

Playwriting and the Masks of History: An Interview with Playwright Don Nigro

Stratos E. Constantinidis

Stratos: Samuel French has published 26 of your plays and they have also been produced in theatres in the U.S.A., Canada, England, and Hungary. You have been a finalist for the National Play Award with *Anima Mundi*; you have received a grant for your play *Terre Haute* from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation; you have been awarded a Playwriting Fellowship Grant for *Fisher King* by the National Endowment for the Arts; and you have been commissioned to write and direct a two-act play, *Mariner*, about Christopher Columbus for the 1992 Quincentennial anniversary of his first voyage. Columbus shared the psycho-social problems of many playwrights today. He was obsessed with his projects, he was short of money, and nobody was willing to finance his dream. Have you found yourself in a situation similar to that of the Italian sailor since you earned your M.F.A. degree in Dramatic Arts from the University of Iowa in 1979? Is writing for the live theatre becoming a viable profession for you in the 1990s?

Don Nigro: Yes, but only because I've structured my life so that I can make a living by writing plays. I mean, I don't live in New York or Los Angeles where the cost of living is high. What I make now is barely enough to survive in a city like Columbus without having a second job. So, when I'm not in production in a big city or a college town, I live in the country (Malvern, Ohio) frugally. Also, I am a persistent playwright. I keep writing plays whether it takes me one year or ten years to find them a producer. I'm now collecting royalties from plays I wrote fifteen years ago. So, a lot of past effort, that wasn't making me any money then, is now yielding an annuity. As a playwright, society often makes me feel as "marginal" and "useless" and "insane" as Columbus. If I couldn't identify with Columbus, I couldn't have written *Mariner*. I've refused commissions in the past just because I could not plug into the idea I was asked to write about or because I was opposed to it. Some years ago, somebody wanted to commission me to write a play which extolled the virtues of uranium

Don Nigro was born in Canton, Ohio, on September 30, 1949. Stratos E. Constantinidis is author of *Theatre Under Deconstruction?* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1993).

mining in Colorado (laughs). The money was good, but I refused. I can't write a play unless an external stimulus—a delightful experience, an upsetting encounter, or a commission—connects up with something I would have written about anyway. I might have never written about Christopher Columbus, but I'd have written about people who are so much obsessed with wish fulfillment that they overlook the consequences of their actions, whose actions separate them from their humanity and their loved ones.

Stratos: *Mariner* takes place on the wreck of the Santa Maria in 1506. The Grand Tribunal judges the soul of Christopher Columbus, who is found guilty of lechery and pride and is sentenced to stay in Purgatory until 1992 before he is admitted to Heaven. In the eyes of the Grand Tribunal the fact that Columbus is responsible for enslavement and genocide counts to his credit because he reduced the number of non-Christians and served the imperialist goals of the Spanish Church and State. In our century, the case of Columbus has been reopened by revisionist historians with overt and covert political agendas. What was your political agenda in depicting Christopher Columbus the way you did in your play?

Don Nigro: (laughs) I am suspicious of political agendas—my own included. I find myself constantly feeling like I ought to subvert both other people's and my own preconceptions of what is right and wrong. The difference between art and propaganda is that art helps people see both the other side of things, and the contradictions lurking on either side. The art of theatre is built on irony, paradox, and the perception of ambiguity in human experience.

Stratos: How did *Mariner* help you subvert your presuppositions as well as those of others?

Don Nigro: I like the image of Columbus as a heroic explorer, and many historians and biographers have had a vested interest in defending it. I respect and identify with anyone who, like Columbus, works hard against opposition and ridicule to fulfill his or her dreams. You see, this has been the story of my life as a playwright (laughs). But my play subverts the heroic image of Columbus that I and others like. On the other hand, my play does not replicate the views of the revisionist historians who had an interest in presenting a monstrous image of Columbus—even though I find much truth in such revisionist views. I wrote a story so that the reader or the spectator of *Mariner* could disapprove of Columbus' actions but could feel compassion for him at the same time. Juana's

vision of human compassion at the end of the play transcends politics (laughs) as it moves into the realm of art and love.

Stratos: Are you suggesting that art and love stand above politics?

Don Nigro: Occasionally, yes. Once, after a performance of one of my plays this woman came up to me and said, "I really enjoyed your play, but I reject it for ethical reasons." I asked for an explanation. "It's clear from your play that you're a liberal," she told me. "A liberal is a person who compulsively sees the point of view of his enemies, and tries to work out some compromise. But I'm a radical" she said, "and radicals can't afford to do that because radicals are committed to actually changing things. The minute we start having compassion for our enemies, they win because they subvert our position. As a radical I have to reject the position of compassion, compromise, and ambiguity in favor of a ruthless commitment to my ideals." She walked away. To me, this sort of radicalism flirts with fascism. Some radicals are so committed to a self-righteous posture that they stop exploring their own positions. Whenever I catch myself assuming a similar posture, I stop and question it. I think that theatre enhances our capacity for love and compassion, because it trains our ability to see ourselves in others, to feel their pain, and to imagine what it is like to be them. That's why I think that sometimes theatre transcends politics or ideology.

