

The play's not the only thing



PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

FRANCO D'ALESSANDRO | playwright / poet

by Jennifer Nicole Sullivan

He never thought his query letters to publish an anthology of his plays would result in publishing a chapbook of poetry. But when Finishing Line Press asked to see some of Franco D'Alessandro's poetry, the native New Yorker dug out close to 100 poems he'd written since 1990. Sixteen, including several written after the death of his mother in 2005, made it into his first collection, "SUPPLICATIONS: Immediate Poems of Loss and Love" released in August. Before adding "poet" to his resume, D'Alessandro was already an internationally produced and published playwright.

His 2002 off-Broadway hit, "Roman Nights" also reached success in London and Prague. D'Alessandro who splits his time between Yonkers, N.Y., and Newport, has written more than 18 plays and teaches at inner city public schools and universities. Now he's editing a full-length poetry book and finishing a new play, "White Elephants Dancing the Flamenco."

At the beginning of your book, you call your poetry "immediate writing" — what is that?

It's inspired by this school of automatic writing where I'm experimenting with a stream of consciousness and engage in that. With poetry, I found that I would write uninterrupted and at the end of it, find a piece that was good. Anywhere from five to 30 minutes, I work rather uninterrupted, not focused on meter, rhyme and word placement. Automatic writing is very specific, you put your pen on the paper and you never lift it and never edit it. I didn't find that conducive to writing good poetry. I do edit. Some of them very sparingly. Others I've really worked on in the traditional sense. But all of them, they were written in bursts. My style in poetry is, I sit down and it all gets written.

Which poem resonates with you most?

"We Didn't Yet Understand" stands out to me. That was something that was written in five minutes and I think there's something really immediate to it. I had such a distinct recollection of finding my mom's pocketbook in the freezer. There was a time she was going through these tests, for Alzheimer's. It ended up being brain cancer. Sometimes we just thought she was being difficult; we did not know what was happening and I wanted to re-create that heartbreaking urgency. When you're going through this thing, it's very tumultuous emotionally. My mother was the world to me; we knew each other on a few different levels and as the youngest I was forever her 'baby.' I think I called her almost every single day, even when I was younger and didn't think it was cool; I didn't care because I knew she needed that and that's what mattered. She was a remarkable woman; more to her than met the eye, you know? The woman had no jealousy; no sense of self-pity...tough and so sweet. Perhaps the most thoughtful and generous person I'll ever know, and she taught me how to live; to enjoy what you have. But I think people who are that sensitive can't survive growing old. She never could have survived outliving one of her boys or my father; maybe that's why she left so soon. She left on her own terms that's for damn sure.

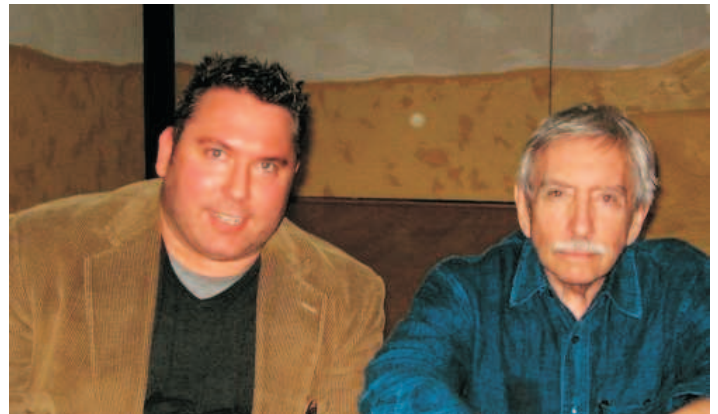
In your poetry and plays, you frequently mention elephants - in poems such as "Like Elephant Bones and Train Cars" and you're upcoming play. What's up with all the elephants?

Elephants pop up everywhere. I loved elephants since I was a child. I went on safari last October in Africa and it was fantastic. That was a full circle moment when I got to see the elephants up close and personal. They were very dangerous. We were charged several times. You got to see how fierce they can get. You cannot go near their calves. My passion for them is how intelligent they are. The ceremonies they have, the tails and trunks. There's a sense of community. It's mind-blowing how these creatures are intensely emotional. I think they speak to me on a profoundly sensual level that's very emotional.

You spent time with Edward Albee during your late 20s during residencies in Montauk, N.Y. What did you learn from the acclaimed playwright?

He's a wonderful conversationalist who kind of pushed me. I was writing "Roman Nights," about Tennessee Williams and Italian actress Anna

Magnani, his muse, and their artist/muse relationship. I'm alone with Edward. I said, "You knew Tennessee, he was a friend of yours. What can you tell me about him that might help me with this endeavor?"



Playwright and poet Franco D'Alessandro with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and mentor Edward Albee

He mentioned many things about his wonderful humor and great wit. People always associated him with drama, but he was such a funny, light-hearted person. He said, "I think Tennessee knew he was good, but I don't think he believed it." I thought, "Wow, there are so many layers to that onion." My God, we all struggle with that. And to think that Tennessee Williams was a man plagued with self-doubt after writing 26 masterpieces. That never left me — that we all have to have confidence in our work or it's the undoing of ourselves. Albee is a great man, a great artist. I'm honored to call him a friend.

Why did you write "Roman Nights?"

I kind of uncovered this relationship; wrote about it as an undergraduate student years ago. No one really understood the relationship of Tennessee and Anna. About the way she influenced his work. That sense of artistic chemistry. But that an American writer would be attracted to this Italian actress, go to Rome and hunt her down. They were friends until her death. In a way, it came to symbolize my own identity of Italian and American...and how these seemingly opposites can be so attracted to each other.

What was it like to have your play appear Off- Broadway?

It was a blessing; it had its downside too. I look at it as my own precious baby in terms of what it's given me in notoriety. It plays a lot of tricks on you when success hits you like that. There have been efforts to make it into a film. I've had three awful go-rounds. Three attempts to make the movie have ended in the typical Hollywood horror story, trying to change your story. I refuse to try to make just any version of this play. I would like to make this movie. We're waiting for the right producer to come around. What I'm looking for is someone who loves Tennessee and Anna as much as I do, but will make a beautiful, powerful movie about the subject matter that has integrity. The stars need to align with the right people.

On the back of your book, actress Olympia Dukakis is quoted as saying that your poems “possess what I value most - an emotional honesty and a keen wit.” How do you know her?

In my first professionally produced play, Christina Zorich (Dukakis' daughter) was the lead. Christina and I became instant friends. Her parents came to opening night and then the friendship slowly blossomed. I'd always looked at Olympia as an Anna Magnani type — she's always associated with qualities that were passionate, bold and intense. Here I was, working on “Roman Nights” 15 years ago and I'm becoming friends with this actress. I found myself writing parts with Olympia in mind. We did a workshop of my play “The Shattering” in 2004. We're going back to that for 2010 and we're talking about doing a production. It's one of those relationships that's kind of big sister, little brother. I call her ‘my wife from another life’... She likes to drink tequila with me and we tell naughty stories.

How does writing poetry compare to playwriting?

It's different in the sense that it's a lot more vulnerable because it's me, although I don't think one should assume the poet is in the poem. When I write a play, a lot of people try to pick it apart. You are creating a whole world in the play. The “I,” kind of gets lost in it.

In a good way. As a poet, it's been very naked.



with Oscar winner and dear friend Olympia Dukakis

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