

Spring 1-1-2012

# How Don Nigro is Reimagining History for the Stage

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HOW DON NIGRO IS REIMAGINING HISTORY FOR THE STAGE

by

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Theatre and Dance

2012

This thesis entitled:  
HOW DON NIGRO IS REIMAGINING HISTORY FOR THE STAGE  
written by Jenn Calvano  
has been approved for the Department of Theatre and Dance

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Calvano, Jenn (M.A., Theatre)

## HOW DON NIGRO IS REIMAGINING HISTORY FOR THE STAGE

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Bud Coleman

American playwright Don Nigro has written over 300 plays; however, he is not as widely known as one would expect from someone with such a diverse and vast body of work. His historical plays are satirical comedies that mix fact and fiction together to reimagine historical events for the audience, presenting these stories from a new perspective. This thesis analyzes several of Nigro's historical plays through a lens similar to that employed by theorist Hayden White in his study of nineteenth century historical writers in his 1973 work *Metahistory*. In combining the study of these plays with a historical methodology allows one to acquire an understanding of the similarities between how history is typically written and how Don Nigro is not only reimaging history, but the unique style he employs within this genre. By representing the views of those who are historically the underdog, or someone whose voice is not typically recorded into the annals of history (like Lucia), Nigro widens the perspective of his audience members and asks them to consider the event within a new light. With the present pop culture trend of reimaging historical events and persons lives, it is the perfect time to delve into the works of playwrights like Don Nigro.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .....1

II. Mode of Emplotment in the plays of Don Nigro .....18

III. Mode of Argument in *Lucia Mad* .....40

VI. Ideological Implication in *Mariner*.....58

Conclusion .....79

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....85

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

American playwright Don Nigro's work paints him as a kind of Renaissance Man. His play topics range from myth to literature, science and technology to politics, family histories to the larger histories of iconoclastic figures. Nigro has written over 300 plays: 64 full length plays, 4 "short" plays, and 32 collections of his one-acts and monologues are available through Samuel French, Inc. However, he is not as widely known as one would expect from someone with such a diverse and vast body of work. In a 2009 interview with the staff of Samuel French, Inc., Nigro confided that he began telling stories as a child for his stuffed animals and toys and began writing as soon as he could hold a pencil. Born in Canton, Ohio, in 1949, Nigro spent his childhood in Arizona and Ohio. After obtaining a BA in English from The Ohio State University, where he started writing plays in 1970, he went on to get an MFA in Dramatic Arts from the Playwrights Workshop at the University of Iowa. Nigro has taught at The Ohio State University, University of Iowa, Kent State University, Indiana State, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His honors and recognitions include an NEA Playwriting Fellowship Grant for his play *The Fisher King*, the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation Grant for *Terre Haute*, and an Ohio Arts Council Grant. He was a finalist for the 1985 National Play Award Competition sponsored by the National Repertory Theatre Foundation of Los Angeles. Twice he has been named the Thurber House writer-in-residence in Columbus, Ohio. His plays have been produced throughout the country and around the world, having been translated into eight different languages. The Focus of this thesis lies in what I will refer to as Nigro's "historical plays."

I define Nigro's historical plays as his play scripts that have a clear connection to historical figures and events. These plays are often largely based on historic events, but are not presented as docu-drama, or completely factual. Frequently they are highly imaginative mixes of fact and fiction and it can be difficult to discern the truth from the make-believe. Characters like Nicolo Paganini, Lucia Joyce, and Christopher Columbus have real life counterparts who lived and experienced situations close to, if not exactly like, those Nigro places them in on stage; however, he manipulates the sequence of events to contextualize and tell his version of their story. Juxtaposing truth against the ludicrous, stressing the humanity of these iconic figures, and focusing on main characters who are creative and somehow troubled are all hallmarks of Nigro's work. Nigro's reimagined events become a mix of history and life lesson. He creates dialogue giving his take on how these historic icons, who become his characters, interact with one another; although, in many cases Nigro uses published letters and journals or other historical accounts to craft dialogue for these theatricalized persons. At times his characters have a language of their own, using terms and phrases that are colloquial, antiquated, malapropism, or completely made up. These instances appear to be places where Nigro is trying to create a more genuine style of speech for the character portraying their education level, background, or lack of sanity. While it may confuse the audience or reader of the play, other characters in the scene do not seem affected; they make no remarks that they do not understand.

Most of Nigro's full-length historical plays are constructed like memories. The sequence of events is fluid and the events blend into one another. Many span several decades over the hour or two they are alive on stage, jumping around in time, living briefly and transporting the audience into a non-existent time allowing them to witness the past in the present. These plays regularly begin with the author's notes on setting. For example: "No scene changes, no

blackouts, and no space between scenes. Each scene flows gently into the next and scenes interpenetrate one another” (*Lucia Mad v*), “We should never under any circumstances have to wait for a set change of any sort. This play should move in one unbroken flow like a series of kaleidoscopic hallucinations” (*Artaud n. pag.*), and “No part of the set moves mechanically, no non-actors ever on stage either at intermission or between scenes—in fact there is no space between any scenes, the action of each act is fluid and continuous, each part of the set becomes whatever is happening there at any given moment” (*Mariner 8*). An often used phrase of Nigro’s is “The way the play moves is always a part of the play” (*Jules Verne n. pag.*). Nigro is not just creating an entertaining moment on stage; his work constructs living memories for his audience. He strives to establish the world of the play on the stage and that world is a world of past recollection. It should look very different from our everyday lives and is certainly not theatrical realism. These plays are designed to put us into the minds of his characters and view the world from their point of view; they are living memories. Words like fluid, kaleidoscopic, and unbroken flow establish the typical Nigro staging aesthetic.

Each historical play ends with the playwright’s “Notebook.” For each of them the notebook varies in length and content; however, all of them are packed with historical research and insight into Nigro’s interest in and inspiration from the people about whom he is writing and connections that he has made with his characters and other literature, history, and sometimes present events. They help the reader understand not only from where Nigro drew his inspiration, and gathered his facts, but also shows how much fact he has incorporated into the work. It is the discovery of the accuracy of detail along with his crafting of the event that contributes to my interest in the historical plays of Don Nigro. I plan to investigate how he is re-imagining history on the stage. His works takes details from the lives of known people and events, and offers a

new interpretation of them, a popular trend in recent literature in novels like *The Historian* (by Elizabeth Kostova) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (by Seth Grahame-Smith), as well as in films such as *National Treasure* and *The da Vinci Code*. This popular trend takes known historical events and makes them fantastical and beyond that with which we are familiar, allowing us to reconsider these moments from history. Not so different from what Nigro is doing; however, his revisions aid in contextualization of the original history, rather than purely adding a new entertaining element.

By analyzing Nigro's style of writing I explore the contextualization he employs when writing the central protagonist's personal history and that character's place within a larger history. As the world changes, so does how we view history as well as how history is written. Nigro's historical protagonists offer the audience an alternate view to the accepted historical record by forcing them to consider these figures within the context of their time and the conditions in which they lived. Within my thesis I investigate how Nigro is complicating the role of the central protagonist through this contextualization along with his insertion of his own ideals into the work. Thus he makes the play not just about these characters, but about their place in history and in a collective historical consciousness.

Nigro's plays have fallen under the radar of scholarly study and, in general, he is not particularly well known. In the preface to *Labyrinth: The Plays of Don Nigro*, Jim McGhee notes the thoughts that Laurence Harbison, senior editor at Samuel French, Inc., has on Nigro's "lack of a national reputation," as he puts it. McGhee cites Harbison's feelings that Nigro being located outside of New York and the absence of what he calls a "Major New York Production," which I can only assume to be in reference to the fact that Nigro's work has not been produced in a Broadway Theatre. In fact, more often than not, Nigro's work premieres at universities and

festivals like The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. His work gets produced; some plays more than others, like *Seascope for Sharks and Dancers* (a two person play popular among college aged thespians which explores relationships, especially the effects of their end) and *The Curate Shakespeare's As You Like It*, subtitled "The record of one company's attempt to perform the play by William Shakespeare" which is considered by [Samuelfrench.com](http://Samuelfrench.com) to be an "underground comic classic." His monologues are quite often chosen by emerging actors and actresses for audition pieces. Eccentric, yet relatable, characters created by Nigro make fun, quirky monologues that stand out at an audition. When one has written as many plays as Nigro has, you cannot expect them all to be hits.

As much as I admire him as a writer, some of his plays are rather verbose and are better appreciated by someone who has an extensive knowledge regarding the historical events about which he is writing. When directing his *Ballerinas* and *The Bohemian Seacoast* in the winter of 2012 I realized how challenging these plays can be to produce, especially when directing them for an audience made up mostly of non-theatre major college students who are required to attend the productions for their Introduction to Theatre classes. For those not familiar with Nigro's topic, like Delia Bacon in *The Bohemian Seacoast*, her lengthy monologues regarding her family, her past, and her theories can be information overload. Others are incredibly interesting, but are difficult to practically produce: *Punch and Judy* calls for Punch to hang himself at the end of the play, Paganini gets corked into a man-sized bottle in his self-titled play, and both *Mariner* and *My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon* are rather lengthy the former being 130 and the latter 169 pages. For me an ideal audience member for one of his historical plays would be someone familiar with the subject matter or main character. These folks get the inside jokes and

understand how original his plays are because their historical knowledge allows them to see how creative Nigro has been in his reimagining.

Present fascination with historical fiction in popular culture makes Nigro's work even more relevant for today's audiences. As mentioned above, films and literature are filled with historical fiction. Seth Graham-Smith's popular novel, *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, takes many of the facts of the beloved 16<sup>th</sup> president's life and juxtaposes them with a fantastical tale of a secret life seeking out vengeance against vampires. A cult following sprung up rather quickly prompting the creation of a film of the same title to be released in June of 2012 starring Benjamin Walker and Rufus Sewell. With a rise in the popularity of reimagined history, there is no better time for a study of Nigro's historical and fantastical plays.

Nigro is not the only playwright retelling history on stage. He is one of many who are writing in this way; however, he may be one of the most prolific in the genre. Since the beginning of theatre, playwrights have taken true stories and theatricalized them for their audience. I argue that these playwrights change the way that we view history. Having a living representation of Christopher Columbus, Lucia Joyce, or Samuel Beckett on stage, acting out stories from their lives, can make their historical events more real for the audience giving them the chance to experience a part of these historical lives. Reading an historical account in a book creates the ability to separate oneself from the event, having it acted out in front of you creates an immersion and can make the audience feel as if they are a part of the event. For theatre goers who are unfamiliar with these historical events, the plays may inform their opinions about what took place. For those who are familiar with the historical versions they will gain a new perspective from which to view the event. Nigro's historical plays use the theatre as a vehicle to further our understanding of history and how it can be represented to a modern audience.

The main theoretical/critical method I will employ for my analysis of Nigro's historical plays will be adapted from Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, originally published in 1973. White calls his book "a history of historical consciousness in nineteenth century Europe" (1). And explores how the great writers of history of nineteenth century Europe (Ranke, Tocqueville, Hegel, Nietzsche, etc.) approached and executed the task of recording history. He employs a method which categorizes the structure of different historical narratives in an effort to discover the explanatory affect each author employs. White's method encompasses three modes that make up the historiographical style of the writer: mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication. These three modes combine to not only classify and explain the phenomena about which the author is writing, but also give insight into the author's (or for our purposes, the playwright's) stylistic and ideological tendencies.

