

Captain Manuel Zora, Provincetown

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I remembered (but only vaguely) having previously encountered the name when I saw it typed over a half-page of Louis Sheaffer's notes—"Manuel Zora—Provincetown." A seasoned news reporter and columnist, Sheaffer was then working on a biography of the playwright Eugene O'Neill.¹

Sheaffer's notes suggest that Manuel Zora's memories of the playwright smack of local legendry, especially what Zora says is corroborated by no one else. In the 1910s and early 1920s O'Neill spent a good deal of time in Provincetown, for a while, along with his wife the writer Agnes Bolton and their son Shane, as a year-round inhabitant. Not specifically useful to Sheaffer, these notes, foreshortened as they appear to be, nevertheless piqued my interest in Manuel Zora. They brought to the fore a figure Provincetown history vaguely remembered by me as one of quasi-folkloric import. His given name—Manuel—indicated that in all likelihood Manuel Zora was a "Portygee" (as the Portuguese are still called by some), but the surname "Zora" rang no clear Portuguese-language

¹ Notes by Louis Sheaffer, "Manuel Zora—Provincetown," Sheaffer-Eugene O'Neill Collection, Shain Library, Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut.

bell in my ears. Was “Zora,” I considered, a made-up name in and for America, something concocted at Ellis Island, perhaps, by an ignorant immigration official eager to get on with his work, a name that had stuck to Manuel for the rest of his life? Or was it a perfectly good Portuguese surname, one that might be explained as deriving from a common trade or now arcane occupation, a village or other geographical place or feature? A check of my pocket Portuguese-English dictionary offered a solution right off. While it does not list “zora,” the first meaning it gives for “zorra” is “an old fox. Now that was news to me, since the only Portuguese word for fox (young or old, wily or not) that I was aware of was “raposa.” As I soon learned, Manuel Zora—well and exactly named—was widely referred to, especially by the United States Coast Guard, as “The Sea Fox.” He had earned this honorific epithet for his skill in never allowing himself (or his boat) to be caught with the goods by the United States Coast Guard during his many years of rum-running.

Manuel Zora was already celebrated as a skilful fisherman when he first met Eugene O’Neill. Seven years younger than the budding writer, he recalled that the young O’Neill was a poor drinker—“eight drinks and he’d be pretty stewed”—and when a barroom argument (usually started by O’Neill) came to the point of a fight, he would get behind Zora and say, “Go ahead, Manny.” Zora felt the playwright was “damn close to a genius,” but “wasn’t really a nice person.” But “we respected one another,” he insisted. He felt I was good in my line, as he is in his,” conceded Captain Zora. If O’Neill’s “line” was drama or literature, Zora’s was fishing and, during the years of Prohibition, rum-running. And if Captain Zora was not impressed with O’Neill’s knowledge of the sea or his experience with boats, dismissing him as a “banana-head,” he did admire O’Neill’s angry response to any evidence of “phoniness.”

Manuel Zora was born in 1895 in Portugal, in the Algarvian seacoast fishing village of Olhão (where smuggling was wide-spread), arrived alone in the United States in his mid-teens, and, at the age of eighty-four, died in Portugal. He had gone back in Olhão, probably in 1962, where as an “americano” (a returned Portuguese who even gave English lessons at times) he was a figure interesting enough to be interviewed and written about, holding forth about his rum-running days in Provincetown and

the celebrities he had met.²

During his Provincetown years, besides fishing and rum-running, he had tried on several other hats. He modeled for at least one artist, ran a restaurant (the “White Whale”) in the 1920s, and performed with the Provincetown group, “The Wharf Players,” notably in the lead role in “Fish for Friday,” a play about Portuguese fishermen by Arthur Robinson, produced in 1932.³ But it was his prowess as a fisherman and his expertise and derring-do as a rum-runner that turned him into one of Provincetown’s own year-round celebrities. In fact, so well-known was Zora’s rum-running that in 1956 he became the subject of a book. Published by the reputable New York publisher, Thomas Y. Crowell, *The Sea Fox* bears the subtitle “The Adventures of Cape Cod’s Most Colorful Rumrunner.” On the title-page the authorship of the book is credited to “Scott Corbett with Captain Manuel Zora.”

