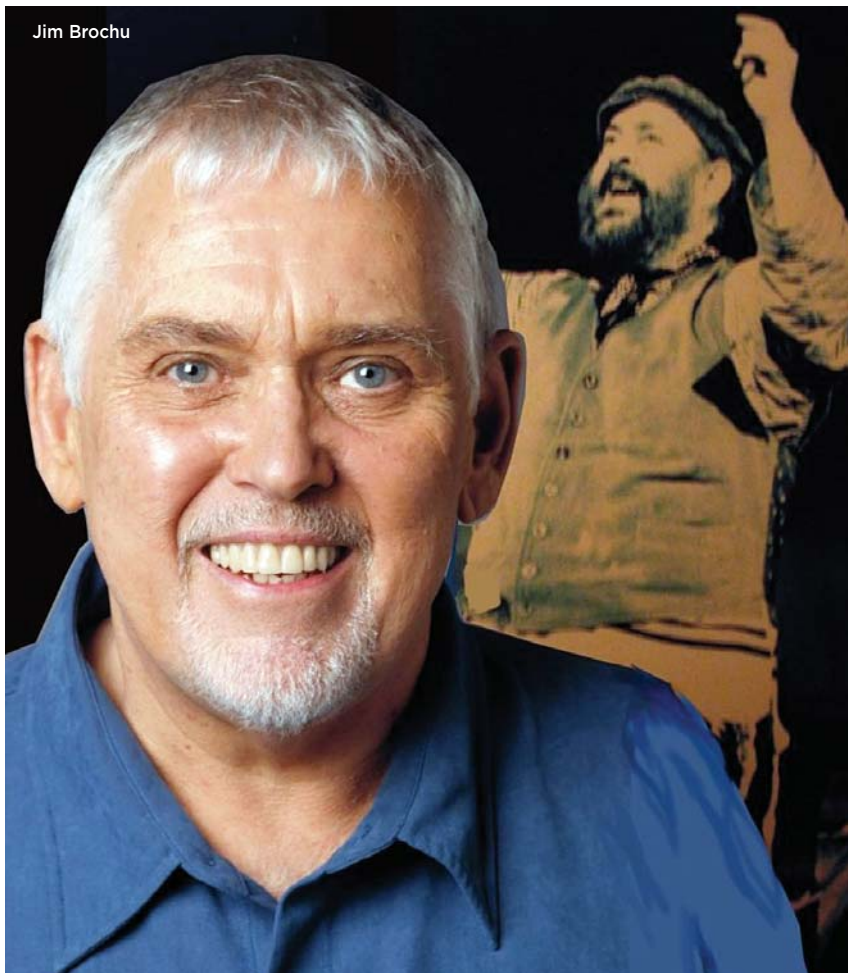


# IT'S ZERO HOUR FOR JIM BROCHU

by Tom Provenzano

“I was planning to be the first Brooklyn-born pope until I was 13 and my father introduced me to his friend Ethel Merman. She totally changed my life.

He heard me listening to *Annie Get Your Gun* and said, ‘Oh that’s Ethel.’ He took me to *Gypsy*. We went backstage and she gave my father a big kiss then turned to me, ‘You must be Jimmy! What are you going to be when you grow up?’ I burst out, ‘I’m gonna be a show girl!’ Later we met at Sardi’s where her caricature was hanging on the wall. I thought, ‘Do I want to be up at Sardi’s or do I want to be on the balcony of St. Peter’s?’”



Jim Brochu

Fortunately for the theatre (and perhaps the church) Jim Brochu chose the former and has successfully pursued that ambition for more than a few years—and indeed his caricature is hanging in Sardi’s.

Brochu is an incredibly prolific writer, director, producer and performer. He and his partner of more than 20 years, composer Steve Schalchlin, have created two award winning musicals, *The Last Session*, which originated here and moved off Broadway, and *The Big Voice: God or Merman?* which won the LA Stage Alliance Ovation Award for Best Musical, Intimate Theatre. It is slated to tour cities throughout the U.S.

Having written a play as homage to his early mentor Merman, Brochu is now turning to another Broadway icon that entered his early life. His father was a dashing Wall Street executive who had great connections all over Manhattan—including David Burns, a constantly working Broadway actor who was one of the stars of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Young Jimmy got to go backstage where his precociousness came to the attention of the great Zero Mostel who took the 13-year-old under his rather large wing.

Brochu learned by watching Mostel carefully. When asked about the star’s penchant for meandering away from the playwright’s words, Brochu became fiercely protective. “He used to defend himself about that by saying, ‘The writers, directors and producers get you to opening night and then they go to Florida and come back with tans while you are in the prison of the theatre!’”

“He always said, ‘Why must it be dull as shit? It is a living breathing thing.’ He felt he had the right to do things as long as he said the words. In *Forum* he never changed the text but perhaps one night he did announce the winner of the Sonny Liston/Floyd Patterson fight—but he did say, ‘Patterson knocked him out in Round X.I.I.’”

As successful as Brochu has become, he is still remarkably star-struck. When he speaks of his memories of Mostel he becomes exceeding alive and excited. Brochu works constantly on new musicals, and he has a standing gig delivering riveting lectures about stage and film on cruise ships, but he has wanted to create a very personal one-man show for some time. While rifling through his living room or, as he more accurately puts it, the museum, filled with signed publicity shots and myriad other theatre memorabilia, he came across an old copy of *Theatre Arts Magazine* with Zero Mostel on the cover.