In exploring the mode of emplotment, White gives the writer of the historical account a genre by which he (I use he rather than he/she because no women writers are discussed) conveys his story; White identifies four modes of emplotment: Comedy, Tragedy, Romance, and Satire. The modes of emplotment relate to the style employed by the writer in his conveyance of the account. Modes of emplotment can be compared to a tone or way in which the writer decides to craft the event for the audience. Historians, like playwrights, control the method with which the information of the historical account, or story, is delivered to their audience. In writing regarding a historical event, one cannot help but to craft the event in their opinion of how it happened. Authors choose when the event begins, climaxes, and ends, and by highlighting specific moments or details their interpretation of the occurrence contains their tone and style. Specifically for my study, I wish to explore the modes of Satire and Comedy to define how

Nigro employs these modes of emplotment in his historical plays. White defines Satire as “a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master...” (*Metahistory* 9). In his definition of Comedy, White asserts that “hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world...” (*Metahistory* 9); this conceit of temporary hope makes it applicable to Nigro’s histories.

If the mode of emplotment is the method by which the author explains a story to the audience, then the mode of argument is used to characterize the event. For White, the mode of argument is where historical writing moves between an art and a science. The writer creates the story of the event by using the historical facts to develop a narrative of what happened, an art. The science of the process comes thorough how the writer develops an argument within the act of writing about a particular event by summing up the event and helping the audience to understand the significance of it. For White, the mode of argument can take one of four forms: Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextualist. I was immediately drawn to the Contextualist argument to represent Nigro’s style, since I am arguing that he is contextualizing these historical figures for his audience. White begins his definition of Contextualism with “events can be explained by being set within the ‘context’ of their occurrence” (*Metahistory* 18). Examining the times, events, and society surrounding an historical incident generates a rather New Historicist study of events, which I believe will be fitting when applied to Nigro’s writing.

White defines ideology as “a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state)” (*Metahistory* 22) and like White, I do not intend to use these terms in the strict sense of political parties, but rather in an overarching ideological or philosophical sense. Through the mode of ideological implication one sees the social view through which the author writes,

regarding the event. Since White analyzes nineteenth century European historical writers in his book, it may have been necessary to update the ideological positions of Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism and I therefore found several currently published books on twentieth century ideology to compare and contrast the categories defined by White. White's definition of nineteenth century Liberalism, embraces those who believe in the need for social change at times, but also believes that social change can be implemented through subtle changes, rather than the general overthrow and displacement of the current societal system. (White 21-25) This definition does not does not stray very far from what we call a liberal ideology today and will work, for the purpose of this study.

Nigro's point of view (his ideas about the present and past and their relationship to one another) comes across more obviously in several of his plays. Typically, I have found that his view can most clearly be found within the playwright's "Notebooks", which I mentioned above. And yet, once his tone (his manner of writing the dialogue, how he has his characters speak and interact) and style (how he constructs his plays, the world he creates for the characters and the structure of that world, which he lists in the setting notes at the beginning of the plays) have been gleaned one cannot help but notice where Nigro's sarcasm ekes in, where he is being genuine, and his liberal tendencies come across rather strongly at times.

Using White's structure for my analysis, I plan to explore how Nigro writes his historical plays. To do this, I will examine several of Nigro's plays through White's framework as a lens for analysis. These plays will be viewed not only as theatrical works, but also as works which recreate an historical moment on stage; therefore, I will also take into consideration the changing views regarding how history is recorded and what is considered to be history, for this I consider theories from Hayden White's *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and*

*Theory* (2010) and Ann Curthoys and John Docker's *Is History Fiction?* (2005). Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage* (2003) has been a helpful tool in analyzing the possible affect of Nigro's historical plays on his audience. In Nigro's re-imaginings, if an audience member or reader has any knowledge regarding the true life of these figures it will affect their experience of the play. A ghosting effect, as Marvin Carlson would say, is bound to occur. One's knowledge of Christopher Columbus from history class in Elementary School gets challenged by *Mariner* as it balances different shades of Columbus' life. For regular theatre goers, Nigro's interpretations of Beckett, Artaud, or Chekov may clash with their own feelings about those artists. Nigro's fantastical creations of historical people incorporate various levels of the myths of who those people may have been into the characters. A journal article from 1993 entitled "Playwriting and the Masks of History: An Interview with Playwright Don Nigro" offers a look into Nigro and his process of writing while discussing his characters, methods of writing and the levels of himself in *Mariner*.

New Historicism is a useful theoretical frame when applied to plays which explore historical events. For example, three plays where the authors were reimagining history -- Suzan-Lori Parks' *TopDog/Underdog* (2001), Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998), and Don Nigro's *Lucia Mad* (1993) -- employ many principles found consistently in New Historicist theory. Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide* (2006) provides a basic introduction and rudimentary understanding of the New Historicism theory needed to begin analyzing these plays. Articles by Stephen Greenblatt and the book *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), which Greenblatt co-authored with Catherine Gallagher, also proved helpful in this study through their introduction to some of the ideas of Michel Foucault and the term "counterhistory."

Before diving straight into the cryptic and dense works by Foucault, I found it helpful to begin with, *Introducing Foucault: A Graphic Guide* (2009), a graphic novel that introduces the reader to Foucault, the man, and his main theoretical concepts in a user friendly form and prepares the reader to delve into his work. Though highly reductionist, *Introducing Foucault* provided a much needed foundation about Foucault from which to begin. *The Foucault Reader* (1984), a series of essays taken from Foucault's major writings; including essays in which he expounds on the subject of history, provides a well organized introduction to these paramount concepts in new historicist theory. Foucault's concepts of discourse, truth, and power help to inform a study of New Historicism and make it easier to find hints of these concepts in the works of playwrights like Frayn, Nigro, and Parks. A final theorist whose work furthered my understanding of New Historicism was Hayden White. Particularly important to this study are his ideas regarding how history is written. As mentioned above in the methodology section, White's method of analyzing historical writing in *Metahistory* (1975) provides a useful approach to the analysis of history plays. *Is History Fiction?* (2005), by Ann Curthoys and John Docker, serves as a survey of historical writing from Thucydides and Herodotus through present day historians. An examination of the evolution of the debate about historical writing as science versus art, *Is History Fiction?*, expanded my knowledge on the topic and helped me to develop my theory of Nigro as a metamorphosis of the historical writer.

In addition to those theorists dealing with New Historicism and notable historians, the work of playwrights that recreate history on stage, and an exploration of elements of new historicism in these works was a necessary element to understand Nigro within the context of his colleagues. Exploring a myriad of different authors and styles of re-imagining history was vital to see how different the extremes could be classified under my "re-imagining history" label.

David Ives' one-act *Variations on the Death of Trotsky*, published in 1994 in Ives' compilation of one act plays *All in the Timing*, a purely comic series of interpretations of the last minutes of notorious revolutionary Leon Trotsky's life, immediately came to mind because both Ives and Nigro have written a wide range of one-act plays and both seem to have a penchant for reimagining historical persons and events. Yet, where Ives' work focuses on the comedy, Nigro's work has the bite of sarcasm mixed within his comedy. Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (1965) reimagines the performance directed by the Marquis de Sade where inmates at the Asylum of Charenton in France reenact the murder of French Revolutionist Jean-Paul Marat. Nigro seems to focus on the historically mad or obsessive individuals whose creation kept them from total self destruction. Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, a play that jumps back and forth between modern day and the nineteenth century, demonstrates the dangers of attempting to interpret historical events within the confines of one's own time. Nigro's contextualization of history has a similar purpose, reminding the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience of the difficulty of judging historical figures against modern standards. In *The America Play* and *Top-Dog/Underdog*, by Suzan-Lori Parks and Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes*, both authors take historical persons, or at least their names and personality traits, and place them anachronistically into new situations, something found less frequently in the works of Nigro. Other playwrights working reimagining history on stage include Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* and David Hare's *Stuff Happens*. Each of these plays has aspects that are similar to Nigro's style. In *Copenhagen*, Frayn mixes the myth, legend, and facts of the fabled conversation between Bohr and Heisenberg to create a play that has the sense of a recreated memory. Clouded by uncertainty, as well as the issue of the play being written in the present with knowledge regarding the outcomes of these events, makes it reminiscent of Nigro's *Paganini* or *Mariner*. *Stuff Happens*, on the other hand, takes literal conversations and published

comments by political figures out of context and constructs new relationships and meaning behind the political actions of these individuals. Much like Nigro's *My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon* and *Traitors*, Hare uses news stories and historical documents to explore the motivations of public figures. While reading rather voraciously, the one author who I kept clear from was William Shakespeare; I considered briefly his historical plays, but then thought better of it. Shakespeare is a study in and of itself and would widen the scope of this study to an unmanageable degree.

Don Nigro who, as can be seen above, encompasses the different methods and styles of re-writing history as many of the other playwrights, became the focus of this study of reimagining history on stage and of how a playwright writes history in a manner similar to historians. During my freshman year of high school our drama instructors chose to perform scenes from Nigro's *Mariner*, a satirical look at the life of Christopher Columbus, for the Boston Globe State High School Drama Festival; this was my first introduction to the author who continues to intrigue and inspire me. My senior year of undergrad I proposed, and was chosen to direct, Nigro's *Cinderella Waltz* for the senior directing internship. The play is a comical take on the popular fairytale which includes a village idiot who is quite intelligent when drunk and a self reflexive Cinderella named Rosey Snow. It was rather well received by the largely undergraduate audience made up mostly of other Fine and Performing Arts majors. Having bachelor's degrees in and love for both history and theatre perhaps accounts for my initial intrigue with these plays. Curious about Nigro's other works, I began to research them, instigating a realization that there is little to no scholarly writing regarding Don Nigro's work.

Norlin Library contains several of Nigro's one-act plays within one-act compilations. The only other book there regarding Don Nigro is *Labyrinth: The Plays of Don Nigro*, edited by

Jim McGhee and was published in 2004. McGhee's title serves as an accurate description of the contents of the book, *The Plays of Don Nigro*. McGhee does not comment on the plays Nigro has written, he has simply organized a list of Nigro's plays with short descriptions of each. It chronicles an immense body of work. According to the preface, at the time of publication, Nigro had "completed over 200 scripts and ha[d] over 60 in progress" (McGhee v). McGhee organizes Nigro's work, at first, according to size of cast starting with monologues and then moving onto "Short(er) Plays," then to 2 characters, 3 characters, 4 characters, and 4+ characters. The last three chapters are broken down as "Ruffing Plays", which are a series of plays based around a fictional English detective John Ruffing, "Full Length Plays", and "Pendragon Plays," a cycle which chronicles the Pendragon family from 18<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nigro's work could still be further categorized. He has a series of plays that trace Russian history through its famous writers, plays that recreate myths, legends, and famous literature (which I chose to leave out because they deserve their own entire study), and the plays that I will be analyzing, plays which reimagine historical events and people. McGhee's book offers no criticism of Nigro's work, just a listing. This book became useful in a preliminary search through Nigro's plays because of the massive quantity of work Nigro has published. Early on I ruled out the Pendragon plays, partially because I personally felt that they are not emblematic of his best work, but also because they deal with more a obscure and specific family history and would be harder to research how much of the plays are Nigro's imagination versus historically accurate details.

