

BONOFF  
BURTON  
"BUSTER"

**BONOFF, Burton  
"Buster"**

January 9, 2000. Residence: 2201 North Central Ave., Phoenix, AZ; and West Warwick, RI. Beloved husband of Barbara (Wasserman) Bonoff. Devoted father of Larry Bonoff of West Warwick; and Betsy Menders of West Warwick. Dear brother of the late J. Lee Bonoff and Rhoda Lehman. Loving grandfather of Melissa. A memorial service will be

held Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. at Temple Beth El, 70 Orchard Ave., Providence. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to the American Diabetes Foundation, 2348 Post Rd., Warwick; or the American Heart Assn., 40 Broad St., Pawtucket. Shiva will be private. Arrangements are by the MOUNT SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL, 825 Hope St., Providence.

**73 1-11-2000  
'Buster' Bonoff dies at 75**

From Broadway shows to the glitter of Las Vegas acts, from country heroes to rock 'n' rollers, Burton L. "Buster" Bonoff brought some of the biggest names in entertainment and the arts to Rhode Island. An obituary, **C-4**; An appreciation, **F-1**



# Buster Bonoff wanted to draw audiences 'I'd invite to my home'

*Continued from the cover*

operated live theaters in Connecticut, and so it was natural that Buster and Barbara would go into the sometimes rough and tumble business of presenting shows.

After working in Connecticut, they took a look at Rhode Island, Barbara said yesterday.

"There's not much there, let's try it," she remembers Buster saying.

The early days "were a rough road," Barbara added. "We were losing money, losing money, losing money."

The Warwick Musical Theatre opened on June 24, 1955, and there are all of the now well-known stories of each usherette, as they were called, being required to bring an iron on wet nights. It was the only way to dry the seats. But the Bonoffs persisted, led by Buster's drive.

Saul Friedman, who helped start the theater along with Bonoff, remembers when Bonoff and he housed the dancers and chorus members at the Carleton Hotel in Narragansett. After shows at the theater, he said, the parties at the hotel would go on well into the wee hours.

Warwick Musical kept doing touring Broadway shows for a few years but "things really took off," Barbara said, when the theater went to a star policy, to Las Vegas kinds of acts such as Perry Como, Tom Jones and Engelbert.

It was Buster Bonoff's heyday, and he loved it. He worked long days and played hard, usually on the golf course, too.

On a dare one day in New York, he had his balding head shaved. It made him look like Kojak, people thought, and he loved playing with that. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, his sharp, not-to-be-forgotten presence was the force of Warwick Musical, and later in Phoenix, where the Bonoffs opened a second theater.

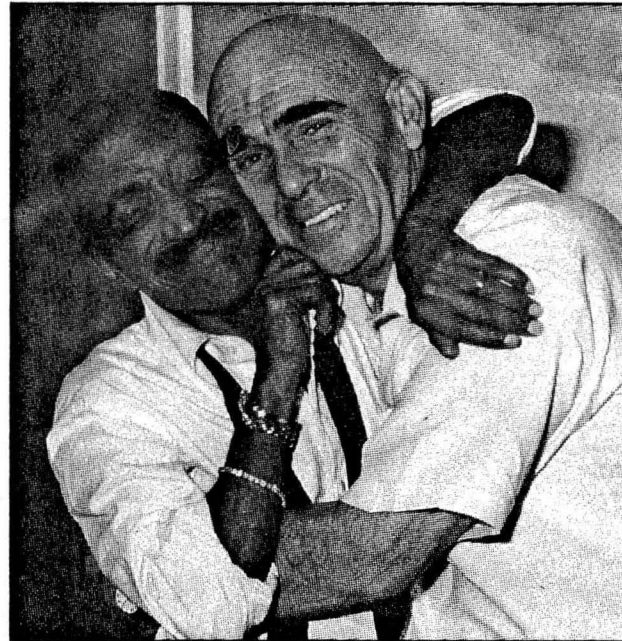
## Diabetes took his life

Buster always remained in fighter-pilot trim, and usually had a tan. He wore sharp, show biz clothes, often with a gold chain around his neck, for a time one with a gold razor blade dangling from it.

Many years ago he was diagnosed with diabetes and took insulin shots every day. His doctors told him to lose weight, and like the disciplined man he was, he shed poundage, and kept it off. Eventually, though, he died of complications resulting from the disease, his family said yesterday.

But for all of his life and with his problems, Buster Bonoff was a tough and shrewd guy with a real sense of humor, an honest man, but nobody's fool.

He sued a number of entertainers, including, most famously, Bob Hope, for not showing up at the Tent, which Rhode Island audiences



Journal/files

**BONOFF HAMS IT UP** with Sammy Davis Jr. in this photo from the walls of Bonoff's office.

always called the theater even though a permanent structure was built in 1967.

