



MORE THAN ZERO

EXPLORING MOSTEL’S LESSER-KNOWN TALENTS

By Stephen Baldwin

By most accounts, Zero Mostel was a big man. His onscreen performances, his stage presence, even his physique — they all seemed to entail an all-consuming magnitude. Mostel died at age 62, having been in a number of classic films (*The Producers*) and Broadway shows (*Fiddler on the Roof*, for which he won a Tony). But only a small group of people have witnessed Mostel’s lesser-known artistic side: painting.

“Everything he did was big, and so I think his artistic talent got overshadowed by his performance art,” says Lindy Green, curator of *The Artist Backstage: Drawings and Paintings by Zero Mostel*, which will run in Toronto starting March 26. The show includes 40 of Mostel’s artworks, for the most part unseen by the general public, which explore a variety of modern art styles.

“I find in his work this really clear dichotomy of two styles,” Green says. “You’ve got this one style, sort of abstract expressionism, with really modern, bold, strong images, and then the other half are these absolutely beautiful, delicate and skilful life drawings that were done mostly with a live female model.”

The exhibit will compliment the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company’s production of the off-Broadway play *Zero Hour*, which also opens on March 26. Starring Jim Brochu and directed by Piper Laurie, the play details Mostel’s inner struggles as an artist. Behind Mostel the comedian was a proud and often egotistic man, who was blacklisted in 1951 and banned from the screen until 1958. A large portion of this dark period was spent in his studio, and with his family.

“Zero was in his own category, they broke the mould when they made him, and then broke the mould again ... there won’t be anyone else like him,” says Zero’s son, Josh Mostel, himself an accomplished actor who has appeared on both Broadway (*My Favorite Year*) and onscreen (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Billy Madison*).

“His greatest influence on me was, you know, don’t do what he did,” says Josh, who continues to emphasize that there never was, and never will be, anyone quite like Zero.

“The thing about Zero was that there was always a sense of danger in the audience, like what is going to happen? Is he going to come after me?” says Josh, who will be in Toronto for the play’s official opening on March 28. “Sometimes you got the feeling that anything was going to happen, and sometimes anything did.”

■ *Zero Hour* and *The Artist Backstage: Drawings and Paintings by Zero Mostel* runs March 26 to April 16 at Toronto’s Al Green Theatre, at the Miles Nadal JCC (750 Spadina Ave.). For tickets, call 416-366-7723 or visit stlc.com.

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COURTESY OF THE HAROLD GREEN JEWISH THEATRE COMPANY
While most know Zero Mostel for his acting work, the Broadway star was also a painter.