Using the methodology outlined above, this paper will be an analysis of several of Nigro's plays seeking to discover how Nigro uses historical figures and stories in a way that contextualizes them for a modern audience, helping us to view their lives from a new perspective.

Chapter 2 - Mode of Emplotment in the plays of Don Nigro - will explore how Nigro crafts his plays and study the style of writing he uses. While specifically discussing how Nigro typically constructs his plots by exploring several works, I will demonstrate the similarities and differences in his typical modes of emplotment from play to play. In order to have a large range of plays to establish the argument the study will begin with several of his one-act plays, specifically *Banana Man*, *The Bohemian Seacoast*, and *Netherlands*. Each of these one-acts gives a good general overview of Nigro's satiric comedy style while indicating some of the deviations that can occur within it. These one-acts follow events from the lives of Buster Keaton and Samuel Beckett, Delia Bacon, and Vincent van Gogh respectively, displaying how Nigro's main characters tend to be creators of some kind, as well as eccentrics. I will follow this up with two sections that will discuss two of his full length plays that I feel are quintessentially Nigro in style: *Paganini* and *Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros*. *Paganini* explores the intersection of fact and myth that has become the legend of Italian violinist Nicolo Paganini and *Jules Verne* follows the career of Nellie Bly as a rare and famed nineteenth century female Journalist. As in most of Nigro's plays, the eccentricities and obsessions of his characters are what seems to make them so compelling. By looking at several of Nigro's historical plays, I hope to not only give a sense of his tendencies and manner of storytelling, but also typical conventions employed by him. As I discussed above his set specifications at the beginning of the plays, use of language, and general mode of writing all contribute to what makes his style unique.

Chapter 3 – Mode of Argument in *Lucia Mad* - examines the mode of argument, which I believe to be contextualist, employed by Nigro in his play *Lucia Mad*. Nigro writes his version of James Joyce's daughter Lucia as strong, intelligent, and at times even manipulative; however, Lucia is a character rife with contradiction. She appears to be in desperate need of love and a

relationship, and yet, as Nigro writes her, this relationship will be on her terms. Nigro contextualizes Lucia for a modern audience, demonstrating a feminist viewing of her life, making us reconsider the role of women and madness in society. He shows that she rebels against the characteristics of the ideal feminine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which contributes to her historical representation as mad. *Lucia Mad* shows how the people and situations surrounding Lucia's life are all pushing her toward an ideal feminine lifestyle like those outlined in Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex*, which I will draw from to demonstrate Nigro's contextualist mode of argument. Because de Beauvoir was writing in the 1940s her work provides a good frame to demonstrate the contextualization and New Historicist tendencies that I have found to be inherent in *Lucia* which takes place mostly in the late 1920s and early 30s.

Chapter 4 – Ideological Implication in *Mariner* - will investigate the inference of Nigro's ideals within this work commissioned by The Ohio State University for the Quincentennial of Columbus's maiden voyage to the "new world." *Mariner* weaves history, literature, myth, and contemporary politics into his creation of a Columbus Tale. Many of the characters from the play lived in the fifteenth century and have become famous and/or notorious in their own right: Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, Prince John of Portugal, and the Grand Inquisitor Frey Tomas de Torquemada, to name a few. Several events of the play historically occurred; however, it is through the lens of Nigro's imagination and opinion of the history surrounding Columbus, that we view the details of these events. Nigro has created a play that gives the audience his take on the life of Christopher Columbus, his time, and his relevancy to a world five hundred years after his history altering voyage. Nigro's ideological implications construct Columbus and his world while relating the events of the story to the happenings of Nigro's own time.

In the following pages I will explore these historical plays by Don Nigro analyzing his writing style with the tools borrowed from White's method of categorizing historical writers. Within this journey through Nigro's historical plays I hope to bring awareness and insight to his work by laying out his technique, tendencies, and savoir-faire when dealing with historic subject matter, which makes his work both imaginative and relatable to a modern audience. His reimagined history helps us to consider the importance of poetic truth. Nigro does not try to hide the theatrical conventions that he has established in his fantastical recreation of these events. In fact, quite the opposite, he celebrates the fantastical and embraces theatricality within his plays. Nigro is honest; his theatrical reimagining of history promotes his world as being artificial in almost a Brechtian fashion, never feigning realism by constantly reminding the audience of the qualities of memory. Living memories are what he is creating on stage, in their purest form: fuzzy and disjointed, mixed up, and with personal biases and focus of the person remembering them. This often overlooked playwright deserves the attention of scholars in both the fields of history and theatre for his fascinating recreations of significant moments from our collective historical past. As Chuck Palahniuk, so aptly states in his 2001 satiric novel *Choke*:

We can spend our lives letting the world tell us who we are. Sane or insane. Saints or sex addicts. Heroes or victims. Letting history tell us how good or bad we are. Letting our past decide our future. Or we can decide for ourselves. And maybe it's our job to invent something better. (292)

Historical imagination is rife within our popular entertainment, especially those works which are employing a satirical tone, creating the perfect time to advocate for Nigro's work that reimagines

history and applies a critical eye to both the past and its relationship with the present. Nigro isn't letting history tell us who we are; perhaps he is inventing something better.

## CHAPTER II

### MODE OF EMPLOTMENT IN THE PLAYS OF DON NIGRO

In his historical plays, Nigro is reimagining history. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White defines emplotment as: “the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind.” (7) Using comedic satire as the mode of emplotment allows Nigro to not only recreate the historical event in a memorable, enjoyable manner for the audience, but also enables him to insert his own views both of history and modern society and make a larger point about the state of these institutions. As will be explored further in Chapter 4, on ideological implication, Nigro’s creation of these historical figures tend to repeat similar character traits with one another, showing that Nigro is both writing about those people he admires, or relates to and with whom he can easily insert his own views without making them appear blatantly his. Nigro seems to have similar ideology and philosophical views with those people whom he places as the main characters of his plays, or at least how he pictures them. As I explore the emplotment of several of Nigro’s historical works I will note the similarities of characters, language, and structure within the plays and satirical style in which he creates them.

Satire is typically considered to be darker than comedy because of the mocking and ridiculing tone that inevitably exists within the genre. There are a myriad of definitions of satire. I chose to employ the definition of satiric comedy from M.H. Abrams *Glossary of Literary Terms* as both an often used source which is mentioned in the works cited section of several other books on satire and a definition that represents part of my idea of the genre. Satiric Comedy:

ridicules political policies or philosophical doctrines, or else attacks deviations from the social order by making ridiculous the violators of its standards of morals or manners. (Abrams 29)

Since much of the structure of this paper has been influenced by Hayden White's *Metahistory*, I would like to take Abrams definition further by adding to it White's definition:

[I]t is, in fact, a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy. (9)

These two definitions combined provide an accurate description of the comedic satire style in which Nigro is writing. I chose to list it as comedic satire rather than satiric comedy because I feel that the comedy in Nigro's work comes second to the satire. Where his plays often begin comical and are comedic in fact throughout, the most silly and funny scenes are often juxtaposed with a severity of tone or air of tragedy in the scenes that follow which is why I also do not call it classic satire either. In the following pages, I will discuss the structure and language of several of Nigro's plays, while relating his writing style back to my definition of comedic satire which is a combination of the two listed above: a comedic mocking of social constructs that displays the struggle of woman and man against their surroundings, their world, and at times their lives.

To begin, I will follow some of the patterns by tracing them within several of his one-act plays that reimagine history. In discussing these one-acts, I plan to paint a picture of his style. *The Bohemian Seacoast*, published in 2003 in the collection titled *Palestrina and other plays*, displays a some what cynical take on the evening Shakespeare conspiracy theorist Delia Bacon spent at Shakespeare's grave searching out evidence that Shakespeare did not write the plays attributed to him. History tells us that after this evening, with the help of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bacon published her theories regarding the "true" authorship of Shakespeare's plays; it was not

long after that she was admitted to an asylum. Nothing deters Bacon from her theory within the play, every time new evidence arises that should sway her, she keeps coming back to her same hypothesis/conclusion. Cyclical structure is prevalent in Nigro's works; *Banana Man*, published in 2005 in a collection of the same title, is a strong example of this. Each night the same events occur on stage as the night before, so the characters are in essence trapped and doomed to continue repeating this same 20ish minutes of their lives over and over. In *Banana Man*, Nigro creates his version of the conversation between writer Samuel Beckett and comedic actor Buster Keaton at a dinner break while working on the film aptly titled "Film." These characters are in essence trapped, which is another theme of Nigro's. In *Netherlands*, also published in *Palestrina and other plays*, we see a typical Nigro convention where the main character, who in this case happens to be Vincent van Gogh, is a tortured artist stuck within a play that seems to be a strange variation on his life and work. Throughout the play he contemplates his life and what we know now to be Van Gogh's death while surrounded by a world that resembles his paintings. He sits on a bench with the only other character who is simply listed as Dutch Girl. Everything that surrounds him is reminiscent of his paintings, his creations, as though he has been trapped in a world of his own making. While these one-act plays display a great deal of humor, they all tend to have moments of seriousness that jerk the reader out of the comedy, and like many of Nigro's works, in general end on a tragic note, and the world of the plays often appear to mock those main characters, about whom the plays are written.

*Paganini*, published in 1995, and is listed as "A Comedy in Two Acts" on the cover, yet, dark themes abound in this retelling of the myths and truths that surround the life story of Genoese, violinist Nicolo (as Nigro spells his name) Paganini. Being one of the best plays to demonstrate White's definition of satire, from start to finish Nigro's *Paganini* is plagued by "the

dark force of death,” to use White’s phrasing. Borrowing from the myth that Paganini sold his soul to the devil, a Violin Merchant arrives in the first scene and makes Paganini a bargain which he cannot refuse. Indeed Nigro asks us a question, as he does in many of his works, whether Paganini is controlling his world or if it rules him.

Concluding with *Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros*, published in 2005, I will look at the methods Nigro employs to question and ridicule the standards of the government and society during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the lens of famed reporter Nellie Bly’s life. One of the most famous journalists of her time, Nellie Bly was a pioneer displaying the ability and drive a woman could possess, despite the common thought to the contrary. Nigro creates, what at first glance seems like a farcical view of her life; however, at closer look the serious tone which always follows the scenes of comedic mayhem question social mores and display the strain of being iconoclastic.

Obsession and madness haunt many of the characters within Nigro’s historical plays. Creation is often equated with madness and their obsession with creation frequently haunts them until their death. As in many modern works, a darkness and cruelty exist within Nigro’s comedy. Characters appear hopelessly trapped in a world that fights against them and irony comes into play because they each contributed to the creation of this world somehow. If satire comments on social constructs and humankind’s desire to be in control of their world, Nigro’s construction of these satirical worlds that revolve around historical figures gives us a relatable reflection of society that we can both laugh at and learn from.

