

FRAGMENT #1:  
FROM A RECENT ON-LINE INTERVIEW

1. Mr. Gagliano, What made you want to work in the professional writing field?

•As is usual with me, it's never about planning. I tend to fall into things. I was always interested in the entertainment field, though; did some performing as a young, young man and suddenly started to write. I guess, in my DNA, lurked a theatre animal gene. What did I write first? Radio plays. There was a time, you may be shocked to learn, when American radio produced original drama for that medium. Then, in high school and later in college I started to write stage plays, probably because I joined a theatre club in high school and had actors available to me (playwrights need actors to tell their stories). Again, I kind of fell into it; also I found I had a talent for dramatic storytelling. Then I started to see professional plays on Broadway (I was born in Brooklyn), and I was hooked. The immediacy of theatre appealed to me, excited me. In any case, I seemed to have no option (I apparently had to be a playwright), and various theatrical doors started to open for me while I was getting an MFA at Columbia University. From then on it never occurred to me to "want" anything else.

2. Many successful writers have numerous outside influences. Can you name a few people who affected the way you write? How exactly did they affect your style?

• Georg Buchner, the writer of the very great and important play, *WOYZECK*, influenced me the most; his style, his imagery—above all, the extreme compression and extraordinary, intense and vivid language in his work—including the intense language in his letters.

• Musical influence: The operas of Giuseppe Verdi -- especially the way his operas usually end in a rush. My plays tend to end that way—in a rush.

• The great dramatic critic Eric Bentley was a teacher of mine at Columbia University and he introduced me (and much of America,) to writers like Buchner, Brecht and others. Also, Eric wrote about the playwright as being "an artist"—not just as a commercial craftsman writing by the numbers. I aimed to be a playwright-artist. I must have succeeded, because I never made much money in the commercial theatre.

• The popular songs of my day were also an influence—especially the words in the songs by the great lyricists who wrote the sung words: Johnny Mercer (*Blues In The Night*), Lorenze Hart (*The Lady Is A Tramp*), Ira Gershwin (*The Man I Love*), Cole Porter (*Anything Goes*), Yip Harberg (*Over The Rainbow*)—that crowd. They influenced the way I wrote the lyrics for my musicals. To this day, what is called "The Great American Songbook" is my passion.

• The Roman Catholic Church was also an influence — its rituals, specifically—the theatricality of the rituals (costumes—priests in drag, music, fire and brimstone

sermons, etc.). The dogma eventually turned me off, but the theatrics left a lasting impression on my work and informed specific plays.

- The first Broadway Musical I ever saw on Broadway was Rogers and Hammerstein's ALLEGRO. Not one of their major successes, but it used a Greek chorus, had little scenery and forced me to use my imagination to fill in all that was needed. That musical had the kind of theatricality that appealed to me. And when I was an undergraduate at Queens College, we had no formal theatre space and had to do our plays in an upper student lounge and had to make theatrical magic with little or nothing. Great training. Great influences.

- I've also been influenced by the films of Federico Fellini—especially the surreal aspects of his films, and of his Italian humor.

3. What were some of the environmental influences that took hold of you and your writing, your childhood, where you grew up, etc.

- Radio was ubiquitous, back in the day, and an influence, especially a weekly show called, The Make Believe Ballroom—and the original plays of a writer of original radio plays, Norman Corwin—and the Metropolitan Opera On The Air.

- Italian-American Street festivals in my section of Brooklyn had an influence—music, processions, food, contests, etc., and were great theatrical worlds to observe and be part of.

4. What were some of the obstacles and challenges that you faced in your career?

- Main obstacle: Having to make a living doing other things, while feeding my theatre habit.

- “The Theatre Establishment,” who could not quite make out my style of writing.

- Actors, who could not get behind my language.

- Lousy timing (long story): My plays seemed to have been written for today's world. Perhaps they were ahead of their time. Or not.

5. If you had a single piece of advice for somebody who is interested in becoming a professional writer, what would that be?

- Be sure you have the “calling;” it's too hard otherwise. Be sure you can stand being rejected over and over and over and over and over again.

- Also, if you're a playwright, be prepared to write for live actors to tell your story, and be sure you work at knowing what actors are all about—how they work, what they do.

- Understand that you are creating a blueprint of sorts when you write a play. When that blueprint gets to production stage to build the solid piece, be prepared to be just another one of the ensemble that takes over your work. Ego deflating.

6. Briefly, what are some of the writing tactics you use when starting a new piece. (Example, Brainstorming, first draft...)

- I brainstorm with myself. I write down and number question and answers as the questions and images and ideas keep dropping in. And I always keep asking the same basic questions as I write and number: Why is this day different from any other day for the characters? And what does each character want? And what are the obstacles to that want? As the numbers (with answers) get into the 80 numbered range, the entries are usually quite long by then and I'm ready to move into the first scene and to start the first draft. From then on I forget about technique, let instinct take over, and just let 'er rip.

7. What work are you most proud of and why?

- I really love them all, but FATHER UXBRIDGE WANTS TO MARRY was my breakthrough play (1967/The American Place Theatre) and strongly influenced my writing from then on—so I guess that's my major love. On the other hand, I also love my children's play, THE HIDE AND SEEK ODYSSEY OF MADELIENE GIMPLE. The simplicity and fantasy of that play then combined with the UXBRIDGE intensity and began to mold a special style that led to all of my future plays—especially THE PRINCE OF PEASANTMANIA.

8. What Genre are you most interested in writing and why?

- Musical theatre. I've had the most fun working in that genre. But lately—because of my new Web site ([www.gaglianoriff.com](http://www.gaglianoriff.com))—I'm becoming more interested in blogging and writing essays and starting notes for a textbook on my text analysis techniques. I just published my first novel, ANTON'S LEAP (on Amazon.com), and I have another novel started. As for writing more plays, it seems to be, "been there, done that." We'll see.

9. If you didn't pursue writing, what would you pursue?

- It's too late now, but I can't imagine anything greater and more satisfying than to be a cabaret singer and to sing the Great American Songbook. Dream on! Right?

10. I had to throw the famous interview question in here. When you get to the pearly gates, what would you like God to say to you upon arrival?

"Playwright Gagliano, you've stayed married and loyal to the same woman for fifty years; you've got a terrific son who is doing world-class work on National Public Radios MARKETPLACE; you've nourished and mentored a lot of students who seem to feel that you've made a difference in their lives; you don't pick your nose (much) — and

you've pretty much lived by the golden rule (one of my better days of devising stuff to live by). Your plays are okay, though they have too much sex stuff for my taste, but they give me a couple of good laughs once in a while. And I must admit that you often render in dramatic terms the random absurdity of my grand design (it's the mischief in me)— and I applaud you for that. So you can go through the gates — and, by the way, they're not pearly, they're diamond-y (diamonds came first) — Yes playwright Gagliano, float on through to Cloud Cabaret and catch your favorite singer Frank Sinatra sing one of your favorite songs, HERE'S THAT RAINY DAY. There's room at Cole Porter's table. Johnny Mercer is seated there, too. Careful with John: He gets mean when he gets drunk. Ciao!" []

Frank Gagliano  
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