

Eulogy for John U. Zweers 1927-2004
Church of Our Savior, San Gabriel, 23 Jan. 2004
by Rev. Michael Douglass

John Zweers was a special man, complex and talented. Those of us in this room represent the many types of relationships John enriched: students, co-workers, entertainers, puppeteers, illusionists, historians, and fellow teachers.

I had the honor of playing several of those roles through the 30-plus years we worked together, and so we'll attempt to briefly highlight representative moments from many of those relationships, which may mirror some of your relationships with John as well.

Like some of you, we were about 16 years old, walking somewhat apprehensively into an advanced placement history class at John Muir High School. We glanced around, awaiting the arrival of the legendary Professor John U. Zweers.

He walked in, tall and quiet, and set a well-worn briefcase down at his desk. Without a word, he turned to the chalkboard and wrote a giant "F" on the board. He shot a look at us and matter-of-factly said, "Until you prove otherwise, your grade is an 'F'."

It was classic John Zweers. Little did we know at the time that we were part of a drama, about to unfold--a splendid and exciting play on the stage called life. John played the director--a skill he had learned as a student of theatre at the famed Pasadena Playhouse, and most of us in this room came to appreciate the lifetime roles that he opened up for us. John was a unique individual, and truth be told, he took pleasure in fostering that uniqueness in a variety of ways. He was a multi-faceted man: entertainer, historian, teacher, mentor...illusionist, puppeteer, and good friend.

John embodied the stuff of which legends are made.

From the perspective of a teacher, he was far ahead of his time in terms of participatory learning techniques. World History and American History were not just subjects to be taught in the traditional didactic sense, but adventures to be experienced. Tests were an experience in themselves. John preferred to weave stories throughout the test, so that we filled in the blanks where indicated to complete the historical narrative. History was alive, not just a class to be completed for the credits.

He loved bright students, and like a true mentor, gave them opportunities to think and excel outside the traditional classroom box.

He created a college level curriculum called Intellectual, Cultural, and Social History. We had the opportunity to get in on the ground floor with this incredible opportunity. In addition to the required studies, great moments and themes in history were acted out, complete with stage craft instruction, costuming, and drama skills. The pages of history came alive as we presented dramatic recreations of Greek Theatre, the Elizabethan Period, Shakespeare, Plymouth Plantation, Vaudeville, and scenes from The Civil War, World War I.

For this student, a new world of excitement opened up as stage and drama breathed life into history.

In our relationships with John, many of us honestly agreed to endure some great sacrifices on his behalf--a tribute to our respect for him as an individual. For example, in his Intellectual, Social, and Cultural history class, we were performing a historical re-enactment, when the fire alarm went off at school. That meant we evacuated, costumes and all, to the outside quad area with hundreds of our peers. Lori Walter, then Lori Demarjian, was wearing some sort of Viking helmet with bananas coming out the sides to depict horns. So there we were, standing outside, acutely aware that the entire student body was gawking at us in our unique costumes. I had the misfortune of standing out there in the open as Marco Polo. It wasn't that Marco Polo was a bad role...it was the costume. John had me wearing a purple tunic of sorts, and I'm still sad to say, a pair of purple tights. It was my fellow marching band members that gave me the most grief about that...and Lori and Scott Walter saw fit with John's gleeful encouragement to never let that story fade.

John's credits in the world of entertainment were impressive. He learned stagecraft and was a directing major at the prestigious Pasadena Playhouse...in its heyday, the launching site for many respected actors and actresses. In the world of magic and illusion, John grew up under the guidance of the legendary William Larsen, Sr. and the master craftsman Floyd G. Thayer. His boyhood friends were Bill and Milt Larsen, the brothers who founded the Magic Castle in Hollywood and helped raise magic to a respectable and incredibly popular art world wide.

He had a great love for the Society of American Magicians and its wholesome tenets as a society dedicated to magic as entertainment, with added purpose to debunk and expose the charlatans of the supernatural who prey upon unsuspecting victims. John had a personal code of chivalry, rooted in the mores of Victorian England. The S.A.M. and its traditions fit well into his personal culture, and he helped raise the organization to be the oldest and one of the most respected fraternities in the world.

He loved the stage and illusion genre of the magician, performing in homes as well as on stage in full evening shows. The "Annual Show" became a memorable activity every year, as the S.A.M. presented a full evening of magic, often to support a school class or worthy cause.

He was awarded almost every honor the S.A.M. can bestow, including Elected Member of the Magic Hall of Fame and Honorary Life Member. The Magic Circle in England elevated him to the top degree of Member of the Inner Magic Circle with Gold Star. And, he was a faithful member of the Magic Castle in Hollywood...the Academy of Magical Arts and Sciences.

