O. Z. Whitehead (1911-1998): Actor and writer

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Few could have anticipated the large amount of newspaper coverage that accompanied the passing, in Dublin, Ireland, of O. Z. Whitehead (18 March 1911-29 July 1998), at the age of 87. Front page headlines in the Irish Republic, as well as major obituary articles in the national press in the United Kingdom and the United States, reported the death of a well-loved figure who, to the entertainment and theatre world, was one of the last surviving character actors of a now-vanished Hollywood studio system. Despite a lifetime of acting, however, his most acclaimed performance and best remembered role remained that of Al in John Ford's classic 1940 film version of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

But to the Bahá'í world, Whitehead was first and foremost a distinguished pioneer who had devoted the final three and a half decades of his long life to the nurturing and consolidation of a distinctive Bahá'í community in Ireland. His passion for history, and the desire to inspire the Bahá'ís into active service, led him into a second career as a chronicler of the lives of the Faith's outstanding early believers, through three popular volumes of pen-portraits, as well as numerous contributions to Bahá'í journals around the world. Beyond all that, to those who made his acquaintance and became his friends, he was a quietly-spoken, inspirational figure, a gentle and loving teacher whose regular Sunday night fireside meetings helped to confirm many as Bahá'ís. He was an administrator who gave exemplary service, both on the local spiritual assembly of Dublin and the national spiritual assembly of the Republic of Ireland on which he served for 15 years following its formation in 1972.

"Zebby" - as he understandably liked to be known considering his full name was Oothout Zabriskie Whitehead - was born in New York City on 18 March 1911. Zebby's ancestors on the Whitehead side were from Argyllshire in Scotland, although the names Oothout and Zabriskie suggest Dutch and Polish origins as well. His father was a wealthy banker and Zebby's formative years were passed not only in the privileged salons of Manhattan's Upper East Side, but also spending summers in the playgrounds of the nouveau riche, the kinds of exclusive resorts that appear in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. In addition to this world of privileged luxury, Zebby was taken often by his father to the cinema. By the age of 10, having seen Charles Chaplin and his young accomplice Jackie Coogan in The Kid, Zebby was determined to act.

On entering Harvard University, Zebby forged a lifelong friendship with Dick Hepburn, brother of the actress Katherine, and sacrificed his study of English for amateur dramatics. Three years later, much to his family's disapproval - for acting was an unmentionable profession in white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant circles - Zebby left college without graduating and made his theatrical debut in a play, entitled The Lake.

In 1935, Zebby made his cinema debut in The Scoundrel starring Noel Coward. Theatre roles followed throughout the rest of the 1930s including The Seagull, and Farewell Summer with the silent screen actress Lois Wilson. When John Ford was casting The Grapes of Wrath a year later, Zebby was summoned to Hollywood and offered the part of Al, over better-known actors such as Mickey Rooney and Glenn Ford. The role cemented Zebby's reputation as a solid, reliable character actor and began a committed working relationship with Ford which would continue into the 1960s. Zebby followed his movie success with a long spell treading the boards in Chicago, in Life with Father, in which he starred opposite his friend Lillian Gish.

When the United States entered the Second World War, despite being a member of an anti-war group and a pacifist by conviction, Zebby joined up. A curvature of the spine ruled out active service, but he finished the war in the Pacific as a sergeant. It was not an easy experience for him. "War," he told the Irish Times in 1982, "has the effect of accelerating change in all the worst possible ways. People become harder, more ruthless."(1)

The war over, returning to Hollywood, Zebby appeared in Fred Zinnemann's My Brother Talks to Horses (1946). He kept busy throughout the 1940s with supporting roles in The Romance of Rosy Ridge, The Pirate, Road House, Family Honeymoon and the musical A Song is Born. But Zebby was becoming frustrated about only securing a few small parts in films and a mediocre stage play. He also made a bad investment in a seemingly sound film project.

