

# Dublin Based Journalist HUGO McCAFFERTY Interviews

## Irish-Italian-American Playwright FRANCO D'ALESSANDRO

**You're of Irish-Italian heritage, what parts of you come from which?**

Parts? Well, let's see, my stomach is certainly Italian and my liver is without question Irish! So, my father is from a little town in the region of Lucania (Basilicata) called Pisticci; he and his parents came back and forth to the States a few times, finally settling in New York in the 1930s. My grandparents, who were born 10 years apart, were in their 40s and 30s, so they never learned much English. My father is an amazing immigrant success story. He attended NYU and then moved back to Italy, Bologna this time, where he attended medical school and lived there for six years.

My mother was born in New York City to Irish parents. Her father, who died young when she was 13, was from Kilkenny and Cork, but her mother's family, my Grandma, was the major force in my life. She raised six children and 13 grandchildren and we are all extremely close. She had an incredible life; she was a Dunn and McCreely from Belfast (Antrim) and Carlingford (Louth)... her family had a very difficult life as Catholics in Belfast in the 1880s-1920s... it was a big family (six children in which twin McCreely sisters married twin Dunn brothers) but the family was broken apart and eventually they were all driven out to places like Liverpool, Sydney, and New York. My great grandmother, Maggie McCreely Dunn, lived to 86, and there are some amazing stories there, I tell you. My parents met in a New York City hospital on my father's first day of work; she was 19 and a gorgeous Irish lass and he was, 28, and just back from Italy; they met on New Year's day!



*Franco D'Alessandro, Lucia Marano, Tad Coughenour – "Roman Nights" Los Angeles production.*

My dual heritage is very important to me; I feel very Italian and very Irish because I have lived and spent significant time in both of those countries, I have studied both languages and I am very knowledgeable of the rich histories of both Ireland and Italy. For me cultural identification is something that must be earned; I never understood Americans who call themselves by an ethnic hyphenate, yet know nothing of the country and culture to which they attach themselves. I mean is it really any value to identify as an Irish American or Italian American if you have never visited those places or studied their histories or learned the languages?

In my opinion, it takes more than eating lasagne al forno or drinking a pint of Guinness to make one meaningfully connected to his or her ethnicity and heritage.

**How do these two communities interact in New York?**

Well, traditionally, there was great conflict between the

Irish and Italians because they followed one another in immigration to the States; the Irish came to NY around 1840s-1890s, the wave of Italians in about 1890-1930s. They were in competition in many ways. You see this represented in some classic films like "On The Waterfront," "The Public Enemy," and "The St. Valentine's Day Massacre"... and I always liked how in "The Godfather" Don Corleone adopted Tom Hagan as his son. Over the years the common Catholic religion brought them together, so by the time my parents met in the 1950s, there was room for inter-marriage. My Irish grandmother loved my father!

I think there is a great similarity between people from the south of Italy and the north of Ireland. Italians from the south differ from Italians in the north very much they way Irish from the north differ from Irish from the south. In terms of expressiveness and warmth... perhaps, vocal volume! Ha! The Italians from the south have become known to the world; from Rome to Naples and further south people have an understanding of that sensibility. Sadly, due to the occupation of the six counties in the north of Ireland, few people know much about that marvellous part of Ireland and her people. Back to your question; both of my two families mixed easily and both sides are extremely close today. {Robert DeNiro, John Travolta, Jack Scalia are all Irish-Italian, as are younger stars Bradley Cooper, Sofia Coppola, Chris Evans, Zachary Quinto... to name but a few.}

**Anna Magnani is a recurring character in your work. Why are you so drawn to her?**

Magnani, especially for Italian immigrants, was a voice, a persona that gave us presence in the United States vis-a-vis her Italian neorealist films and Hollywood block-busters. Obviously, I am too young to remember, but I know this and lived this through my Italian family here. Aside from this, and I am not one for superlatives with regard to art, she was, simply, the greatest actress who has ever lived. Great, solely due to her ability to evoke and stir emotions few actors ever can.



Lidia Vitale as Anna Magnani in D'Alessandro's "Solo Anna" in Italy.

Her expressive face, her great and subtle humor (often over-looked by people), her intelligence, her physicality... I defy anyone to watch a series of her best work: Open City, Onorevole Angelina, Bellissima, The Rose Tattoo, Risate di Gioia, Mamma Roma, L'Amore, The Golden Coach, Wild is the Wind, Nella Città l'Inferno, L'Automobile... and not be completely blown away... and not declare her "the greatest." I would also advise you to look at some of the rare but extant interviews, you will be utterly captivated by the depth of Magnani the woman. She is human fire.... she is three elements, earth, wind and

fire, all in one. I suppose that describes a volcano; a more than apt description of La Magnani. Her grit, her intelligence, her ability for profound tenderness and terrifying power, I find very intriguing. People who are intimidated by passion bore the hell out of me.