### ***Banana Man – The Bohemian Seacoast – Netherlands***

I include *Banana Man* as a bit of a break from the typical comedic satire that can be found as the mode of employment within Nigro’s historical plays. This seventeen page play

follows the conversation between Samuel Beckett (referred to as Sam) and Buster Keaton during dinner while shooting a film written by Beckett, starring Keaton. Their conversation is continually interrupted by the waitress who thinks she recognizes Keaton. *Banana Man* has satirical elements, yet in the end it is more of a satirical comedy. There is no truly tragic event within the plot of the play, like that which exists in many of the other works I am about to discuss. In fact, even the event on which the play is based is not depressing or tragic, again as is the case with much of his other inspirations.

Seemingly a comment on perception and audience, the play looks at these subjects both in the theatre and in life. Weighty topics are addressed in a fun and whimsical manner. Lines with depth like Keaton's "Nobody knows me" (8) and Beckett's "The Irish are made of disappointment" (10) are inserted into the comedy of mistaken identity and running gags, which makes it hard to take them seriously. However, the play addresses the question raised in White's definition of satire regarding if man is captive or ruler of his world. Structurally, the play's repetitive nature suggests a lack of control over our own lives. This restaurant represents where their historical counterparts might have eaten at night during the shoot of the film. Nigro admits in a preface to the play that Keaton was said to eat alone and that this conversation probably never happened. Again, we are getting the playwright's creation of a possible historical event.

The conversation between Keaton and Beckett revolves around the fact that the film doesn't make sense to Keaton. He then apologizes to Beckett for "the other thing" (11), referring to not working with him on *Waiting for Godot*, citing the reason why as, he didn't understand it. The waitress keeps coming to the table trying to figure out from where she recognizes Keaton and each time she guesses the wrong actor. When the waitress leaves, they return to their conversation which continually goes to the subject of Keaton attempting to understand the film.

Overall, the play has a cyclical nature including repetition of specific language and the topic of their conversation. Toward the end of the play the waitress gets fired and we find out that this too is a cyclical event,

BUSTER. How much do I owe you for the spaghetti?

SAM. No, I'll pay.

WAITRESS. That's okay. This one's on me.

SAM. But you can't afford that. You've just been fired.

WAITRESS. Oh, he fires me every night. Look at him over there sulking behind that stupid mustache. There's nobody to wait on the tables now. He never thinks ahead. He's got the brain of a cheese log, but he needs me, you know? It's good to be needed. It gives you the illusion that somebody's out there in the dark. (20)

Satire can be found when considering the futility of the cycle that is occurring within the play. This world, this conversation, this play which has all been created by Nigro, repeats each time it is performed. Keaton, enlightened each night by the waitress' personal epiphany, will begin the process again tomorrow of not understanding Beckett's work and not being recognized by the waitress. This is alluded to at the end of the play when Keaton does not have enough money to cover the tip he would like to leave, Sam gives him the money and his response is "Welp<sup>1</sup>. [sic] Tomorrow." (21) Tomorrow they will be at the restaurant again eating, and literally tomorrow, those characters will be there again, in the same situation they were in before. In the excerpt above the waitress comments on what keeps us going, the hope that the audience is interested enough to continue paying attention, reflecting the hope of theatre practitioners everywhere. The satire in *Banana Man* is most prominent in its self reflexive nature of the theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> As was addressed in the introduction, this is an instance of Nigro's characters using colloquialism. In this instance Buster employs a lazy version of the word well, "welp." This gives him the sense of an average joe, similar to the matter-of-fact type characters that he was known for portraying.

Although the cycle keeps going the play does end on more of a happy note than some of Nigro's other works. When the waitress finally figures out whom Keaton is she relays the experience from which she remembers him, a version of *Romeo and Juliet* where Keaton played both roles. She goes on to describe the impact that the play had on her, how it ultimately constructed her view of life.

WAITRESS. I mean, you're trapped in this theatre, in this play, this performance, and you don't know what the hell you're doing, and you're like horribly miscast, in way over your head [...] but you keep running up that goddamned ladder anyway [...] and playing your characters for all you're worth, [...] you don't know for sure whether anybody's actually out there watching or not, and you don't even know if they're laughing with you or at you, or what, but you just keep playing your action [...] part of the reason that we keep playing our part anyway is that we have this eerie, irrational feeling that somebody is looking at us, you know, that somebody is watching us who's at least interested enough in what happens to keep watching [...] in a way that's what keeps us alive.  
(19)

Her perspective helps Keaton to finally understand Beckett's film and perhaps gives him a new outlook on life. Although we may be captives of this world, the hope that there is more to life than what we see can be enough. Where the change that occurs in *Banana Man* is rather positive, the change that we will see below in Delia during *Bohemian Seacoast* ultimately leads to the negative idea in real life that she ended up in a mental institution.

During a clear night in September 1856, American theorist Delia Bacon camps out at infamous playwright William Shakespeare's tomb, where she believes proof has been left by her namesake, Francis Bacon, regarding the true authorship of the plays attributed to Shakespeare. The premise for Don Nigro's work *The Bohemian Seacoast* is a chronicled historical event. Delia Bacon writes of the evening in a letter to friend and benefactor Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was the American consulate in Britain at the time. "I was alone there [at the tomb] till ten

o'clock. On my right was the Old Player [how she refers to Shakespeare], I knew, looking down on me, but I could not see him" (qtd. in Bacon 254). Nigro crafts his version of what happened that night in 1856.

Both historically and within the play Delia does not attempt to break open the corpse's tomb. During Nigro's construction of the event, Delia is visited by an apparition claiming to be the ghost of William Shakespeare; the very person who she is attempting to prove did not write the plays attributed to him. Delia relays the story of what has brought her to this moment to the ghost. She is remembering and perhaps mentally reliving her life, her childhood, the failure of those in the past with the Bacon name, her unfortunate affair with Rev. Alexander MacWhorter, and her conviction and theories that a distant relative of hers (Francis Bacon) worked together with the poet Edmund Spenser, Queen Elizabeth, and others to create the plays attributed to Shakespeare. Evidence within letters from Francis Bacon prompted her to come to the grave where she feels the group has left their proof.

Comedy abounds within the initial meeting of Delia and The Corpse. Nigro's Delia has been stood up by her "drunken landlady" (63) Ms. McGoohan, who has Delia's "pickaxe and burglar's tools." (63) When The Corpse does arrive, he is none too happy by the noise which is being made by Delia. He walks up behind her and proclaims "WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS ALL THIS DAMNED RACKET ABOUT? (63, author's emphasis), causing her to turn around and scream. The Corpse then goes on to criticize her performance as well as her theory, and hilarity ensues. Like many of Nigro's plays everything starts off on a rather comic note, but turns more and more serious as the play progresses. My experience has been with most of his plays that the audience is laughing and gets engrossed in the comedy of what is happening, then

all of a sudden they realize that what they had been laughing at a moment ago, got rather serious and sad and the laughing abruptly ends.

Where *Banana Man* ends on a more positive note of enlightenment and renewed faith in one's life choices *The Bohemian Seacoast* ends with a lack of progression or illumination on Delia's part. After her interaction with what she believes to be Shakespeare's ghost, who explicitly tells her that he wrote his plays, she still has doubts. He tells her: "You have wedded yourself to futility and destruction, and your kingdom is a tomb much darker and more dismal than mine can ever be" (68), a reaction to her attempt at destroying his name in order to redeem the Bacon legacy. He leaves and Delia goes on a rant; his words have affected her. She questions, "My life has been, my life has been, what has it been?" (69). If the enlightenment that is brought about in *Banana Man* by the waitress brings a positive reassurance for Keaton, the enlightenment that *The Corpse* leads Delia to results in a collapse of everything that Delia both believed in and, as it would seem, for which she existed.

Mentally she cannot take the strain of what is presented as the truth. Her final monologue contains strains of Shakespearean language and allusions, as well as moments from her life. "The lady evaporates in the damp tomb" (69) is reminiscent of Juliet's fate, while also representing what is presently happening to Delia in rather poetic terms. As her theories melt away, it is as if she herself will evaporate in the place where she has been proven wrong. "Oh, I have been wronged, my lovely groom, ye have left me at the chapel, with my knickers dripping" (69), a reference to the affair and scandal with MacWhorter who historically, after wooing and seducing Delia, refused to marry her. This was the event that led to her reclusive, retreat into her work and her subsequent trip to England to validate her theory. "Oh, oh, oh, this way madness lies" (69), is close to "Something wicked this way comes" from *Macbeth*; both lines can be seen

as harbingers of the future. “Disaster, doom, bubble, squeak” (69), again sounds like the witches from *Macbeth*, “Double, double, toil, and trouble.” “Delia, revenge! That in the porches of mine ears did pour. USURPER. USURPER” (69, author’s emphasis); these lines are suggestive of the ghost of Hamlet’s father relaying the betrayal of his brother. Delia too feels betrayed by the memory of her namesake Francis Bacon who she has pinned her hopes on as the true author of Shakespeare’s plays. This monologue ironically makes her appear as a tragic heroine of Shakespeare’s plays. Her strife and sadness are a cruel result of fate.

Nigro’s Delia is blinded by her obsession to redeem the Bacon name. In a letter from her brother, the real life Delia is warned against her growing obsessions:

Misguided by your imagination, you have yielded yourself to a delusion which, if you do not resist it and escape from it for your life, will be fatal to you. How less to say this, I know not. I am not now to inform you that your theory about Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s tomb and all that is a mere delusion – a trick of the imagination. For five years you have known that I think so. (qtd. in Bacon 249)

Possessed by the urge to make something of herself and create a legacy for the name of Bacon, she can only see what she wishes to believe is true. Historically her mental state decays rapidly after she has visited Shakespeare’s grave, which is signified by the monologue discussed above, and even more so once her book was published, about a year later. In December 1857 she was admitted to an asylum fittingly in the Forest of Arden, the setting of Shakespeare’s *As You Like it*. She was released and traveled back to the U.S. in April 1858, where she went back and forth between bouts of hallucination and lucidity. On September 2, 1859, Delia Bacon died surrounded by her surviving siblings.

At the end of *The Bohemian Seacoast*, the stage directions read, “She raises her head and exits like the Empress of Nowhere.” (70) Delia’s conviction creates a sad ending for her in the

play; she passes beyond the edge of sanity failing to return again. Her obsession creates a living nightmare in which she is trapped, which is similar to van Gogh's situation in Nigro's *Netherlands*.

In *Netherlands*, Nigro creates a comically Dutch world for painter Vincent van Gogh. At the beginning of the play Nigro's stage directions state that the shadow of a windmill arm circling passes over van Gogh and the creaking of the turning blades can be heard. The only other character in the short six page play is referred to as the Dutch Girl, wearing wooden shoes and carrying a "pail of clabber" (53), a dairy product made from souring milk. All the Dutch Girl talks about, at first, are stereotypically Dutch things like windmills, wooden shoes, and tulips. Her conversation turns amusingly less Dutch as she continues:

In the olden times, all the men were called Dutch, and the women were Duchesses. [...] I used to go with a boy who was shot out of a cannon at the circus. They called him the Flying Dutchman. (54)

All the while van Gogh talks of his hallucinations, cutting off his ear, and painting. Neither of the two appears to be paying much attention to one another. Progressively van Gogh becomes more philosophical in speech, while the Dutch Girl fades in and out of attention to his topics of conversation and her lists of all things Dutch.

