

# Anthony Zerbe's 'Mirrors' spotlight St. Martin's Place

By Emily Morrison

When he first arrived in Rochester to play Judge Frank Troy in GeVa Theatre's current production of playwright Tom Dulack's *Diminished Capacity*, Anthony Zerbe sat down to a meal with a local reporter. During the course of the conversation, the actor offered an intriguing observation about the character who finds himself at the center of a premise that no longer holds.

The play, by zeroing in on a violent confrontation that takes place at the very seat of judicial power, sheds unflattering illumination on a criminal justice system that doesn't work as it was intended to. Judge Troy, says Zerbe, is not simply looking for the answers. "He's trying to figure out what the questions are."

Next Tuesday afternoon, Anthony Zerbe plans to enact another role that unintentionally places some of us in the same quandary. On May 27 at 4 p.m., Zerbe will appear at GeVa Theatre in "It's All Done with Mirrors," a one-man dramatic rendering of the poetry of e.e. cummings. GeVa has agreed to donate use of the space for the presentation, which Zerbe conceived as a means of raising money for the benefit of St. Martin's Place, a neighborhood meal program operated at 55 Ontario Street in the northeast section of downtown Rochester.

Those of us who are given to making metaphysical connections are sorely tempted to indulge in obvious ruminations. Left to our own devices, we ponder possible correlations between the shortcomings of our criminal justice system and the deficiencies of a sociopolitical mechanism that turns the institutionalized mentally ill into the streets and pours billions of tax dollars into defense while cutting back on much-needed social programs.

Anthony Zerbe doesn't. On the contrary, he implores us to refrain from reading *anything* into this act of simple generosity and gratitude. There's no mystique, no heroics and no thematic link to forge between the benefit reading and *Diminished Capacity*, unless you count the idle speculations of journalists whose fondness for analysis causes them, as Zerbe wryly observes, "to want to equate soup kitchens with the circuit court."

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e.e. cummings

So here's the rub: come if you love poetry or drama, come if you have \$5 to donate to a worthy Catholic charity, come if you happen to be downtown or if you're committed (or curious) enough to drive a few miles out of your way for first-class entertainment by a dedicated stage actor more widely acknowledged for his many roles in films and television. Perhaps best known for his Emmy-award-winning role on the television series *Harry O*, Zerbe was seen most recently in the TV specials *Dream West* and *North and South Part II*, and as the prosecuting attorney in the Denver-Carrington trial in *Dynasty*. His film appearances include the upcoming *Hell Camp* and the currently running *Off Beat*, as well as *The Dead Zone*, *The First Deadly Sin*, *Who'll Stop the Rain*, *The Turning Point*, *Farewell My Lovely*, *Rooster Cogburn*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Judge Roy Bean* and *Papillon*. Among his Broadway credits are *Terra Nova*, *The Little*



Foxes, *Moon Besieged* and Dulack's *Solomon's Child*.

"Why am I doing it?" Zerbe counters when confronted with what appears to be a leading question. "Well, I look at it this way," he begins. "The soup kitchen feeds 75 people twice a day, a lot of them mothers and children. If I can share an hour of e.e. cummings with a theater full of people who pay \$5 apiece, then what we end up with is that *everybody wins*. The soup kitchen wins, the mothers and kids win, the audience wins. And if it means that the people who go to St. Martin's will get to go there a little longer, then it's definitely worth the effort."

"Everybody has to pay — I'm even going to pay," Zerbe adds. "Howard (Millman)'s giving us the theater. Somebody's going to turn on the lights; somebody going to sell the tickets. Cummings is going to be spoken in the theater and echo and dazzle everybody with his extraordinary footwork. And I have the privilege of speaking this arrangement of English that is so completely unlike any other."

The benefit also offers Zerbe an opportunity to thank Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan for her support during the production of *Diminished Capacity*. Sister Pat, a Sister of St. Joseph and GeVa's literary director, originally mentioned St. Martin's Place to Zerbe, whose brainstorm was born when he discovered that St. Martin's is administered by Sister Pat's "fellow" SSJs, Sisters Margaret Brennan and Marie Brown.

