



# An absurdist among us

## Newport playwright's collection of short works explores the many variations of love

### 'STRANGER LOVE: FIVE SHORT PLAYS'

**e** By Franco D'Alessandro  
Paperback/141 pages

Finishing Line Press, November 2010

Available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and [www.finishinglinepress.com](http://www.finishinglinepress.com)

BY JENNIFER NICOLE SULLIVAN

Playwright Franco D'Alessandro is a master of duality. The Italian-Irish-American writer who splits his time between Newport and New York City just released a collection of five short plays



D'Alessandro

titled, "Stranger Love," which carries dual meanings where "stranger" works as both compound noun and adjective.

In his 141-page collection (including a Q&A with the playwright) published by Finishing Line Press last November, the 43-year-old writer brilliantly balances humor and tragedy while exploring forms of love (platonic, familial, sexual, love of work) in each of the short plays written from 1996-2001.

"I think most of my work deals with the idea of understanding or the lack of it. I kind of always felt like understanding is like the highest form of love," said the native New Yorker at an East Village

cafe last month. "Understanding, in a really profound multi-layered way, is so much more than the traditional ways we think about love or define love."

In the late '90s, D'Alessandro fully fleshed out the need to be understood in his most recognized play, "Roman Nights," which explores the fascinating friendship between the late playwright Tennessee Williams and beautiful Italian actress Anna Magnani who experienced a deep, mutual understanding. The three-hour play ran off-Broadway in 2002, was produced in London and is in its fifth-year run in Prague, Czech Republic. This year, productions will open in Buenos Aires,

Argentina, and Moscow. On March 26 (Williams' 100th birthday), a 90-minute version titled "Tennessee & Anna" debuts in Los Angeles at The Odyssey Theater.

D'Alessandro's collection of short plays strips complicated scenarios to the bare bones and enters each story in medias res, in the middle of the action. In the collection's second play, "Waiting Station" — an existentialist play that nods heavily to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and the 15th century morality play, "The Summoning of Everyman" in its use of allegorical characters — two characters, Friend and

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## Short plays explore 'Stranger' as noun, adjective

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Stranger, wait for a train and explore the dynamics between past, present and future. The play ends with a satisfying absurdist twist à la "The Zoo Story," a style D'Alessandro surely soaked up under the tutelage of acclaimed playwright Edward Albee during residencies in Montauk, N.Y.

D'Alessandro gives another nod to absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco in "My Little Love Gun," when a sexually frustrated wife tosses a small stuffed rhinoceros (the mammalian title of Ionesco's famed play) on stage along with a pink vibrator and a Martha Stewart Living magazine as she searches her closet for something unknown. She and her philandering hus-

band experience a communication breakdown within a dreamlike world where language, as D'Alessandro describes, is "very gooey and stuck."

The collection is dedicated to Kevin Francis Cleary, a 38-year-old Euro Brokers employee who died on 9/11 in the World Trade Center on the 84th floor of Tower 2. Cleary (who happened to be best friends with the late comedian Chris Farley) performed in original productions of "Waiting Station" and "Gesu", Mary & Joseph" (also in the collection) and had planned to retire to pursue acting full time. Just before he died, Cleary had begun rehearsals of D'Alessandro's "And On..." a memory play in the collection about a son, mother

and grandmother that was expanded specifically for Cleary.

"Yeah, so that was pretty devastating...It's very hard to go there actually," D'Alessandro said.

Based on "an insane experience" he had, "What Play?" is a screwball, rapid-fire interaction between a writer, his agent and producer that diminishes the writer and his work.

"I had an offer from a Hollywood producer," said D'Alessandro about an offer to bring "Roman Nights" to the big screen, "And I just couldn't believe the way they looked at writers as just completely disposable. And their first intention is to get rid of you ... like 'what can we do to just make you go away?'"

But D'Alessandro's a writer that certainly won't go away. Last year, he published a poetry chapbook, "Supplications: Immediate Poems of Loss and Love" (also from Finishing Line Press), and hopes to publish "Roman Nights," "Tennessee & Anna" and an accompanying essay in one book. Next for D'Alessandro is a spring reading in New York City of his latest play, "White Elephants Dancing the Flamenco" set in 1920s Spain. Look for him to give a reading in Newport in April.

And when he's not teaching drama for the City of New York, he's always writing — simply to fulfill his curiosity.

"I think I definitely write to know what I think about something," he said, "Or even to get to know myself better."