Known for his melancholy and ill luck with women historically, Nigro's representation of van Gogh gives the impression of being surrounded by world of his own creation. He talks with the Dutch Girl about a death similar to the one that his real life counterpart experienced, asking her what she thinks happens to someone before they die, once they have attempted to kill themselves. This is a reference to the fact that after van Gogh allegedly shot himself; he did not die for approximately 29 hours.

VAN GOGH. For a painter, say, who has gone into a field and shot himself in the head, perhaps he spends the time before his death in making one last painting.

DUTCH GIRL. A painting of what?

VAN GOGH. I don't know. A wheat field under threatening skies, with crows. A landscape in the rain. A woman picking olives.

[...]

A girl he was once desperately in love with. A girl who did not love him, who found him entirely too strange to love. A Dutch girl, say. In a Dutch landscape. There is a windmill. There is a girl on a bench. [...] Yes. A Dutch landscape in the rain, with Dutch girl and windmill, and crows. (56)

Here van Gogh describes his life, his paintings and the current scene created by Nigro. Nigro's van Gogh is within his painting, where he would probably be his most content. Unlike many of Nigro's other main characters, van Gogh does not fight against the world of the play. It is as if he has accepted his fate and has chosen to embrace it and he is almost stoic in his acceptance. He has a line within the play, "We pay for life with death." (55)

*Netherlands* is comically dark and filled with the ridiculous, like many of Nigro's plays, but does not include a main character struggling against their circumstances like *Bohemian Seacoast* or the plays that I am about to discuss, *Paganini* and *Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros*. Nigro's emplotment, though still satire, feels differently in *Netherlands* because van Gogh accepts his ill fate. We still see the main character living in a world that, although he has created, he has no dominion of. Van Gogh, Delia, and Paganini are slaves to their obsessions, their forms of creation. The only difference with van Gogh is his acceptance.

VAN GOGH. One creates partly out of joy and wonder, but mostly out of frustrated desire, and despair. One is not loved. One is betrayed. One is a cracked mirror. One is lost. One makes

certain investigations into truth. One fails. And in the end, one is devoured. (57-58)

### *Paganini*

Writing about famed Italian violinist Nicolo Paganini is a fitting choice for Don Nigro. Like many of the historical figures around which he bases his plays, Paganini's life is filled with mystery and myth. In a biography written in 1957, author G.I.C. de Courcy begins with:

the chronicle of his [Paganini's] life, as it has come down to us, is so filled with faulty inferences, undocumented assertions, downright inventions, obscure anecdotes and traveler's tales that no single version can be accepted as authoritative. (vii)

The musician's fantastical life seems plagued most by the legend that he sold his soul to the devil in order to play in the entrancing manner for which he was made famous. Nigro uses this lore as the center of his Paganini tale which creates a Paganini beset by the fear that he has unknowingly sold his soul to the devil and is therefore no longer in control of his destiny. Nigro's Paganini, much like the Paganini from antiquity, suffers from lecherous tendencies and cycles through several women, most of which were much younger than him. However, we see through the play that neither women nor fame bring contentment to the musician.

PAGANINI. I have a woman. She does not make me happy.

METTERNICH. The search for happiness is futile. There is momentary pleasure, but there is no happiness.

PAGANINI. Then what's the point of anything?

METTERNICH. What do you value?

PAGANINI. My son. I value my little son.

METTERNICH. Yes. There's something you've made.

PAGANINI. And music. I value music.

METTERNICH. Also something you make.

PAGANINI. What are you saying? That the closest we come to happiness is in creation?

METTERNICH. I only asked you what you valued. You must draw your own conclusions.

PAGANINI. But how can a man find any sort of peace when he knows he is damned?

[...]

METTERNICH. Find your role and play it, my friend. Sample everything at the feast that gives you pleasure. Soon enough the bill will come. (75-76)

Paganini's companion alludes to a recurring satirical theme in Nigro's plays when he says, "Find your role and play it." Paganini's world has offered him a role and he can either choose to accept it or fight against it. Regardless, he cannot change it. It is out of his hands. Aspects of Paganini's life bring him pleasure and those facets of his life come from his creation, both his son and his music. Here Nigro creates another cycle. Paganini fears that his ability to create comes from a deal with the devil, removing his control over his fate, a fact that causes his restlessness. And yet, his creation is what brings him his greatest moments of pleasure. Paganini's conflict derives from this cycle.

PAGANINI. But the beauty of music is also its danger, for when we become seduced by music, as by emotion, we lose our soul.

SOLIDER. As to the Devil?

PAGANINI. Exactly. But what does it mean to lose one's soul? What is the true form of demonic ecstasy and damnation in art? Is to create merely to aid Satan in his work of destruction? Is it to prepare him, as it were, his feast?

SOLIDER. I must confess to you, I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I am a simple, honest soldier. I kill for money. (28-29)

At the end of the play Paganini learns that those whom he has feared the most are actually creations of a character referred to as The Clockmaker. Just when he thought he understood who was in control of his life, he learns he has been wrong again.

I dream that God is an organ grinder and I'm his monkey. [...] I dream that I'm manipulating a little violin player who looks just like me, and then I look on my own shoulders, and see strings attached, and I am trapped at the carnival of puppets forever. (109)

Right after this philosophical monologue, attempting to work out who is in control of his life, The Clockmaker assures Paganini that everyone creates their own redemption, giving Paganini and the audience the assurance that we are indeed in command of our own lives. He tells Paganini that salvation is just behind the door on stage. At that moment the door opens and a quartet of farcical doctors, who continually show up when the play seems to be on the brink of its most serious and tragic moments, come out and break the tension and illusion that there is any honesty to what The Clockmaker just said. Paganini never gets a serious answer to the questions that plague him throughout the script. The character surrounded by absurdity wants so desperately to understand his life; however, in the end the answer to the enigma eludes him and he is mocked by the remaining characters as they exit to the sound of an organ grinder's music leaving him alone on stage trapped in a human sized bottle that has been corked. Rife with satire and absurdity, Nigro employs a mode of plotment in *Paganini* that displays the tale as one that shows that man ultimately will never truly understand who controls his destiny.

### ***Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros***

Act One of *Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros* begins with famous, turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, female journalist Nellie Bly speaking to someone. In the stage directions at the beginning of the

play it says that the person to whom she is speaking cannot be seen, but his voice can be heard from the darkness. Questions are being asked of Nellie: “Who are you?” “What’s your name?” “When were you born?” (4). Her responses make her seem confused. This first scene represents how she began her journalism career with New York’s *World* newspaper in 1887, run by Joseph Pulitzer. She got herself admitted to Blackwell’s Island asylum, hence the title of the scene “The Mysterious Island,” in order to write an exposé on the conditions and treatment of women in mental health facilities. From this experience Bly created the article, “Ten Days in a Madhouse”, which not only landed her a job with *The World*, but propelled her to fame. Nigro’s play recreates the events that shaped Bly’s career and subsequently her adult life. In doing so he creates a commentary on the difficulty of being a woman during the late nineteenth century. It is this commentary and the manner in which it is presented (or its emplotment) which displays Nigro’s satirical style.

At first glance *Jules Verne Eats a Rhinoceros* would appear to be a farce. According to *The Glossary of Literary Terms*, farce is a form of comedy

designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter [...] employs highly exaggerated characters [...] and] puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations. (Abrams 30)

A superficial comparison of the play with these characteristics of farce turns up quick results.

During many of the scenes throughout the play Nigro calls for “Offenbach Cancan music” to be played. It is a recurring piece of music that Nigro specifically lists in the stage directions.

Offenbach’s “Cancan” conjures mental images of Looney Tunes’ “Yankee Doodle Daffy” and Disney’s “Mickey’s Circus.” Both are cartoons that underscore moments at the height of their absurdity with this musical piece by Offenbach, which is categorized in iTunes under the genre of classical music.

Characters in the play include: The Giggle Sisters (a vaudeville group whose act is their laughter), a News Hawker who acts as a kind of narrator or sensationalizer of the events of Bly's life -- which were sensational to begin with -- and legendary puppets Punch and Judy, whose appearance illustrates Nellie's concept of marriage. At various times throughout the script Nigro mentions the heightened behavior that is expected of the characters, with the exception of Nellie.

Although this scene creates itself in a way that is a bit stylized, like a French boulevard comedy, everything done to the rhythm of the music, there are levels of reality apparent in the way these people behave themselves. (8)

He goes on to specify the varying levels of exaggeration from character to character. There are scenes, such as the one discussed below, where the action mimics that of a cartoon with different characters chasing one another in and out of the doors.

A hazard of Bly's chosen career placed her into rather dubious situations, like being admitted into an asylum, sailing around the world in a hot air balloon in an attempt to beat the fictional record of 80 days by Phileas Fogg in Jules Verne's famous novel *Around the World in 80 Days*, and exposing child trafficking in New York by posing as an unwed mother. Nigro's formation of the events of Bly's life heightens their improbability through exaggeration, such as putting her in a restaurant with Jules Verne, eating a rhinoceros while the waiter is setting up tables to Offenbach's "Cancan." This premise is a reference to a phrase of Joseph Pulitzer's which becomes a recurring theme, "if Jules Verne eats a cabbage, that is not a story [...] But if Jules Verne eats a rhinoceros, now, that is a story" (28).

All of the major characteristics of farce are met by *Jules Verne*, over-the-top characters in outrageous situations which have been designed to provoke laughter from the audience. And yet amidst all of this chaos, Nigro insists that Nellie (and at times those characters that were closest to her in life) be portrayed realistically. This is most jarring when these scenes of extreme farce are

followed by one which is more realistic and sincere. During the course of the play Nellie always seems to be fighting for something, a job, her ideals, what she thinks she wants; however, every stride she makes and every new accomplishment does not satisfy her, nor do they stop her from having to fight for what she wants. Nellie stands out amongst the other characters, because Nigro has written for her to.

The Offenbach Cancan music, loud and wonderful, as the stage is suddenly full of people running about, in and out of doors, a manic French farce, while we hear the News Hawker barking one headline after another. Nellie is in the midst of all this, while the others, Roosevelt, Pulitzer, the Second and Third Madwoman, Jules Verne and the Barbary Ape, keep chasing her and each other in and out of the three upstage doors [...] The lights are flickering like an ancient nickelodeon movie, and everybody but Nellie moves like characters in a farce. She is being chased and pushed around like a rag doll, but she is also chasing bravely after her stories. (44)

By having Nellie not behave like the rest of the characters, Nigro is accentuating the mayhem and struggle of her life. The aforementioned scene of crazed farcical comedy transitions into the more realistic scene where Nellie interviews feminist, anarchist Emma Goldman. An honesty and sincerity exists between the women that makes this dialogue stand out after the hijinks that preceded it. Nigro creates a dialogue that includes Goldman's high opinion of Bly's work, her wrongful imprisonment, and late nineteenth century radical feminist thought.