It was towards the end of the 1949 that Zebby, increasingly disillusioned with Hollywood and concerned about his lack of work, heard about the Bahá'í Faith for the first time. He got into a conversation in a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard with a young man called Jack Benjamin who was boarding with a Bahá'í named Churchill Ross. Zebby did not hesitate to accept an invitation to a fireside meeting, although he had not given much thought to religious matters at all since losing interest in the church while he was a student at a private Episcopal boarding school near Boston. At his first fireside, Zebby heard Marzieh Gail(2) speak. He was impressed by her manner. "Some clergymen whom I had met often conveyed to me from their remarks that they considered themselves at least better educated and probably more mature than their congregations or their listeners," Zebby wrote. "Mrs Gail, on the contrary, spoke as if she felt privileged to share with those present some of her thoughts on the Bahá'í Revelation."(3) Unable to absorb everything, Zebby at least acknowledged a logic in her comments that he had never heard expressed about religion before. A process of investigation followed which resulted in Zebby's declaration, helped on his journey by many distinguished American believers, among them Sara Kenny and Charles Wolcott, with whom he shared the experience of the Hollywood system.

In 1952, after an appearance in Beware My Lovely with Robert Ryan and Ida Lupino, and having suffered the repercussions of the unwise investment in a film called Miss Body Beautiful, in which he also appeared, Zebby returned to New York where he divided his time between stage work (touring in The Chalk Garden with Lillian and Dorothy Gish), live television, and Bahá'í activities. Zebby's pilgrimage in 1955 and his meeting with Shoghi Effendi had a profound effect on him. Until the end of his life he would inspire the friends with his reminiscences of the Guardian and his pilgrim notes. One story that Zebby particularly relished telling was how he had been sitting at dinner one night with the Guardian and Mason Remey, when Shoghi Effendi gave Remey an intense look and said, "We must protect the Cause from both within and without." Zebby told the Guardian that he would love to pioneer but that he had responsibilities towards his aged mother. The Guardian encouraged Zebby to see to his family obligations before pioneering. It would be eight years before Zebby was free to leave the United States.

In 1958, Zebby's old mentor John Ford lured him back to Hollywood and persuaded him to play the part of the patrician Norman Case Junior in The Last Hurrah, a role which equated most readily to Zebbie's own background. He then went on to play an army medic opposite John Wayne in The Horse Soldiers and a countrified dimwit Herbert Carruthers in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. In one scene, John Wayne dismisses Carruthers from the saloon on the grounds that he is too young to vote. At the time, Zebby was 51 years old but still so youthful looking that neither he nor John Ford saw anything wrong with him taking the role!

Ford was a legendarily irascible figure though Zebby admitted to liking him (while quietly adding that at times Ford could be "terribly difficult"(4)). Certainly, Zebby was more than a little uncomfortable with the hard drinking and gambling clique which Ford and Wayne were a part of, although Ford kept Zebby on his pay roll for some time after he had finished shooting his scenes for The Horse Soldiers, perhaps aware of his financial predicament.

In 1963, after making Summer Magic with Hayley Mills for Disney, and with his mother now deceased, Zebby made the decision to move on and serve the Bahá'í Faith in a more direct way. After attending the Bahá'í World Congress in London where he spoke with Hand of the Cause Ugo Giachery about which country he should pioneer to, Zebby relocated to Ireland, settling in Dublin where he wholeheartedly threw himself into Bahá'í work as well as acting in various plays and films in an environment which was clearly less competitive and more fulfilling than the Hollywood studio system. In 1966 he won the Best Supporting Actor award at the Dublin Theatre Festival for his performance as the night porter in Eugene O'Neill's Hughie, a part he was to return to at the Peacock as late as 1989.