### **Why did you choose to make 'Solo Anna' a one-character play?**

Two words: Lidia Vitale. My friendship with the great Roman actress began about ten years ago. There was talk of a major film version of ROMAN NIGHTS, and I wanted her for the part of Magnani. The film has yet to get made but everyone agrees, she is the only one who can pull that off. She IS a 21st century Anna Magnani.

I would like to see her opposite someone with depth like Michael Fassbender as Tennessee Williams.

Well, five years ago, Lidia had been working on the Magnani pieces of my play of ROMAN NIGHTS and Susan Batson, the great acting coach, encouraged her to perform it... I was inspired to write more and very quickly I had the vision for a night with Anna, alone..."solo Anna"; where we see various key moments in her life that hopefully, after 90 minutes, add up to a meaningful and revealing glimpse into her life and art.

### **Your play 'Roman Nights' is about the friendship between Anna and Tennessee Williams, what did these two see in each other?**

They instinctively saw what the other was missing and each provided that essential and missing element. I feel friendships, true, great friendships are about supplying those missing elements in each other's lives. In the play I write how each is the other's life raft...or life saver... You see, Williams lost his sister Rose (his best and most

intimate friend) to a lobotomy when the siblings were in their 20s. He never recovered from that loss. Who would? Who could? I know loss has defined my own life and my art, so the connection for me, the access to this story was easy.



Playwright Franco D'Alessandro celebrates the 300th sold out performance of his play "Roman Nights" in Prague, Czech Republic with actress Simona Stasova. The play has been translated into nine languages and performed in over a dozen countries.

Magnani, had never known her father, she met him once or twice. She had a terrible time with men; one after the other... husband (Alessandrini), boyfriend (Serato) and then Rossellini (her great love) all disappointed her in some way. Partly because she refused to be subservient, a good girl or "less than a man" – in love and in work, everything for Magnani was a battle. I understand that fight. My whole life has been fight, too. She was the sister, muse and confidante that he lost and so desperately needed. Who would love him and not judge him; for being gay or an artist? Her ferocity towards life and acting inspired him. Williams was a husband, father and colleague who saw



her always as an equal. He provided her that essential masculine energy but with no threat or desire for domination. Both Williams and Magnani were ahead of their time, as most geniuses are.



Anna Magnani with Tennessee Williams shoot "The Rose Tattoo" on location in Key West, Florida. One of the films that inspired D'Alessandro to write "Roman Nights."

Let me tell you something, there is no greater energy than that between a playwright and his muse/actress. We get turned on by that relation-ship...it's like falling in love. It is a total blurring of reality and fantasy...like great sex! I love the process of writing something for an actor or with someone in my mind. We writers have to be open to magic, to the mystical, fantastical, mysterious elements of life.

#### **As the author do you think Williams and Magnani are projections of aspects of you?**

Absolutely! That is why I wrote the play; a sort of exploration and confession all in one. The paradigm for me was always the chemistry of the Italian – American love story.

Williams, who was very much of a Celtic pedigree with a majority of Irish and Scots-Irish ancestry, had

that great wit and strength and sensitivity that I see in my Irish family. And he pursued Magnani for years before they actually met and became friends.

He started spending time in Italy, first with Gore Vidal and later with friends like Luchino Visconti, much in part, because he wanted to get close to Magnani. He also loved Italian cinema, theater and art...he was a true Italophile. My first trip to Italy alone (without my parents with whom I travelled extensively for the first 18 years of my life) was as a student at age 19... I almost never came back to New York! I am equal parts Williams and Magnani; I have Williams' inclination towards the poetic, the excessive, and living in my own world; and I definitely have Magnani's fierce sense of loyalty, and her alternating desire for passion and solitude.

#### **I think the world needs Tennessee Williams today more.**

O thank God, I am not the only one! Yes, I agree emphatically. His wisdom seared to the heart of the matter like Wilde, his poetry takes us on epic journeys of the soul like Proust. Williams is America's Shakespeare and that is not, my friend, hyperbole. In terms of both his prolific nature as well as the sheer amount of universally acclaimed great work, there is no match. Also, remember he wrote not just classic full-length plays and dozens of one-acts, but excellent short stories and magnificent poetry.

He started spending time in Italy, first with Gore Vidal and later with friends like Luchino Visconti, much in part, because he wanted to get close to Magnani. He also loved Italian cinema, theater and art...he was a true Italophile. My first trip to Italy alone (without my parents with whom I travelled extensively for the first

18 years of my life) was as a student at age 19... I almost never came back to New York! I am equal parts Williams and Magnani; I have Williams' inclination towards the poetic, the excessive, and living in my own world; and I definitely have Magnani's fierce sense of loyalty, and her alternating desire for passion and solitude.