EMMA GOLDMAN. I liked the madhouse story. It was honest and well done. Rather unusual for your paper, I thought. You look with a clear eye. This is not generally encouraged, especially in women.

NELLIE. Well, thank you. I must say, Miss Goldman, you don't look to me like any sort of criminal. What exactly is the charge against you?

EMMA GOLDMAN. I told the truth about the government in public. In America they call this incitement to riot.

NELLIE. I don't think they can put you in jail for telling the truth.

EMMA GOLDMAN. They're the government. Who's going to stop them?

NELLIE. So you don't actually want people to riot?

EMMA GOLDMAN. I want people to pay attention to what their government does instead of just swallowing what it says. Apparently that's considered treason here. (46)

A criticism of the government and society in general, enhances the satirical tone of the scene and makes us aware that while the farce exists in the play it does so to punctuate Bly's life. In the midst of all the pandemonium of attempting to get these stories and the novelty of a female reporter Bly was still in a battle to be taken seriously because she was a woman. A major goal of hers was to uncover injustice, as can be seen by the stories she fights to cover and the investigative journalism style for which she was famous. It is the women in the play who question society and the status quo. Goldman asks what the editors will do to Nellie's story if she tries to report the truth.

EMMA GOLDMAN. You seem like an intelligent woman. Why do you let them make a puppet of you?

NELLIE. I'm not anybody's puppet.

[...]

EMMA GOLDMAN. They're making money off you. That's why they run you ragged. [...] When a man says he respects you, what he generally means is, he'd like to fornicate with you, and then stick his hand up your backside and start controlling what comes out of your mouth. Get out while you can, before they steal your soul. (48)

The scene is only three pages long, but it sticks out as the moment where Bly begins to question who is controlling her destiny. Goldman plants the seed of doubt into Bly's mind that will

plague her throughout the rest of the play. There is a naivety that Bly's character has when she enters the scene with Goldman, which changes after it is over.

As has been discussed above part of White's definition of satire regarding man being ruler of or ruled by his world, which has been explored in several of Nigro's plays throughout this chapter can be found again within the theme of control within *Jules Verne*. In the excerpt below, Nellie speaks with her one of her closest friends and colleagues Rhys. She has left *The World*, where they both worked, and has gotten married.

RHYS. You could come back.

NELLIE. My husband would be horrified. A respectable married woman does not write for newspapers. Apparently, a respectable married woman doesn't do much of anything.

RHYS. You're not happy.

NELLIE. Oh, Rhys, it's been a nightmare. Marriage is like pitched warfare. It's just one bloody battle after another. It's worse than when I was locked up in the madhouse in a straight jacket [...]

I spent years running around impersonating madwomen and chorus girls and riding elephants. Even Nellie Bly is a name some editor in a newspaper office gave me. I thought if I got married, I might begin to discover who I really was. But I'm feeling more like a stranger to myself everyday [...] (63-64)

As strong and independent as Nigro's Nellie seems, she has been controlled by others for the majority of her life. In the play, once Goldman plants the idea in her head that she is a puppet for those who run the newspaper, Nellie quits journalism and marries a wealthy manufacturer of barrel hoops. Her choice to get married seems like a reaction to the fear that she is not as in control of her life as she may have believed. By taking herself out of the possibility of being governed by the men working with the newspaper, she puts herself under the control of her husband who, judging from the dialogue above, is himself controlled by the social ideas

regarding the behavior of married women of the nineteenth century. Even before she was married when she was pursuing her dream of being a reporter, it was a man who gave her the journalistic pseudonym by which she is known. This point punctuates her desire to seek out and report the truth because she cannot, or does not want to see the truth of her own situation. With an identity created by a man, she runs herself ragged seeking out stories that both align with her standards and will continue to sell newspapers, she balances what she wants with what is expected of her. Historically her stories were as famous for the injustices that they exposed as they were for the fact that it was Nellie Bly who was the reporter. In fact, rather than in the by-line, her name often appeared in the headline. Used as a sort of anomaly to sell papers, the credit Nellie got in her day can be attributed as much to her novelty as her journalistic skill. Nigro's employment of the satiric style within this comedy stresses the juxtaposition that Nellie faced. Although Nellie may have been a pioneer for women's rights and made great strides toward fixing the injustices she exposed in her stories, a price comes with being iconoclastic and hidden complications exist on the road to progress.

This sampling of Nigro's vast body of work gives an example of his typical style of storytelling within his historical plays. These plays juxtapose comedic mayhem with more realistic, serious scenes in a manner; at times it happens so quickly that it catches the reader off guard, punctuating and heightening the satire of the piece. Characters mock and question societal constructs and aspects of life that people typically take for granted. Most are struggling in a world over which they want to believe they have some control over, but as their stories and historical counterparts show, they really don't.

Looking at the types of characters typical to a Nigro work we find creators, explorers, and iconoclasts: people who are attempting to change common perception. Similarly Nigro

challenges his audience's perception of these figures, how we think of them, and the time period that they are often struggling against. By employing a satirical style of emplotment Nigro emphasizes the ways in which these historical figures rebelled against the status quo of their day. As can be seen within the next chapter on Mode of Argument in *Lucia Mad*, by contextualizing the time period of the characters for his audience in his satirical style he is both emphasizing the non-conformist nature of the characters, while bringing our attention to repressive historical, societal trends.

## CHAPTER III

MODE OF ARGUMENT IN *LUCIA MAD*

Best known for his masterpiece *Ulysses*, James Joyce's name is synonymous with Classic Irish Literature. Playwright Samuel Beckett, renowned for his creation of absurdist theatre -- *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, etc. -- lives on today through his work for the stage. When someone says the name Lucia Joyce, if it gets recognized at all, most often the context is a conversation relating back to her father, or in reference to madness. Within his 1993 play *Lucia Mad*, playwright Don Nigro attempts to contextualize, and perhaps even adjust, the historical view of Lucia Joyce. Nigro's writing of Lucia shows how she rebels against the characteristics of the feminine ideal, which contribute to her historical representation as mad. *Lucia Mad* shows how the people and situation surrounding Lucia's life are all pushing her toward an ideal feminine lifestyle like those outlined in Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work *The Second Sex*. In this revolutionary feminist work, de Beauvoir proposes that society has crafted "the concept of the 'truly feminine' ... [and questions] why woman has been defined as the Other -- and what have been the consequences from man's point of view" (xxxv). While delving into history to investigate these questions, de Beauvoir looks at "what humanity has made of the human female" by investigating societal myths and how they have shaped a collective definition of what it means to be feminine (37). It is through Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "truly feminine," the feminine myth, or as I will refer to it the **ideal feminine**, that I wish to investigate Don Nigro's title character Lucia and his method of writing her. Written in 1949, de Beauvoir's book provides an appropriate lens to help contextualize the time period of the play, since the

majority of it takes place in the 1930s. The three main aspects from de Beauvoir's book that I use to craft the ideal feminine are woman as daughter, woman as muse, and woman as sexual being. Proper social expectation is imbedded in each of these societal roles. Lucia's non-conformist approach to these roles leads to rejection by most people in her life, imposed psychiatric care, and eventual admittance to mental hospitals. I have found themes of de Beauvoir's ideal feminine in the dialogue of *Lucia Mad*. Nigro writes Lucia as strong, intelligent, and at times even manipulative; however, Lucia is a character rife with contradiction. She appears to be in desperate need of love and a relationship, and yet, as Nigro writes her, this relationship will be on her terms. Nigro uses contextualization as a way of getting the story of Lucia Joyce's life across. By contextualizing Lucia for a modern audience, and demonstrating a feminist viewing of her life, he asks us to reconsider the role of women and madness in society.

*Lucia Mad* looks at the intersection of the lives of James Joyce, his daughter Lucia, and writer Samuel Beckett. Don Nigro has taken real life events of these people during a period that roughly covers from 1927, when a mutual friend Thomas McGreevey first introduced Beckett to Joyce, through the 1980s, long after Lucia had been institutionalized. Memory drives the play and therefore, in true Nigro fashion, there are no set changes and all locations exist on the stage at the same time. As Nigro states in the setting notes at the beginning of the script, "[t]hese locations blend in Lucia's mind and in Beckett's as well, and the play should be seen as the melding of their two memories with locations common to both [...] No scene changes, no blackouts, no space between scenes. Each scene flows gently into the next and scenes interpenetrate one another" (v). From the beginning we are getting Nigro's creation of these "memories" and his take on these relationships. Many of the events within the play are historically documented happenings: Beckett and Lucia were rumored to be engaged; her

catatonic state the night of her and Alex Ponisovsky's engagement party, when she threw a chair at her mother, cut the telephone line, and set fire to her room, and her sessions with Carl Jung. Nigro, however, takes the liberty of creating the dialogue which strings these events together. He gives his audience the take on how these events played out and crafts his version of the world in which they lived.

Lucia appears first, singing lines from the Lord Tennyson poem "Maud," a poem that deals with themes of obsession and forbidden love. Because Nigro lists her as being "at the madhouse," and since he ends the play with her there singing in a similar manner, we can assume that this is meant to represent the end of her life. She goes on to talk to the audience, or perhaps herself, about madness, love, art, and memory, while we see and hear Beckett, older and pattering around, talking to himself in a rather *Krapp's Last Tape* manner. Throughout the rest of the play, the circumstances around the beginning of their friendship unfold, allowing the audience to see what has made "Lucia mad." Her mother, Nora, projects the image of an Irish, Catholic housewife who perpetuates the ideas of a conservative, mother-figure. She speaks to Lucia in the vernacular of a stereotypical housewife. Nora tries to remake Lucia in the image of herself, as de Beauvoir suggests most mothers attempt to do. Having such a famous father presents its own set of problems for Lucia. It seems as though everything pales in comparison to the great man, including his daughter. Everything in the Joyces' lives revolved around his work. Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, is everything Lucia thinks she wants and needs, an intelligent, sexy, creative, and intriguing man. While Beckett does not appear to be in love with her, he never seems to make a concerted effort to convince her of this. Lucia longs for physical contact with Beckett, while he says he regards her like a sister. Each of these relationships crafts Lucia's world; the characters construct Lucia how they expect her to be for them and no one is

asking Lucia what she wants. When she tells them, they treat her like a child and barely listen to her demands. Through each relationship and her reactions to them, Nigro crafts his interpretation of Lucia.

### **Lucia as Daughter**

Nora pushes the role of daughter on Lucia in a manner that most closely represents how Simone de Beauvoir defines the mother-daughter relationship and the overall role of daughter. “[W]hen a child comes under their care, women apply themselves to changing her into a woman like themselves...it is wiser to make a “true woman” of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done” (de Beauvoir 281). In the excerpt below, Nora attempts to get Lucia to come to the kitchen and leave the men alone for their after dinner conversation. In fact, throughout the majority of the play when we see Nora, she is entering or exiting the kitchen and her actions consist of household chores. Typical stage directions for Nora are: “Coming from the kitchen into the parlor, folding up laundry” (11) and “Nora has moved to the sofa area, dusting” (17). The kitchen equals the mother’s domain in Nora’s ideal world. Nora attempts to impose this identity onto Lucia.