Opened in September, 1984, St. Martin's serves approximately 1,000 meals a week to people who have come to rely on this service, either as a primary or supplementary source of nutrition, according to Sister Pat. Sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph, St. Martin's is operated entirely on donations of money, food and supplies. The service of its two administrators is supplemented by aid from more than 100 volunteers from churches, organizations and the Marketview Heights neighborhood itself.

"With the meal as its focus, St. Martin's tries to provide hospitality in a safe and friendly atmosphere, where people can gather, meet and enjoy some time together," Sister Pat explains. "Since this contact often surfaces the struggles and problems that people suffer, St. Martin's has been able to offer other informal services."



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Anthony Zerbe

These include referrals to agencies, emergency assistance to families and individuals, summer camp sponsorship for neighborhood children, personal support for men and women in drug and alcohol programs, emergency transportation to hospitals and clinics, help with truancy problems among children and availability to families in need of support.

Zerbe expresses genuine admiration for the unselfish efforts of those whose work makes St. Martin's a success. Moreover, his stay in Rochester thus far has been a pleasant surprise. "I'm responsive to the play because I like what the play says about the judicial system," says this stage veteran who postponed a role in a new Alan Parker movie opposite Robert DiNiro and Mickey Rourke to star in the world premiere of GeVa's *Diminished Capacity*. "I'm surprised and delighted by GeVa. The set's super; the lighting works; the play's well-directed; it's a good cast. I think the theater works, the staff works and the city works — it's a beautiful microcosm of an American city."

The e.e. cummings reading, in effect, might be considered Zerbe's farewell present to people whose lives have touched him in a singular way, as well as the reverse. "It's All Done with Mirrors" promises to take us on a side trip into the realm of pure theater, giving life to the words of a man who was undoubtedly America's prototypical "performance poet."

Witnessing an impromptu "dress rehearsal" in Zerbe's temporary Rochester apartment, you can't help marveling at the literal avalanche of imagery concocted by a poet whom Zerbe depicts as "wandering effortlessly through the language. It's gorgeous," Zerbe gasps during a break in the action. "and you can't fathom it. If you just let the images wash over you, then you emerge newborn."

Critic Harriet Monroe, writing about cummings for *Poetry* magazine in 1924, might have been previewing this very performance in

her incisive summary of the poet's effect on those who encounter his work on the printed page. "The poet always seems to be having a glorious time with himself and his world even when the reader loses his breath in an effort to share it. He is agile and outrageous as a faun, and as full of delight over the beauties and monstrosities of this brilliant and grimy old planet. There is a grand gusto in him."

Zerbe's own gusto is clearly reflected in the persona he plans to create on the GeVa stage. "Like the burlesque comedian," he quotes cummings, in a line Zerbe believes could be the poet's epitaph, "I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement."

"The mind provides no answer to the problem of suffering," wrote John Peale Bishop in a 1948 essay on the body of cummings' work. "The answer, even for a poet, is not in words . . . For what can oppose the poverty of the spirit, but the pride of the body? . . . And in cummings there is from now on, in all he writes, an exaltation of the lowly and lively. He is himself, and he accepts his common lot."

Like the character he plays in *Diminished Capacity*, Zerbe makes no attempt to spoon-feed us all of the answers. Nevertheless, his vivid interpretation of even a fraction of the eternal questions is as physically mobile as it is emotionally moving.

If any such connections are to be made between one performance and the other in the last analysis, however, Zerbe himself would undoubtedly be more circumspect. As Frank Troy said in the final moments of the second act, "It's at least a first small step in the right direction."

*(Diminished Capacity will finish out its GeVa run on May 31. For further information about Anthony Zerbe's benefit performance or St. Martin's Place, call Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan at 232-1366.)*

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