'Roma Città Aperta'

O'Neill, Miller and Albee come in close seconds. But, Tennessee Williams chronicles so much of American life, the way we live and love as well as the 20th century American psyche, that he should be produced every season on Broadway as well as the West End, and in every serious theater around the world. But serious theater, while it may not be dying, is certainly suffering from some sort of lingering and disfiguring matistatic ailment. One whose growing malignancy is oddly characterized by its increasing glitzy shimmer.

#### **Do you visit Italy often? How is different to the US?**

Not as often as I used to...once every other year; for many years I would return every year for months at a time. I spent a great deal of time in Italy in the late 80s

and 90s...over 15 years I would say 3-4 were spent working and studying there. I love Italy, part of me is always there, I suppose. Life is slower there, in a good way. In the US everyone is busy, so busy they miss out on the simple things...a great coffee; a long chat with a friend, not via text or email or phone but “un incontro di persona”; and savouring food.... I am a serious cook and am passionate about food and ingredients. A case in point, our fruit here in the US: any season, any time you can get any type of fruit. Which makes no sense. It is all very big too! I am talking double the size of the fruit found in Europe... we love our GMO and hormone pumped food in the USA... here a strawberry is the size of mandarin, pale red, filled with water, not juice and it vaguely tastes reminiscent of a berry. But in Italy, a strawberry is small, bright red....and it tastes intensely like a strawberry! Sadly, though, every time I return to Italy, it is looking more and more like the States. Between the obsession and proliferation of technology and rampant, haphazard immigration, Italy looks less and less like Italia and more like “Italy USA.” I find that true everywhere these days, the common theme here is the loss of the soul. If you lose language and culture how do you not lose the soul too? The anima, the force that brings one to life! It is being lost everywhere through thoughtless homogenization. Maybe that is the destiny of modernity.

### **When can we see ‘Solo Anna’ and what’s next for Franco D’Alessandro?**

Lidia Vitale continues to perform my one-woman play, SOLO ANNA, all over Italy in smaller venues. We were just invited to perform it in Melbourne, Australia. A great actress like her deserves a much

bigger production. Can you imagine that neither ROMAN NIGHTS nor SOLO ANNA has been done on a large scale in Italy yet? It makes no sense... these are plays ideal for the Italian audience and yet no theater or producer has done a proper full production at a major theater with a tour to Rome, Florence, Milan and Naples. Do Italians not go to the theater anymore?

I find it sad and strange that the country that gave birth to Anna Magnani and inspired the most prolific period in Tennessee Williams’ career has yet to produce these plays on a major level. ROMAN NIGHTS has had two beautiful, smaller scale productions on a smaller scale, one during the summer festival in Rome the other through the university in Perugia. These two plays of mine have been performed in over 10 countries, translated into eight or more languages; not just successful but sold-out for nine years in Prague and two years in Buenos Aires; maybe our interview will change that and capture the attention of some Italians with vision and sophistication!

In the Fall of 2015 we have been asked to perform the play in a “solo show” festival, and SOLO ANNA will be on stage in New York over a three month period this year, which I hope will also give us the momentum for a proper Off-Broadway run. This will, hopefully, reinvigorate interest to make the film of ROMAN NIGHTS. There have been several failed attempts with both American and Italian film producers. What’s next is a look at the Irish/ Italian world... my world. I am writing a trilogy entitled The Claddagh Ring Cycle (all Wagnerian allusion and irony intended), which I hope will be much easier and shorter to sit through! Seriously, it is a trilogy of plays that address various aspects of the Irish diaspora in America and all three

plays include at least one Italian character or, in the case of The Bronze Son, an entire family comprised of Irish father and Italian mother and their three sons. Since the 1950s Italians and Irish are the most intermarried ethnic groups in America. I want to chronicle the events of the last quarter of the 20th century through the first quarter of the 21st.

As playwrights, we have stories to tell... my stories concern the modern Italian and Irish immigrant experience in America. I hope to team up (again) with the phenomenally talented Irish director named Caitriona McLaughlin (from Donegal, living in London) – she directed the marvelous production of ROMAN NIGHTS in London. You see, the Italian-Irish theme runs throughout my life! Caitriona is a genius and she understands me so well. She really sees me and hears my voice, for a playwright that is all you can ever hope for. She gets that I am so completely Italian, so totally Irish and yet, very much, an American artist.



*New York born D'Alessandro, who speaks fluent Italian and has a working knowledge of the Irish language, is the byproduct of an Italian father and Irish mother.*