Stratos: Haven't you repeated to me just now Juana's position in *Mariner*?

Don Nigro: Yes.

Stratos: *Mariner* distinguishes between Humanity and Christianity as well as between clinical insanity and creative madness. For Juana, ideology is like a clinical insanity because it destroys any different ways of looking at the world in order to establish a fixed, unified field of vision.

Don Nigro: That's right!

Stratos: Creative madness, on the other hand, fosters unorthodox ways of looking at the world, leading to exploration and discovery. But Columbus, like most characters in the play, cannot distinguish between clinical insanity and creative madness. Columbus' creative madness becomes as destructive as clinical insanity: it destroys his ships, his crewmen, his wife, his friends, and the people

whom he enslaved. Are you suggesting that creative madness and clinical insanity unfold into each other in a vicious circle?

Don Nigro: No, not really. In the beginning, Columbus exercises an exuberant, life-affirming, creative madness. Then, he gradually moves into a clinical insanity as his obsession carries him away from his basic humanity and he sails off into an abstract ideal. Good characters such as Beatrice and Felipa never lose touch with their humanity. So, I distinguish between the creative exploration Columbus is after in the first act and what happens to him later in the second act.

Stratos: Am I to think that the moral stature of Columbus disintegrates when he chases abstract ideals at the expense of specific human beings?

Don Nigro: Yes. The stronger his obsession, the more impressive he looks in a way, and yet the more he is transformed into less than a human being.

Stratos: In your play, Christopher Columbus accuses Amerigo Vespucci of stealing his glory by discovering America. "Why should they name a continent after YOU when you thought you had discovered China?" Amerigo protests. Of course, you did not rename America into Columbia in your play, but you did not stick to the historical facts, or to their realistic representation either. Have you found "truth" by turning your back to the fixed, particular, historical "facts" and by embracing the flexible abstractions of fiction?

Don Nigro: Well, the nature of the historical fact is elusive in this as in every other case. I think that, over time, historical accounts gradually turn into literary accounts (laughs). For Northrop Frye, the history books that survived time were those that became literature. We may disagree with much of what Gibbon says about the decline of the Roman Empire, but we still read his history book because he weaves a powerful, complex set of images in a beautiful prose. History almost immediately becomes mythology and finds its way into works of art such as the epic, the folktale, the play, the novel, or the film.

Stratos: Then, how is an historian's interpretation of the "facts" about Columbus different from a playwright's interpretation of the same "facts"?

Don Nigro: The difference is largely one of personal intent and frame. When I read about Columbus in the historical-biographical accounts by Washington Irving, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Kirkpatrick Sale, it felt as if they were three different novels. Even though they shared names, dates, places, and events, they

reached different conclusions about people and their actions. They also conjectured about events which might or might not have happened and wove a narrative that filled the gaps. During this restorative endeavor, history flirts with fiction. Kirkpatrick Sale wanted to write a history book but, at the same time, he had a political agenda and, I think, an artistic agenda. He used certain narrative techniques to create a powerful picture of Columbus's world. The pictures of Columbus that Irving, Morison, and Sale came up with, are different from the picture of Columbus in *Mariner*. We all tried to come into contact with the original reality of Columbus, but we all failed. As a playwright, I imagined what the emotional truth of a particular historical encounter might have been and offered just another interpretation of what might have happened. In the future, playwrights and historians will offer new interpretations about Columbus which we cannot even imagine today.

Stratos: Columbus used people to fulfill his vision because he felt that his project was superior to their lives. Likewise, the Grand Tribunal put the interests of the Church and State above the interests of people. Your play tells me that you do not agree with the attitude of Columbus and the Grand Tribunal. But your understanding of theatrical production demands that other people (directors and actors) should serve your personal vision in the play. You want them to trust the play's words and the playwright's vision or else leave your project alone. During rehearsals you have said to directors, and I quote you here, "We collaborate on the production, we do not collaborate on the play. I write the play." How is your attitude as visionary playwright different from that of Columbus as a visionary explorer? Can the directors and actors be creative without serving your vision in the play?

Don Nigro: First of all, I said that to a Broadway director who was demanding that I change my play to serve his purposes. I don't usually say that to actors especially if the play is well cast. Secondly, I admire Columbus's creative vision, but I detest his inability to see the consequences of his actions. I see rehearsals and performances as a creative, collaborative process, and I love to be part of this process. I give directors and actors as much freedom to be creative as they want and help them use their talents effectively in a relaxed, democratic, humorous, working environment. If the rehearsals go well, and they usually do, the performances do not betray the play's vision so much as reveal it in more detail and show me things about my play that I had never suspected. As a playwright, I try to build a dramatic world which is both strong and flexible enough so that many people—even misguided ones—can do many things with it, and it will still maintain its integrity. Of course, it is impossible to construct an inviolable play.

