



Mr. Fantastick

H I M S E L F

BY CHERYL CUDDEBACK



MEMORY
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Who'd have ever guessed that the producer of the longest running musical in the world lived in Forest Hills? His name was Lore Noto and the musical was *The Fantasticks*. I'm not talking about Broadway's current production appearing at the Snapple Theater in Times Square.

I'm talking about the off Broadway production that launched the careers of Jerry Orbach and Peter Falk. Later on, Liza Minnelli, Elliott Gould, and Glenn Close appeared in it. The show's most famous song, "Try to Remember" was performed by Bobby Darin, Harry Belafonte and even Gladys Knight & the Pips.

What started out as a reading in an acting class Noto attended turned into the world's longest running musical in the world as per The Guinness Book of Records.

Lorenzo Noto was born in Brooklyn 1923. After his mom died when he was only three years old, he and his brothers were sent to live at the Brooklyn Home for Children. Their father frequently visited them.

His theatrical background started in the orphanage by appearing in the shows they put on. Noto always looked forward to the little old ladies who would pat him on the head after the show and tell him how wonderful he was.

During his teen years he helped his dad operate a pool hall in Ridgewood. He went against his father's wishes and studied to be a commercial artist. During the day he worked as an apprentice at an art studio. At night he attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts to study acting. In later

years he was the recipient of an Alumni Achievement Award given by the Academy. Eventually he began performing in the classics

written by Chekhov and Ibsen. He appeared in libraries and churches and even wrote and directed short plays for the YMCA.

When he was old enough, Noto attempted to enlist into the army but was denied because of his poor eyesight. Not one to easily give up he joined the Merchant Marines. While in combat at the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium he was gravely injured when a German rocket hit the building he was in. As a result Noto was among a group of men to be the first merchant seamen to be awarded the Purple Heart by the U.S. army.

Noto gives credit to the armed forces in helping him work in Broadway shows. "The harsh disciplines I learned taught me the importance of collaboration... 'Stroke oars together' is a life survival truth."



After the war Noto returned to the commercial art industry yet still found time to perform in several Off-Broadway productions. He also married and set up house in Queens, New York.

After seeing *The Fantasticks* Noto started negotiating for the play. When raising the funds

he wore a classic white suit. His pitch was so convincing many thought he was extremely wealthy. Despite competition, he became the chief producer because of his reputation as being an honest person who gets the job done. His passion for the musical's success was so strong that he sunk his life savings into the show even

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though he was married with a growing family to feed. But it paid off. Notwithstanding the reviews the show received after opening night, it continued to run for 42 years. It won an off-Broadway Obie Award and a special Tony Award. The only dark side to Noto's success was when he produced another musical, *The Yearling*. Years earlier, it was made into a movie starring Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman. After three performances it folded. Some people think Noto was never the same afterwards.

The same drive behind Noto's success on Broadway was also behind his love of tennis. He began playing while living in Inwood with his young family and continued when they later moved to Lefrak City. While *The Fantasticks* rose in popularity the Notos moved to Forest Hills Gardens. The draw was the West Side Tennis Club. Back then joining the West Side meant attending a formal tea. Whether it was Noto's acting ability or the new way of thinking introduced during the sixties, the Club's board gave Brooklyn born Lorenzo Noto their seal of approval. Even Noto's unique tennis playing style was accepted. He often appeared on court with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was quick to tell people that he never inhaled.

There were times played the part of one of the major character. During his last stint, he gave 6,348 performances, longer than of any actor in a single role up to that time.

Noto was as unconventional as he was resourceful. When he received offers to take *The Fantasticks* to Broadway he declined. It's believed that had he done so, *The Fantasticks* may not have had the long run it played. Noto also approved a television version of the show to be aired while it still appeared in the theater, thereby breaking a long standing Broadway tradition.

Mel Brooks was a close friend of Noto. When *The Producers* was being made into a movie back in 1968, Noto and a several of other family members appeared as extras in the movie. When

Brooks was working on *Springtime for Hitler*, he shared offices with Noto on West 46th Street. Ann Bancroft, Brooks' wife, often called the Noto's household at all hours of the night demanding to know where her husband was. Noto was fortunate in that his wife, Mary was hardly concerned about his whereabouts like Bancroft was about Brooks.

His last performance took place on his birthday in 1986. Noto needed to retire due to health problems. He also wanted to close the show by going out "with style, grace and nobility" since the box office advance sales were still good.

Not everyone felt the same way. The cast and crew nagged Noto to keep the show running. Noto explained his situation to tennis buddy, Donald Thompson, a fellow member of the West Side Tennis Club. Even though Thompson had no theatrical background he did have the funds to keep the show alive another 20 years by becoming its co-producer.

Due to the high rent the theater owners were charging, *The Fantasticks* closed its doors in 2002 with Mr. Noto personally bringing down the final curtain. He died 3 years later.

In 2006 *The Fantasticks* debuted once again where it continues to appear at the Jerry Orbach Theater in the Times Square area. It may not be the exact show that once appeared at the Sullivan Theater but *The Fantasticks* is back nonetheless

One cannot help but admire how Lore Noto lived his life. He was a stand up kind of guy; a good husband and father. Some even think he even had a pretty decent back hand on the tennis courts. His genuine down to earth person demeanor was atypical for his elevated role in the theater. Knowing Noto's background and his approach towards following his dreams, he can no doubt be considered a shining example of what can happen when you listen to your gut instinct and don't give into the common social moirés.