“To do Zero had been in the back of my mind for a long, long time. I thought if God has given me the talent to be a writer, I had better do something for myself. I always thought Zero was a superb character. I have been compared to Zero a lot. I have always done *Forum* and *Fiddler* in stock. Zero

had a great influence on my life and I was fortunate to know him. His life was filled with great laughter, great drama and great life lessons for all of us.”

Brochu jumped into research about Mostel’s life. The result is the one-man show *Zero Hour*. The show is being directed by Paul Kreppel and presented by Herb Isaacs and the West Coast Jewish Theatre. The play is set in 1977 at Mostel’s 28th Street art studio in Manhattan where he is giving his last interview on the eve of leaving for Philadelphia to star as Shylock in the pre-Broadway tryout of *The Merchant*.

Mostel would play only one performance before his sudden death at age 62. “I can think of no other person in show business who had more obstacles to overcome than Zero Mostel,” says Brochu. “He grew up poor. He survived the blacklist. At one point he almost lost his leg in an accident. He got hit by a bus and had 15 operations. He walked with a cane off stage but when he went on stage he transformed. When you think about how he got through *Forum*, running and jumping. No matter what befell him he was a survivor. He is the only actor in history to win three Best Actor Tony Awards.”

But it is his personal memories of the enormously brusque character and ultimate kindness of Mostel that really made him want to write the play. “I once asked Zero for an autographed picture. He shouted: ‘YOU’RE NOT WORTHY!!’ Some time later he came to see me in a play at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Next day there was an envelope on my dressing table.” He shows an autographed photo of the actor. “This has been a treasure.”

The collection of stars who have been an integral part of Brochu’s life is a constellation. But the brightest light among them is Lucille Ball, with whom he had the privilege of sharing afternoon trysts of backgammon nearly every day for the last eight months of her life. The story is contained in his delightfully readable book entitled *Lucy in the Afternoon* which, though out of print, is easily found on line at such sites at alibris.com.

Lucy (as she insisted everyone call her) came into his life when Brochu sent his play *The Lucky O’Leary’s* to his friend Katharine Hepburn. “She said,” speaking in Hepburn’s tremulous voice, “I

think I’d be totally miscast but I think Lucille would be marvelous.’ Steve and I went to Hollywood Boulevard and got a map to the stars homes and sent this to her. She called two days later. She told me,

‘Your play made me laugh for the first time in two years.’ She had been devastated by *Life With Lucy*. They ordered 22 episodes and after the sixth she said, ‘I was fired. I walked out of the studio and people turned their backs.’ I met her at her home the next day and we bonded.”

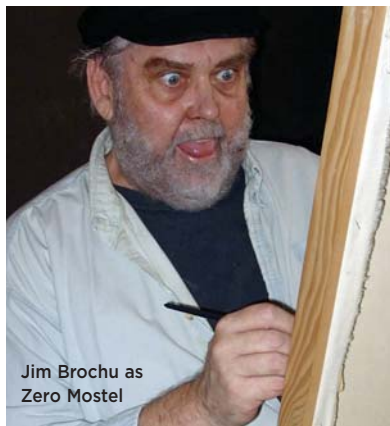
While his happily requited crush on huge stars has been a joy, it is his two decades with partner Steve Schalchlin that has been his lifeline. Several years ago Schalchlin was dying of AIDS. Brochu recalls vividly, “He sat down and wrote a song. When he finished writing he seemed healthy. I saw what the creative process was doing for him. So I started giving him homework assignments. ‘Write a song about your own funeral called ‘Save Me a Seat.’” He’d written about seven or eight songs and

said, ‘You’re a playwright. If I just have a bunch of songs and then I die, the songs die with me. If you write a play around them they live on forever.’

“For Thanksgiving in 1995 we were at a friend’s house who had a recording studio. I saw the play in a flash of grace: A composer dying of AIDS who was once a popular singer has brought his band back in to record his last songs before he kills himself the next day. They find out during the show and they tell him he has no right to do that.”

The play became *The Last Session*, which has gained a cult following throughout the country. Its gospel-inflected score is meant to reach those who rarely attend the theatre. The play was nominated for Best Musical by the New York Drama League and the New York Outer Critics Circle. The LA version, at Laguna Playhouse, received five Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards. It also received Outstanding Los Angeles Theatre Production by GLAAD Media Awards and has been produced by both professional and amateur companies all over the country, including Houston, Dallas, Denver, Baltimore, Omaha, Rochester NY, Indianapolis and (at Northeastern University) Boston.

Schalchlin is extremely hearty today. The couple continues a romantic and artistic partnership with great energy as they enjoy performing on annual Crystal Line cruises and sailing happily through life. ■



Jim Brochu as Zero Mostel

**“I can think of no other person in show business who had more obstacles to overcome than Zero Mostel”**

—JIM BROCHU

**ZERO HOUR**

Opens July 7  
plays Fri.-Sat., 8  
Sun., 2 and 7  
ends Aug. 13  
Tickets: \$30

Egyptian Arena Theatre  
1625 N. Las Palmas Ave.  
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www.westcoast  
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