He went up the ranks of the local S.A.M. Assembly 22, and then through the ranks of the national organization to be its President from 1966-1967. He was the first editor of the Los Angeles Wand, first a publication for the national organization, then the monthly periodical of Los Angeles Assembly 22. He helped memorialize National Magic Day in the U.S., and helped parlay that into National Magic Week, which ends on October 31, the day the great Houdini died. He also authored "The Magic Man", a biography of the great magician Herman Hanson.

His greatest passion, though, was the S.A.M. Hall of Fame and Magic Museum, which he helped found in Hollywood in 1971. It really was the embodiment of a dream, and John poured himself into its construction and perpetuation. He was always in his element at the Hall, whether on stage performing his memorable version of the spot can, or making Joanne the Duck convincingly come to life as she picked the wrong cards out of the deck. He loved pounding some boards together and creating exhibits, often in his own inimitable manner...he derived great pleasure from the fellowship that was born on the worknights at the Hall. In the

early days, a 3 a.m. quit time was not uncommon. Many years ago, he began publishing the Magic Museum Messenger, a quarterly publication about the progress of the Hall with historical articles by many people in this room today.

John was also a member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians Ring 96, and was a past national president of the puppeteers of America. He built awe inspiring collection of puppets from all over the world, and had studied and performed the famous Japanese puppet genre called Bunraku.

Now even in magic, the heart of a teacher was at work. John helped form the first Boy Scouts of America Explorer Post dedicated solely to magic...the Wondrous Order of Wizards, Explorer Post 1313E. The Post met at the Hall of Fame, and John devised a very healthy approach to training these young people. It's worthy of note that before it became a popular crusade, John had quietly incorporated young women into the Post and into full membership in the Explorer program. His desire was not to create professional magicians, but to give high schoolers a broad scope of what we might call holistic training: the techniques of magic, stage lighting and stage craft, the deep history of magic, and the code of conduct required of productive citizens. Although quite a few scouts went on to perform as full or part time professionals, all of them walked away with enriched lives and skills as a result of John's mentoring. His efforts with young people in this venue earned him the highly prized Silver Beaver Award in scouting.

John was schooled at John Muir College in the 1950's. When it became John Muir High School years later, John became a fixture at the school, helping raise it's History department to college-bound levels. John's master's degree was obtained from the University of Southern California, where he met the renowned drama historian Dr. Butler. In another quirk of history and fate, I studied under Dr. Butler a few decades later, and John and I returned to the good Doctor's classroom for a historical demonstration of the Bunraku form of Japanese puppetry.

We've talked about magic, puppetry, teaching, and even scouting. Finally, we look at John in the light of a friend. Plenty of you in this room have enjoyed 12th night celebrations at John's home...a reflection of his Anglican roots. These Christmas season evenings became legendary in and of themselves, but of course the highlight was consuming as much of dear Anna's Christmas cookies as one could tactfully consume.

There were the exhibits with hidden meanings...the test papers to show how many of the riddles we could work out. I suspect, although it has never been truly verified, that John the magician had a way of forcing who won the prizes for unraveling the riddles, but I suppose we may never truly know! And there was the highlight, at least it was supposed to be the highlight, of discovering the shriveled pea wrapped in foil and hidden in the 12th night cake. I'm still confused about what the shriveled pea meant, but we all dutifully accepted the honor with proper respect and surprise when it came our way. Again, I suspect John really engineered who got that prize, but we'll leave that mystery to the pages of 12th night history.

One of the great joys of visiting John's home was visiting with our beloved Anna, whose Christmas cookie recipe will probably wind up in the Smithsonian Institute. She has always been gracious and welcoming, and as a minister, I hold a doctrinal suspicion that God will reserve special jewels in her crown for over seven decades of service to the Smith and Zweers households, and to those of us who are privileged to call her friend.

John's home, of course, is a museum in and of itself, and reflects his love of history and the entertainment arts. The mannequins in period costumes...St. Lucia in her 12th night gown and candle lit crown...puppet displays from around the world...and the 8 by 10 glossy photographs of those who joined John in the pursuit of the highest forms of magical entertainment.

And then, the spiritual side of John Zweers. He was always an honorable and honest man. He taught Sunday School for the Episcopal church for a time, and when I last spoke over the phone with him, just 2-3 weeks ago, we talked of Christ, and he calmly observed that we was in God's hands, ready for a new chapter. As the consummate and well-read historian, I imagine that he will enjoy vigorous heavenly conversations with many of the luminaries of history about whom he taught for so many years.

If indeed all the world's a stage, John was one of its most colorful and devoted actors, enriching lives and maintaining deep loyalties to long-time friends. To have been among his friends is to have been enriched in many ways, and to now carry on the spirit of joy and passion with which he enjoyed history, the entertainment arts, and most deeply, his friendships. May we all endeavor to bless others with the great treasures of time and friendship...the treasure that John so much enjoyed passing along to us.

Amen.