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# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

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## Waiting Tables While Waiting for a Big Break



Brad Zimmerman will perform his one-man show, *My Son the Waiter, A Jewish Tragedy*, at Bucks County Playhouse from March 23 to April 9. Photo provided

By **Marissa Stern**

Brad Zimmerman grew up playing sports. An all-around athlete, he played baseball, soccer, tennis, basketball — everything except hockey.

“I had weak ankles,” he laughed.

So naturally, he became a comedian.

“My early life was totally sports,” said the Oradell, N.J., native who went to the now-defunct Camp Akiba in the Poconos for seven years. “There was no indication whatsoever that I would end up doing what I’m doing. So it’s quite remarkable.”

He recalled taking an aptitude test in high school that led him in the direction of the arts. He studied theater — and still played soccer — at Rollins College in Florida before pursuing two years of graduate

school at Penn State University. But he realized pursuing his MFA meant he was avoiding moving to New York, so he quit.

Zimmerman moved to New York in 1978 to chase his dreams of performing and has been there ever since. But it wasn't an easy journey.

"If every audition was hitting baseballs, I'd be a superstar," he joked.

Zimmerman, 63, spent 29 years waiting tables as he took acting classes and learned to perfect his craft. After taking a stand-up comedy class, he finally started to get out in the world, as he says. He found a niche in the combination of acting and comedy and writing his own material.

He recounts his story in a one-man show, *My Son the Waiter, a Jewish Tragedy*, at the Bucks County Playhouse starting March 23.

"It's not just one of those stories where somebody keeps plugging away and plugging away and all of a sudden gets a break," he said. "That's not my story."

Throughout his career, he's hit many strides. He's opened for legendary comedians such as George Carlin and Joan Rivers. He played a lawyer on the HBO hit *The Sopranos* — close enough to being the lawyer his mother might have wanted him to be — and has done other work in TV.

*My Son the Waiter* showcases what he's learned along the way, and it's a story that — despite its specific callout to Jews — resonates with a wide audience.

"I chronicled my journey, which was a real struggle, into this hybrid — part theater, part stand-up. It's not just funny, it's very poignant. A lot of people find it very inspiring, and it's not just for Jews. It's a universal piece," he said. "There's the Jewish mother, of course, who plays this huge role in the struggle and that kind of thing, but it's a universal piece."

By sharing his struggles, he's been able to connect with people who understand the challenges he faced, even if their challenges were different than his.

"That's been the journey. It's been about overcoming myself, my own issues, all sorts of things — lack of confidence, poor self-image, all these things have been a journey and to get to that point where you really believe in what you're doing and the product," he said. "Self-improvement is one of the greatest natural highs in the world. Not itsy bitsy self-improvement, but really pronounced where you're creating something that's unique and kind of stands on its own, and I think that's what I've done. I think it's a one-of-a-kind kind of thing and very original."

The show offers plenty of laughs.

"I hear success stories that are mind boggling," he says in a clip on the show's website. "This one's the top headache doctor in the world. This one's building a home in Florida, 125,000 square feet. Can you imagine what [my mother] tells her friends about me?" — donning an exaggerated accent — "If all goes well, I think Brad is going to buy a bookcase."

But there are also moments of poignancy and reflection.

Amid the lessons learned of paying the price to achieve success and finding the drive to pursue what you love, he also learned more about himself and his own ambitions.

These are lessons he's taking with him as he continues to work on a sequel, *My Rise to the Middle*.

"I wouldn't have waited tables for 29 years if for some reason I didn't think I had something," he said.

"At that time, it was thinking I had something in the comedic arena. So that's probably why I never gave up because deep down underneath the self-doubt and all that was a belief system that I did have something, so it became a challenge."

He began work on *My Son the Waiter* in 2005 and continued working on it and performing it periodically until 2013 when he was doing a three-week run in Florida — which turned into four months — and the owner of the theater called in two producers to see the show. They bought the touring rights for seven years.

Originally, the show had a different title until the theater owner gave him a suggestion.

"He said, 'Put Jewish in the title; it's a great selling point in Florida.' And some guy who worked with him came up with this title and I go, 'My God,'" he said, adding with a laugh that the one who came up with the title was not Jewish.

The name of the piece illustrates Zimmerman's struggle but with a comedic twist.

"You know as well as I do, the whole thing is 'my son the doctor,' 'my son the lawyer' — when your son is a waiter for 29 years, I mean, you know, let's face it, it's not something you're bragging about, and that's the whole thing with the Jewish mothers. They want to say, 'my son the doctor,'" he said.

"Nobody has ever said, 'My son is a waiter, in fact he can carry four plates now and he's learning how to use a tray.'"

But ultimately it's a success story any mother — Jewish or not — would be happy with.

As he plans to look into doing more TV and film work while working on his sequel, he hopes that the audience will learn, as he has, that "it is within each person to achieve excellence."

"Being creative is huge in any capacity. It doesn't mean to make money at it but the notion of being creative is huge in life. Find whatever it is — knitting, it doesn't matter what it is, painting, pottery — it's very important, a creative life. ... It's not a dumbed-down piece, it's a provocative piece and it will make people think if they want to.

"It's, 'What is the meaning of your life? Are you living that life?'" he added. "So I think that my show addresses that."

Tickets and showtimes for *My Son the Waiter, A Jewish Tragedy* are available at [bcptheater.org](http://bcptheater.org).