



## Legendary Press Agent Bobby Zarem's New York Exit Interview

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By Tripp Whetsell

Bobby Zarem, the self-proclaimed mastermind behind the "I Love New York" tourism campaign, has left the city that he "literally saved" [his words] almost four decades ago. Over the weekend, Zarem, 73 — the manic celebrity publicist who once crammed 500 boldface names into the West 57th Street subway station for the premier party of the film *Tommy*; the screaming, slovenly spinmeister who shilled for Stallone, Cher, Dustin Hoffman, Sophia Loren, and tons more; the inveterate potty-mouthed promoter who hyped such movies as *Saturday Night Fever*, *Dances With Wolves*, *Scarface*, *Rambo*, *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, etc. — moved back to his childhood home in Savannah, Georgia. Though Zarem says it's for good, he also insists he's not retiring and that longtime assistant Bill Augustine will continue to run the New York office out of Augustine's apartment. On the eve of Zarem's departure — and before having his last dinner for a while at Elaine's — the man *Newsweek* once dubbed "superflack" spoke to Daily Intel.

**You're one of the most famous publicists of all time, even though you've said repeatedly that no one knows what you do.**

They don't and that's because I'm not a bragger. If you're a press agent and you're smart, you don't tell people what you do because if it doesn't pan out you end up looking like an asshole. I never told my clients what I was doing in case it never materialized, and they never questioned it. They just knew I would get the job done and I always did, which is the difference between me and everyone else in my profession. I'm basically an artist.

**What is your relationship now with some of your early clients, like Dustin Hoffman, with whom you had a falling out after you stopped working together?**

We are okay again now, but it took awhile. Dustin had been my client back in the early seventies when he had just started to make it big. What happened was that it was New Year's Eve Day around 1973 and it was the last day of our contract. He called me and asked if I could score him some dope and I spent half the day trying to find some down in the Village. I got it and dropped it through his mail slot and didn't hear from him again. I was hurt, but that was a long time ago and now I'm over it.

**What's your take on the gossip industry and entertainment PR today versus when you first started, particularly in the cyber age?**

It's a whole different world and there's no logic to it, no building of a campaign. Today there is no schedule or program anymore, because there are so many outlets that by the time major publications learn something it's already been out on Gawker or Nikki Finke. In terms of today's celebrity publicists, there are definitely some good ones out there, but a lot of them are in it for the wrong reasons — either just for the money or because they're trying to get laid.

**Maybe so, but you've influenced and trained a lot of them, like Lizzie Grubman and Peggy Siegal, for instance.**

I never trained Lizzie, but I always liked her, oddly enough. As for Peggy, I saved her life. We first met at a dinner party thrown by a mutual friend who was a reporter for *Women's Wear Daily*, and after that I didn't see Peggy for six months. The next time I saw her she was in a coffee shop on the Upper West Side near where I lived at the time and used to have breakfast every morning. One day, I saw her in there crying and when I went over to find out what was wrong she said her mother had told her she was no better than a dog and that she was going to commit suicide. I immediately gave her a job and put her in touch with my psychiatrist.

**Is there any truth to what she's said about your once throwing a typewriter at her because she garbled a phone message?**

It's a complete and total lie. You know how wide desks are, right? How could I have missed if I was standing on one side of my desk and she was on the other?

**If what you're saying is true, why do you think she made it up?**

That's Peggy Siegal. That's who she is. That's her nature, and by the way, after we parted company and she still had a key to my office she came in one night, broke into my metal safe, and stole my black book that had all my personal phone numbers and addresses in it.

**Speaking of breaking and entering, I understand you've had a little experience with that yourself, like the time you forced your way into Paramount Studios and swiped the publicity photographs for *Saturday Night Fever*.**

What happened was that Paramount thought they had a piece of shit on their hands and so did Robert Stigwood, who hired me to represent *Saturday Night Fever*. They told me I couldn't give art to *Time* and *Newsweek* because they thought it would either delay the reviews or the review would be very small and go unnoticed because there wasn't a picture with it. In the meantime, both Frank Rich, who was then at *Time*, and David Ansen, at *Newsweek*, who are friends of mine, had their tongues hanging out waiting to see it. I also told Martha Duffy, who was *Time's* arts editor back then, about it one night up at Elaine's and she asked me how quickly I could get the pictures to her. The next day, I went over to the New York offices of Paramount and asked *Saturday Night Fever's* marketing director for them. When he wouldn't give them to me, I shoved him onto the sofa and went across the hall to the art department. I grabbed six color negatives and ran out. This is a true story. And I sent one to *Time*, *Newsweek*, and

*People*. *Us* wasn't in existence quite yet. It was about to come out and they put Travolta on the first cover.

**You've said many times that you were the one who first introduced Mia and Woody at Elaine's back in the early eighties. How did that happen?**

Mia was on Broadway in a play called *Romantic Comedy* with Tony Perkins, and I went to it. It was a Friday night, and I was there with Shakira and Michael Caine and Pat Kennedy Lawford, and we went backstage afterward. We were going to Elaine's and we asked her if she'd like to join us and she said yes. As we were pulling up in front, Mia said to me, "Isn't this where Woody Allen hangs out?" and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "Do you think he'll be there tonight?" and I said "Probably," because it was a Friday night and Woody was there almost every Friday night back in those days. As it turns out, though, he was not there that night, but then the next night the Caines had a dinner party at Elaine's and Woody was there with another woman and I got up and went over and said, "Woody, Mia would like to meet you," and he said, "Oh, okay," and they talked for a few minutes. As he was leaving, he asked me for her phone number, which I gave him after Mia gave me permission, but he didn't call her until ten days later.

**Since you were responsible for their union, whose side were you on when the scandal happened years later?**

I don't believe any of it. I think Mia made it up and I think she's a liar and I sort of blocked her out after that. I knew about Woody and Soon-Yi at a very early stage — like six months before it broke. I thought it was just interesting, but I didn't see anything wrong with it.

**One of your biggest pet projects in recent years has been the Savannah Film Festival, which you helped establish with the Savannah College of Art. As a result of your work on the festival, are there any young actors you particularly like these days?**

I like a lot of them. James Franco is great, and we've become very good friends. Joseph Gordon-Levitt is fantastic, but I haven't met him. Then there's Jeremy Renner, who's in *Hurt Locker*. He came to the Savannah Film Festival last year and actually tricked me into getting up onstage with him. I got a standing ovation.

**Besides the festival, I know that you're also planning to resume work on your memoirs once you get settled. Do you have a title yet?**

I don't have a title yet, but I've gotten a couple of calls this week from publishers. The first chapter in my book is about the time I met Tallulah Bankhead by sneaking into her room at the Waldorf when I was 8 and asking for her autograph. She threw the *Savannah Morning News* and from there it's going to be about how I got to where I am today.