Zebby also committed himself to nurturing new talent and founded the Whitehead Award for Drama in 1966 to encourage the writing of one-act dramas. The following year he had a part in Joseph Strick's film version of Joyce's Ulysses. His television appearances included Passing Through, Caught in a Free State (as the Wartime US ambassador to Ireland) and two episodes of the long-running soap opera Glenroe. His later films included Philadelphia, Here I Come, and Diary of a Madman.

This entire period saw the growth and development of the Irish Bahá'í community to the point where in 1972, Zebby was able to be a key player in the birth of the national spiritual assembly of the Irish Republic, to which he was elected. His colleagues on the institution remember him as a constant, loyal, and vigilant member who unfailingly attended meetings and always made solid and wise contributions to consultation. In addition, his selfless, personal generosity as a benefactor of the Faith helped many projects come to fruition. His dedication to his Sunday night fireside was astonishing. It was held without fail. Even on weekends when Zebby had been meeting with the national assembly, he would take off promptly at four o'clock on the Sunday afternoon to prepare for his fireside.

Just as important, however, in terms of Zebby's contribution to the Bahá'í world was his burgeoning desire to convey to the believers a sense of their own spiritual heritage through recounting the stories of prominent, early followers of the Faith. As far back as June 1963, shortly after Zebby's arrival in Ireland, he had had the opportunity to spend some time with Hand of the Cause A. Q. Faizi. Zebby informed Faizi that besides being an actor, he had also made some attempts at writing. Discovering that Zebby had known some of the prominent early believers, Faizi suggested Zebby write his impressions of them. Faizi informed him that knowledge of the early believers was already of great interest to the Bahá'ís and that it would be of special value in the future. When Faizi returned to Ireland in 1966, he asked Zebby how he was getting on with his writing. "Write down every Bahá'í experience that you have," said Faizi. "Before long people will want to know about Bahá'ís, no matter how obscure they may be. One line that anyone writes could be very important."(5) By the end of Zebby's life, George Ronald had published three popular and well-loved volumes of his pen portraits, Some Early Bahá'ís of the West (1976), Some Bahá'ís to Remember (1983), and Portraits of Some Bahá'í Women (1996). Initially, Zebby's research did not extend into primary sources, but following the success of the first book, his work for further essays included consulting original letters, believers' notes, and diaries. The strength of these books, while arguably not academic in their style or method, is their gathering of information which had been previously scattered in not very widely available sources, and their retelling in simple, refreshing, and inspirational terms.

In his final years, Zebby became a popular Dublin character, often to be seen passing St. Stephen's Green on his way to lunch at the University and Kildare Street Club. He continued to support Irish Actors Equity and the Screen Actor's Guild and served on the executive of the Irish branch of PEN, the international writers' club, which honoured Zebby with a special luncheon towards the end of his life. The Irish Bahá'ís continued to revere him as a source of great knowledge amongst them and a well-loved, inspirational member of their community.

Zebby's last public appearance was at a large Bahá'í new year party held in Dublin to mark the 50th anniversary of the first local spiritual assembly in Ireland. He had recently come out of hospital and the believers noted how frail he looked. "But when his face would open with that big wide smile, and those mischievous eyes would twinkle," wrote one of the Bahá'ís of that night, "you knew there were depths of steel-like strength and character in this quiet American."(6)

That night, Zebby commented more than once that he was finding things difficult and that it might well be time for him to move on. Four months later, he passed away in hospital after a succession of health problems associated with old age. The Universal House of Justice wrote, "GRIEVED LEARN PASSING O. Z. WHITEHEAD, DEARLY LOVED FAITHFUL SERVANT BLESSED BEAUTY. HIS LONG YEARS SELF-SACRIFICING DEVOTION TO THE CAUSE OF GOD, HIS OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE IRISH BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY, HIS CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE ARTS, HIS PUBLISHED ACCOUNTS OF LIVES DISTINGUISHED FELLOW-BELIEVERS, ALL CONSTITUTE IMPERISHABLE RECORD LIFE OF EXEMPLARY SERVICE..."(7)

Robert Weinberg(8)

End Notes

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