In his later years Captain Zora became a fixture at public patriotic occasions—such as the ceremonies surrounding the visit of the ship *Mayflower II* to Provincetown in 1957 when he took ten boatloads of children—on his dragger, “*Sea Hawk*,” at no charge—to get an up-close look at the replica of the historical ship. And his patriotism extended beyond such local matters to the broader sweep of national politics and issues. In the late 1940s he took great interest in the policies of Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party’s candidate for President of the United States, going so far as to campaign on his behalf in several cities. At a later time, when Zora went to Washington to testify in support of a major harbor project for Provincetown, he recalled proudly that Senator Robert Taft, the powerful Republican from Ohio, had said of him afterwards, “You can feel the salt in his voice.”⁴ Small wonder, then, as the *Boston Globe* once reminded the local citizenry, “If P-town erects a statue in honor of Manny Zora, no one will be surprised.”⁵ It hasn’t happened.

But if there is still no monument to Captain Zora in Provincetown,

² <http://www.olhao.web.pt/Personalidades/Zora.htm>

³ “Plays Current at Summer Theatres,” *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1932, p. A29.

⁴ Frank Crotty, *Provincetown Profiles and Others on Cape Cod*, (Barre, MA: Barre Gazette, 1958); <http://capecodhistory.us/genealogy/family/f1096.html>

⁵ “Free Rides to See *Mayflower* Thrills Provincetown Youth,” *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1957, p. 3.

there is a sort of monument to him in literature. In O'Neill's great trilogy of plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) there appears "a Portuguese fishing captain," one Joe Silva." O'Neill describes him: "a fat boisterous man, with a hoarse bass voice. He has matted gray hair and a big grizzled mustache. He is sixty."⁶ He is drunk, as are his drinking friends, and in the course of their drinking the old captain "bursts into song":

A bottle of beer and bottle of gin
And a bottle of Irish whiskey oh!
So early in the morning
A sailor likes his bottle oh!

A moment or two later, Joe exclaims, regarding the wife of one of his companions, "By God, if ghosts look like the livin', I'd let Ezra's woman's ghost set on my lap! (*He smacks his lips lasciviously*)."

This remark is compatible with Manny Zora's reputation as a lover (or, at least, kisser). In *Provincetown Profiles*, Frank Crotty reports what one of Manny's friends told him about "a demonstration of love-making" that Manny once gave.

It seems Manny was standing by during a rehearsal of a group of P'town actors. The leading man, playing the role of a Portuguese fisherman, was making love to the leading lady. He was doing a poor job of it and getting the director exasperated. Finally the director spotted Manny.

"Hey, Manny," he yelled, "go up there on the stage and show this fellow how a Portuguese fisherman makes love."

"Will I!" Manny hooted, rolling up his sleeves.

They say the actress escaped with minor injuries.⁷

In O'Neill's play the choric banter between Joe Silva and his buddies continues beyond his smacking his lips "lasciviously." Turning to another of his companions, the Captain promises jokingly (in bad taste): "I'll water your grave every Sunday after church! That's the kind of man I be, by God. I don't forget my friends when they're gone!" (818) Later he offers testimony on the existence of ghosts: "There is

⁶ Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*, intr. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 683-867.

⁷ <http://capecodhistory.us/genealogy/family/f1096.html>

ghosts, by God! My cousin, Manuel, he seen one! Off on a whaler in the injun Ocean, that was. A man got knifed and pushed overboard. After than on moonlight nights, they'd see him a-settin' on the yards and hear him moanin' to himself. Yes, sir, my cousin Manuel, he ain't no liar neither—'ceptin' when he's drunk—and he seen him with his own eyes!" (818-19). Incidentally, as I read about Captain Manny Zora's many and various exploits—the weathering of squalls and storms at sea and his evasion of Coast Guard captains hell-bent on bringing him in—I thought that this historical avatar of the Provincetown fishing boat captain may be a precursor of the fictional grandfather in *Leaving Pico*, Frank X. Gaspar's Provincetown novel of a couple dozen years back.⁸ If the whopping storyteller, the Portuguese John Joseph Carvalho, captain of a dory he has grandly named *Caravella*, who will not die until he has finished telling his tale to his grandson, ever had a precursor, he could have been Manuel Zora. The trick-mirror opposite of Manny Zora, skipper of the 38-foot "Mary Ellen," fabled fisherman, and ultra professional rum-runner, John Joseph is merely "a notorious poacher and scavenger, a drunk with no visible means of support except for his over-the-side dory fishing" (2).

⁸ Frank X. Gaspar, *Leaving Pico* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999).