NORA. Come to the kitchen, Lucia, and help me with the whatchamacallit.

LUCIA. The what?

NORA. The soup.

LUCIA. We’ve already eaten, Mama. What do you want me to do, apologize to what’s left?

NORA. Help me with the dishes.

LUCIA. The dishes are done.

NORA. Give your father a moment alone with Mr. Bucket<sup>2</sup>[sic], dear. I know he's dying to hear more about Dublin.

LUCIA. Dublin is much the same. Mr. Beckett had just testified quite eloquently to that fact. (15)

Nora attempts to get Lucia to come to the kitchen, where she presumably belongs. Helping with the household chores qualifies as the appropriate after dinner behavior for a young woman, in Nora's view. Lucia, quite astutely, combats her mother's pleas for help, showing that there is no good reason for Lucia to leave the men alone to talk since all of the housework has been done and the men's conversation seems filled with the banal, nothing Lucia, as a young woman, should be kept from hearing. Nora acts as if the men will be able to better carry on their conversation without her daughter in the room. It might be unclear to a modern audience why the men should be left alone and the women should retreat to the kitchen keeping each of the sexes in isolation. A later scene clarifies Nora's ideology on the role of the daughter during the 1920s and 30s.

NORA. (*Coming from the kitchen.*) Lucia, are you talking to yourself again?

LUCIA. It would appear that I am, yes.

NORA. Well, stop it, and come help me with the dinner.

LUCIA. Why is it that Papa is allowed to talk to himself, but I'm not?

NORA. Because your father is a great writer. You're just a girl. Now come and do something with these beans. (21-22)

Again, we see Nora imposing her feminine ideals on Lucia with another attempt to get her into her "proper place," the kitchen. Lucia's resistant response brings insight into Nora's thought

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<sup>2</sup> As was addressed in the introduction, here is an instance of Nigro's characters using malapropisms. In this instance Nora is so absorbed into her own world that she cannot be bothered to take the time to remember Mr. Beckett's name.

process. Her ideal role of daughter becomes more clearly defined; now not only does she belong in the kitchen, Lucia being “just a girl” is not accorded the same allowances as her father, the “great writer.” Later in the same scene Nora takes the role a step further.

NORA. Your father is a genius, Lucia.

[...]

LUCIA. But perhaps he’s not in his right mind. Perhaps he’s insane.

[...]

NORA. Your father is not insane. Now, cheer up and come peel me some potatoes like a good girl. (22-23)

In order for Lucia to be considered a “good girl” she should be performing household chores, instead of working out her thoughts in the form of talking to herself. Joyce talks to himself and Nora considers him a genius; however, when Lucia does it she is chastised. Interestingly, Lucia brings into question the matter of Joyce’s sanity. Since Joyce is considered to be a genius, talking to himself is not out of the realm of what is considered proper behavior for him. His female daughter though was historically considered insane. Talking to herself was one the symptoms of her mental illness which was classified as a form of schizophrenia, it manifested itself with hebephrenic symptom and was diagnosed by several doctors to include “overexcited behavior, speeded-up reactions and disjointed thinking” (Maddox 286). Nigro displays this double standard Joyce as genius, Lucia as mad, when they are both exhibiting similar behavior.

When Nora isn’t pushing Lucia toward the ideal of woman as domestic goddess, or pointing out the behavior which is acceptable for her father and unacceptable for her, she enforces the idea of keeping up appearances. According to de Beauvoir, “the treasures of feminine wisdom are poured into her [the daughter’s] ears, feminine virtues are urged upon her,

she is taught cooking, sewing, housekeeping, along with care of her person, charm, and modesty [...] she must not lose her femininity” (de Beauvoir 281-282).

NORA. Lucia, you could help me, you know, instead of standing around like a stuffed parrot.

LUCIA. Help you what? Wear ruts in the floor going back and forth?

NORA. There’s literary folk coming tonight. If you won’t help me redd<sup>3</sup> [sic] the place up, at least do something with your appearance. You’re a mess, girl. (53)

In the above passage, we see Nora discussing another major characteristic of the feminine ideal of the daughter, appearance. Not only should a young lady help around the house and keep from focusing too much on her own thoughts, but she must also keep herself up to a feminine standard of being presentable. In the 1930s this probably consisted of a specific style of dress, hosiery, heels, make-up, and hair-do, while continuing to “redd up the house” as Nora puts it. We now have Nora’s ideal feminine, a woman with charm, style, grace, who knows when to politely leave the conversation to the men and makes a priority of household chores. As de Beauvoir suggests, the mother attempts to make the daughter in her image. Further proof of the mark of this feminine ideal on Lucia can be found in her response during the word association scene with one of her psychiatrists, Carl Jung.

JUNG. Kitchen

LUCIA. Mother

JUNG. Father

LUCIA. Exagmination round his factification. (88)

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<sup>3</sup> Another typical Nigro form of dialogue, this time a colloquialism probably meant to show Nora’s lack of education and Irish descent which is referred to several times during the play.

Lucia's telling responses, cleverly crafted by Nigro, indicates that her mother succeeded in associating herself with domesticity. However, Lucia's response to the word father demonstrates that she holds him in higher regard. "Exagmination round his factification" not only suggests the style of malapropism that Joyce intentionally employed in his writing, but it is also a portion of the book title, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* published by Samuel Beckett, comprised of essays relating to Joyce's "Work in Progress," which later became the novel *Finnegan's Wake*. Where the relationship between Lucia and Nora consists of a struggle between Nora's view of what it means to be a daughter and Lucia's rebellion against Nora's constructed role; the relationship between Lucia and her father, whether Joyce admits it or not, centers on Lucia as muse.

### **Lucia as Muse**

"I long for a father who is human" (73). In this single line spoken by Lucia, Nigro succinctly illustrates the pressure that comes with being the daughter of James Joyce. By the early 1930s, Joyce had reached a high level of notoriety not only amongst the literary community, but the world at large for his novel *Ulysses*. As demonstrated in the play, when in the 1920s as he began his "Work in Progress," Joyce developed a sort of cult following of literary minds who wanted to aid him in the creation of what many expected to be his next masterpiece. This environment of literary geniuses surrounding the master, Joyce, became Lucia's daily life. Many scholars have discussed Joyce's use of himself and his family as inspiration for the characters in his works. However, the degree to which he used each of them is debatable. Nigro, it seems, agrees with Carl Jung, that Lucia was Joyce's anima inspiratrix (the inspirational female form of his soul), or his Muse, as is later implied by Joyce in Nigro's text.

JUNG. The fact is Mr. Joyce, I've come to understand that you and your very appealing daughter have an almost mystical conjunction with one another. She is, in many ways, I believe, the living embodiment of your anima inspiratrix.

JOYCE. She's not my damned muse, you pretentious Swiss clock-humper, she's my daughter. Why can't you help her?

JUNG. You see how violently you react to this suggestion? The fact that your daughter has come to represent your muse, as you call it, is part of the reason you've been so reluctant to have her certified insane [...] (89)

Not only is this a line in the play, but Jung is historically quoted equating Lucia to Joyce's anima inspiratrix (Yoshida 16). This makes the relationship between Joyce and Lucia quite complicated and less easily definable as the one between Nora and Lucia; especially when we consider the definition of the ideal feminine role of muse as defined by de Beauvoir: "A Muse creates nothing by herself; she is a calm, wise Sibyl, putting herself with docility at the service of a master" (182). Understandably, Lucia seems to prefer the relationship with her father over that with her mother, but because she has learned to hold Joyce to such a high standard, in her mind she pales in comparison to him. She therefore does nothing within the world of the play, only exists. She has no job, she does not care to engage in the house work that her mother finds so fulfilling, and, as Nora earlier pointed out, Lucia is "just a girl" implying that because of her sex Lucia is incapable of higher thought or creativity, as Joyce is. These ideas manifest themselves in Lucia's dialogue.

LUCIA. I'm the flesh and blood embodiment of Papa's Work in Progress. I don't mean to be so scattered, it's just that I grow so frustrated because there is nothing I do really well. (19)

Because she accepts the role of muse assigned to her, she feels as if she cannot excel in creation herself. Here Nigro gives his interpretation of Lucia's failed attempts at creation and career. Historically, Lucia not only participated in, but according to many, including her biographer

Carol Loeb Shloos, she excelled in modern dance. However, Joyce urged Lucia to give up dance, pushing her toward illustration, which she did not have a talent for, because he seemed neither to understand the value in dance for Lucia and as a misguided effort to find a more suitable art for her (Shloos 154-250). Since Lucia views her father as infallible, she unquestioningly follows along with the role he creates for her. Nigro portrays Lucia's acceptance as lack of self esteem artistically, a trait Lucia was known to have. When compared to her father's genius, she felt lacking and unimportant. She is the "serendipitous work of art" (26) -- the embodiment of her father's work -- and therefore seen as the created rather than a creator, a point which Joyce's friends and colleagues historically were known to dwell on when urging him to focus on his work rather than the care of the increasingly "mad" Lucia.

Nigro gives a more compassionate view of Joyce pushing his agenda on his daughter, than he did Nora. His Joyce possesses a self awareness that he has created Lucia's situation. His acknowledgement of Lucia's importance for Joyce's work suggests that Nigro feels Joyce did realize that he pushed Lucia into the role of his muse. Toward the end of the play, after Lucia has been admitted to the mental hospital, where historically she spent the rest of her life, Joyce reflects on his daughter and the life he imposed on her:

She's an artist in all but the useful forms of cussedness. She suffers the exile but her cunning she employs in her own self destruction [...] she has no home, she cannot come to rest, her mind is like the dove on the waters after the flood, and I've done it, I've carted her about in this wretched nomadic penniless existence all her life, it's all right for a writer but not for a writer's child. I've always adored her, but the work has been everything, and everything outside the work has been neglected [...] it eats up everything. (92)

Nigro has Joyce acknowledge Lucia's artistic side, but equates it with her "self destruction." As I will discuss in the next section, this "cunning" is often employed in a manipulative manner, in

an attempt to get something she thinks she wants, most often love. When he goes on to discuss her lack of home he means it both in literal and figurative senses of the word. A nomadic lifestyle had an impact on Lucia's education. She began school in Italy and remained there for two years before the family uprooted to Switzerland where she struggled with German and was held back. After four and a half years of schooling in Zurich the family moved once again, this time to France. Learning each language made Lucia a polyglot, but never gave her a chance to excel in any one of them, making each transition difficult for the child to make friends and feel a sense not only of home, but also of identity, an Irish exile who tried to learn Italian, German, and French and spoke each of them with a brogue (Shloss 82). Joyce allowed Lucia to suffer for the betterment of his work. Don Nigro's notebook at the end of the script provides further insight into the all consuming nature of art.