The idea that each play has one vision of truth that cannot vary, is false. I don't favor carbon-copy productions of my plays. But it disturbs me when directors or actors force a play or a character of mine to fit some pre-conceived vision, which is not compatible with the nature of the play or the character. Legally, I can't stop them unless they change the words. But a play is not just words to be spoken. It is also stage directions and the implied subtext. In a Pinter play, the text is what the characters say, but also what they don't say. So, there is an area of ambiguity that playwrights, directors, and actors negotiate in good faith (laughs). I think that living playwrights must be protective of their new plays from disrespectful directors, designers, and actors. A new play needs more protection than a classic. No matter how bad or subversive a production of *King Lear* is to Shakespeare's text, the literary status of *King Lear* remains intact. On the other hand, a really misguided production of *Mariner* can destroy its immediate future. Of course, when the playwright dies, the play stands on its own.

Stratos: You frequently repeated in your production notes that "the play is the soul, the production is the body, and the play moves from production to production like the soul moves from body to body in Hindu mythology". You view the performance of a play as an act of incarnation. Through the flesh and blood of the actors, the spectator struggles backwards towards some vision of what it might have felt like to be Columbus. Are you suggesting that a theatrical performance can take an audience back to the original experience of Columbus which is anchored in history?

Don Nigro: We are not going back to what it was really like, we are going back to what it might have felt like. Theatrical reality and historical reality are similar in the sense that they recreate the conflicts—if not the actual confrontations—of actual people. Columbus did talk to Isabella even though he perhaps did not talk about all the things he touches upon in my play, and he did not use the English words that I use in my play because he was speaking in Spanish, and probably not very good Spanish. Theatre is good at helping people recapture possible human emotions and emotional sets of truths. If I can hold the attention of my readers or audiences, it is because I can make them feel what it might have been like, and make it appear as real and vivid as I can in their head. Their ability to see depends on my skills as a playwright and their skills as readers or viewers. The Lutherans believe that, during Holy communion, the liquid in the chalice is both wine and blood at the same time. I like this ambiguity (laughs). It is so if you think so. That's the beauty of live theatre: the actors are flesh and blood on the stage, giving the impression that the characters are equally real. In this

sense, the staged world becomes a vivid mental image that is conceived as real by the spectator. The spectator, of course, knows that the man depicted on a stage or in a photograph, or even in a history book isn't the real Christopher Columbus. But if that depiction gives a very vivid experience that touches a spectator or a reader deeply, then he or she can sometimes see it as being more real than a similar life experience that failed to touch him or her deeply (laughs). So, I try to create vivid, powerful, emotional experiences that conjure the illusion that the wine that I serve my readers and audiences is in fact blood.

Stratos: How deeply does Columbus touch the women in your play?

Don Nigro: Columbus is an attractive man—at least for some women—he has a certain disingenuous charm, a flirting routine which a woman can see right through immediately, and smile at it. Even a girl as innocent as Lucinda can see through Columbus. Her mother tells her that Columbus is full of bullshit up to his ears, but Lucinda's response is: "Yes, mama, but I like it." (Laughs). The way he treats women works as a compass that informs the reader or the spectator where Columbus goes off course. When Columbus loses touch with the women that love him, he's sailing out into a destructive clinical madness. As long as he remains attached to Beatrice, Felipa and Juana, he remains an attractive, admirable, creative human being. The women in this play are smarter than the men, and stand closer to the play's feeling of truth.

Stratos: What about Columbus and the men in the play?

Don Nigro: Columbus is different from the other men in *Mariner* because he is an outsider and has a mission which they do not understand. So, they distrust Columbus because they think he is after their money, their power, their women, or their authority. The other men may not like Pinzon either, but they understand Pinzon because they know his motives and recognize the rules that determine his actions. With Columbus, they are never sure. So, when Columbus loses the women who understand him and trust him, he loses everything and stands alone at the end.

Stratos: Could you sum up your theory of playwriting?

Don Nigro: I create dramatic worlds in order to discover things about the so-called "real" world. I use theatre as a metaphor for understanding human experience. The content of that experience determines the form, style, or conventions that I adopt for my play although I do not subscribe to the theory

that only one form or style fits one particular experience. My desire to stimulate certain emotions or thoughts in the readers or spectators of my plays, leading them to experience a certain moment, controls how I write and stage my plays to make such thoughts or emotions happen. I want to have their full attention all the time but especially when I anger them or offend them. So, I use old and new devices to make them pay attention, to empathize with the characters, and to see them as "real" even though they are not. Although I do not want to manipulate their minds like propaganda does, I also do not want them to come out of any play of mine thinking it's OK to be a Nazi or it's OK to cut down the rain forest. It's a major accomplishment to give somebody several minutes of pleasure. It's an even greater accomplishment to give somebody something to think about. But it's the ultimate accomplishment if you can create an experience for someone so vivid and powerful that it changes them forever. A playwright needs to write fearlessly, and to be as honest with himself as he can at any given moment in the writing. I don't pretend to offer any ultimate solutions or eternal truths, and I don't trust people who do. Every play I write is a new investigation into truth, and the body of one's work is the sum of all those investigations. It's a process of exploration and discovery that goes on for the rest of one's life. Sort of like Columbus.

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