He was also a practical man. He once told this writer that he'd never fight with the press "because you guys are there every day," meaning that reporters had daily access to a newspaper's columns or a television station's airwaves.

But then he turned around and complained — vociferously — to editors at this newspaper because a reporter wore blue jeans to a press

conference with Jack Benny.

"You don't wear *dun-garees* to interview Jack Benny," he shouted on the phone. (Blue jeans were then banned at Warwick Musical as disrespectful, his son Larry Bonoff said yesterday.)

But news was different, Buster thought. Later, when the same reporter unmercifully panned Liberace at the Tent, he never said a word.

And he might have. For Buster and Barbara became good friends with many of the famous who entertained at Warwick, especially Liberace.

"I love Jack," Buster once said, and went on to tell a story of Benny falling asleep watching the Super Bowl at Bonoff's Phoenix condo.

"Six guys hootin' and hollerin', and there's Jack, sound asleep," Buster laughed.

Sports was a large part of his life. Golf was a passion.

Last summer, Johnny Mathis told of how much fun it was to play Warwick and get on the course with Buster. "The afternoon would just pass beautifully," Mathis said.

Buster also played a lot of golf with Sammy Davis Jr. They were good friends and Buster supported Davis's projects, especially the

Greater Hartford Open, which raised money for Davis's charities.

Once, in the mid-1960s, Buster and Davis were heading for a Phoenix hotel where Davis was to be the headliner. When they got there, the entertainer went to the back door.

"What's this," Buster asked.

Davis said it was the custom for black people to use the back door.

"No, you're not," said Buster, his son Larry recalled yesterday. "You're going in the front door with me."

"That was no big deal with Dad," Larry added. "Dad never saw color, he saw the person."

But it was with Liberace that Buster and Barbara became really close. They called him Lee, and Liberace headlined Warwick for years.

Buster once remembered that the entertainer was very clear about the difference between business and friendship.

When Liberace's gate receipts began to lag, "he was the one to say he should take a couple of years off," Bonoff once said. "We didn't have to do a thing."

## No raunchy acts

In later years, Buster Bonoff became somewhat disillusioned with the acts at Warwick. He felt they were not the old pros of earlier days. And he couldn't stand raunchy acts, such as Eddie Murphy. It didn't matter to Buster that Murphy was a surefire sellout.

"I made a lotta money on him," Buster once told the Providence Journal. "But I also told his manager

I'd never book him again unless he changed the act."

His motto, he added, was that he wanted to "book acts that will attract fans I'd invite to my home."

By the early 1990s, Buster was tiring. His diabetes and other illnesses had him in the hospital often, and he began to turn the running of the theater over to his children, Larry and Betsy.

"But I always considered him the general manager," Larry said yesterday. "He was the boss."

Friedman said even near the end, when Larry was running the day-to-day operation and Buster needed canes to get around, Buster kept a sharp eye on the business, tracking ticket sales and talking to agents.

Yesterday, Larry Bonoff said that he had consulted in the last weeks with his father concerning an act he is promoting.

## Time to retire

But as far back as 1988, Buster Bonoff was thinking that he'd been the boss long enough.

In an interview at the theater, he wondered aloud how much more time "the boy upstairs" would give him. "I want out, I really do," he said. And then he asked if he'd have another "10 or 12 years."

As it has turned out, Bonoff died Sunday night about 7:45, just 11 years and four months later.

Buster Bonoff, Rhode Island's greatest impresario, was right on, as usual.

— With reports from Andy Smith

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## OBITUARIES

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### Warwick Musical Theatre founder 'Buster' Bonoff

WARWICK — Burton "Buster" Bonoff, 75, of Phoenix, Ariz., founder of the Warwick Musical Theatre, died Sunday at Rhode Island Hospital, Providence. He was the husband of Barbara (Wasserman) Bonoff. They were married 53 years.



Born in Madison, Conn., a son of the late Leo and Sallie (Goldberg) Bonoff, he also maintained a summer home in Warwick.

A theatrical producer and concert promoter, Mr. Bonoff was the head of Bonoff Productions Inc., in Phoenix. He established the Warwick Musical Theatre in 1955 and served as its general manager until it closed last year.

Mr. Bonoff was inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame last May.

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A Marine veteran of World War II, he was a pilot who served in the South Pacific and attained the rank of second lieutenant. He was a 1943 graduate of Riverside Military Academy.

Mr. Bonoff was a member of the Phoenix Country Club and The 100 Club in Phoenix and was a past member of the Warwick Country Club. He supported many local charitable organizations and enjoyed playing golf.

Besides his wife, he leaves a son, Larry Bonoff of Warwick; a daughter, Betsy Menders of West Warwick, and a granddaughter. He was the brother of the late J. Lee Bonoff and Rhoda Lehman.

A memorial service will be held tomorrow at 10:30 a.m. in Temple Beth El, 70 Orchard Ave., Providence.