The artist is a kind of cannibal, he eats his own experience and vomits it forth, somewhat disarranged [...] He is the snake that eats his own tail, the worm that devours itself [...] Art is about the wrong choice, the lost thing, the feared thing, the desired thing, and the making of art is an attempt to cope with defeat and failure [...] (119)

In this section of the notebook Nigro refers to Beckett and *Krapp's Last Tape*; however, it is also applicable to the situation between Joyce and Lucia. In the end Joyce is speaking with Beckett and reveals his regret for Lucia's situation. She is in the asylum and he is blaming himself. He admits that his work has taken over his life. As we see, Lucia has sacrificed herself to an extent. She has been fed the idea that Joyce's work is of utmost importance and because she has been taught to view him as a genius, or even as a god, she wants to believe that she is content with being his inspiration. However, through her demonstration of rebellious behavior, which can be viewed as her need for an intellectual or creative identity of her own, Nigro shows us that he feels she was not convinced.

JOYCE. Now, there is a serendipitous work of art if I ever saw one.

BECKETT. Fruitcake?

JOYCE. No, my daughter.

LUCIA. I'm not a work of art, Papa.

JOYCE. You are a miracle of rare device.

LUCIA. I would prefer, if it's all the same to you, not to be any sort of miracle or device either, Papa.

JOYCE. And why is that, my love?

LUCIA. Because one cannot touch the miraculous, Papa. One can only admire and wonder at it.

JOYCE. And do you not wish to be admired and wondered at, Lucia?

LUCIA. I'd rather be touched. (26)

The closest rejection of herself as muse is displayed through this scene. She implies that she would rather be considered a person than art. She has feelings and desires that need to be met. However, throughout the play Beckett spurns her sexual advances, denying Lucia her desire to be viewed by him as a sexual being.

### **Lucia as Sexual Being**

Within the play, it is through Beckett and Lucia's relationship that Nigro shows Lucia's desire to be treated as a sexual being. The role of sexual being is rife with duality according to de Beauvoir. "Since woman is indeed in large part man's invention, he can invent her in the male body [...] He projects upon her what he desires and what he fears, what he loves and what he hates" (197). "A woman who appeals too obviously to male desire is in bad taste; but one who seems to reject it is no more commendable [...] In refusing her role as object, she is defying

society [...]”(531). There is a conflict between the public and private lives of women that society, especially during the 30s, had created. Woman is desired by man and is required in private to submit to his will; however, in public she must display a demure and chaste image and must not exhibit sexual desires of her own. In the dialogue below, Beckett and Lucia are discussing a dance show in which Lucia performed. The particular show is a famous moment in Lucia’s life. During the scene, Beckett claims to have witnessed this performance, although I have yet to find evidence to prove this as an historic fact.

LUCIA. You really liked me?

BECKETT. You were charming.

LUCIA. Yes. Charming. My final triumph in the dance, I fear. Charm, unfortunately, is not my ultimate objective in life. Children are charming. Small animals are charming. I am an adult human being, and I’m afraid charm is just not enough.

BECKETT. I know some who would give anything for a fraction of your charm.

LUCIA. Would you like it Mr. Beckett, if, when your name was mentioned, what people would invariably say was, Ah, yes, Samuel Beckett, how charming. Would you like that, Mr. Beckett?  
(20)

Beckett hits a nerve in Lucia with his use of this single word, charming. According to the Online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, a second definition of the word charming is “Fascinating; highly pleasing or delightful to the mind or senses.” Lucia indicates that charm is not enough for her, showing that she indeed does desire more out of her life than the roles she currently gets placed into. Lucia makes a point of the fact that she is an “adult human being.” rather than an adult woman, indicating an understanding of the inferior status associated with being female at this time. She continues by contextualizing for Beckett the condescension inherent in the phrase charming. Lucia wants to be more than charming, especially to Beckett.

LUCIA. Do you ever fantasize about such things?

BECKETT. About musicians?

LUCIA. About sleeping with the daughter of the notorious Mr. Joyce.

BECKETT. I think a gentleman doesn't fantasize about having sexual relations with the daughter of his friend.

...  
LUCIA. But you have had sexual intercourse fairly recently?

BECKETT. Lucia, a gentleman—

LUCIA. I don't need a gentleman, Mr. Beckett, what I need is somebody to yank down my knickers and give me a good, thumping what-for.

...  
BECKETT. Lucia, what if your father overheard us talking about things like this? (29)

Beckett, as written by Nigro, averts any sexual advances that Lucia puts forth. He does not even want her speaking about sex with him. It appears to make him uncomfortable to have her speaking in such a way to him and he takes several different approaches to get her to relent. He starts by invoking the title of both gentleman and friend of her father; he implies a kind of taboo existing with the idea of having sex with a friend's daughter, as well as the understanding that as part of the societal definition of a gentleman encompasses keeping any fantasies he does have a secret. The more sexually explicit Lucia's language gets, the more uncomfortable Beckett appears until finally he summons the name of her father, the authority figure in her life, in an attempt to get out of the situation that he makes taboo, a discussion of Lucia's sexual desire.

As a young woman in the 1920s and 30s it was not considered proper to discuss sexual desire or act as a sexual being. Lucia's family chooses to ignore her sexual behavior and language, defining her with the terms they choose to believe as fact, whether or not they fit her reality.

JOYCE. She's not had a happy time of it with men. Several who have pursued her have been, in my opinion, simply inclined to take advantage of her **innocence**. She's an extremely **vulnerable** person, in some respects, Mr. Beckett. I have worried much about her. And she's very **pretty**. (31, my emphasis)

Joyce speaks as if she were a child; of course she is his child but, at this point she is around 23 years old. Old enough to have a husband and children of her own; however, until a woman moves into the ideal feminine role of mother, often they continue to be referred to in terms that make up the ideal feminine role of daughter. Innocence, vulnerable, pretty: these adjectives insinuate that Lucia cannot take care of herself, and suggests that Joyce needs to worry about her. Nigro demonstrates through Lucia's language and actions that she is not so innocent or vulnerable, but rather is a young woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. We see in a later scene with Beckett just how manipulative and cunning she can be.

LUCIA. Please will you do one thing for me? [...] I want you to propose to me [...] Ask for my hand in marriage. It has always been my girlish dream to have a tall, morose, borderline suicidal Irish cricket player propose to me [...] And the second part of my dream is that I refuse you [...] I wish to feel a sense of power over one who loves me. It's so seldom that I have a chance to feel that I have any power whatsoever, over a man or anyone else. Could you not indulge me in this one foolish girl's fancy, Mr. Beckett? (36-38)

Within this scene she tricks Beckett into proposing at which point her father happens to walk in and overhear only Beckett's proposal. According to Nora Joyce's biography, the Paris Literati gossips created the Beckett proposal rumor (Maddox 253). At any rate, Nigro creates a situation that shows Lucia as a strong-willed, intelligent woman who used her cunning and "charm" to attempt to get what she wanted. Beckett, unable to articulate to Joyce the misunderstanding, becomes unable to rectify the situation. Once Joyce departs to tell the happy news to Nora, Beckett confronts Lucia and she adopts the naïve language that others use to define her.

BECKETT. But you know we can't be married.

LUCIA. I don't see how we can avoid it, now. I mean, you've proposed to me. I've accepted. Father has given us his blessing.

BECKETT. But we weren't serious.

LUCIA. I was. If you weren't, I think it's very cruel of you to toy with a young girl's affections that way. (42)

Lucia's sly employment of the phrases which are typically used against her turns them to her favor. Nigro portrays her not as mad, but as manipulative. Nigro's construction and interpretation of the Ponisovsky incident further examines Lucia's "madness."

Historically Joyce arranged the engagement of Alex Ponisovsky and Lucia; however, she still pines for Beckett. It is also a historical fact that Lucia, after the engagement party Joyce threw at an Italian restaurant, goes catatonic at a family friend's house. This is the point at which Ponisovsky breaks off the relationship with Lucia. Nigro crafts a conversation between Lucia and Beckett some time after the catatonic incident.

LUCIA. You think I'm completely insane, don't you?

BECKETT. No, not completely. What I mean is –

LUCIA. If I'm insane, then so are you, and so, for that matter is my father. But you and Papa create out of your madness. I can't do that. I've tried but I'm not good enough at anything and it's too lonely. I need someone to love. It's the only thing that can help me.

BECKETT. You had someone to love, and you've just frightened him away.

LUCIA. He didn't love me [...] I've decided that the world is a demonic conspiracy to humiliate me at every turn and prevent me from ever being loved by anybody. (71)

Nora in particular pushes Lucia toward the role of wife. Lucia wants to be loved, but she wants it to be on her own terms. Nigro contextualizes her catatonic state, during the engagement with a man with which she is not in love, as a physical rejection of the roles which are being forced upon her. Not encouraged to think for herself, not allowed to create, unable to find the sexual satisfaction which she seeks, her body shuts down. This physical rejection of the ideal feminine represents the point, both in the play and historically, where those around Lucia felt she needed medical help to cure her of this “madness.” Her relationship with her mother became increasingly violent, escalating to the point where she threw a chair at Nora. After the chair incident, Lucia, who had been to several therapists and psycho-analysts, was institutionalized for the rest of her life.

In the final scene of *Lucia Mad*, Nigro shows Lucia toward the end of her life, in the institution where she will die, with Beckett visiting her. It is within this scene, where she speaks in the most lucid and insightful manner, reflecting on their interactions.

LUCIA. You only cared for me because I was the great man's daughter, but I only cared for you, because you were his son. We were both in love with phantoms. All love is for ghosts. We're never in love with the person we think we love, we're in love with the ghost of some person we've cast them as in the play of our lives. We love only the mask. (107)

By having Lucia speak so eloquently, so intelligently, Nigro again makes his audience question her “madness.” Forced institutionalization has affected her, but her clarity of thought while with Beckett shows that she can rise above it, it does not define her.

One of the most historically reproduced photographs of Lucia is from dance performance that she and Beckett discuss in Nigro's play:

LUCIA. You've never seen me dance.

BECKETT. Yes I have. I went to your recital. You were all in silver. I believe you were some sort of fish. (20)

Beckett's description is accurate; although there is no historical evidence that he actually attended this performance. In the historical photograph from her dance performance, Lucia appears to be dressed as part woman, part fish, her posture looks precarious with her legs bent and arms and torso shifted off to one side. Her costume, which she made, is reminiscent of fish scales, covers one leg and has fringy pieces coming off of it like seaweed. This can be seen as a metaphor for Lucia's life. In the photo she is neither woman, nor fish. She looks like a dancer; however, her posture is not the typical feminine dancer to which we are accustomed. Her costume is not indicative of ideal beauty; although one could not deny she is beautiful in this photo. Her precarious balance looks as though she could tip over at any moment. It is almost as if Lucia, in this picture, is actively attempting to defy the imposed ideal feminine. Undoubtedly, Nigro has seen this photograph in his research since it is one of the most reproduced images of Lucia. *Lucia Mad* creates a Lucia Joyce that embodies the same qualities as the woman in the photograph. Nigro's Lucia subverts expectations, rebels against constructs, and clings to her convictions, perhaps to her detriment, showing that she is certainly flawed, but not necessarily mad. By employing the mode of contextualization of argument, he displays how her circumstances could have shaped Lucia; Nigro provides his audience with a fuller view of this historical woman, making us decide whether or not to trust the judgments of her age.

## CHAPTER IV

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION IN *MARINER*

In 1990, The Ohio State University Department of Theatre commissioned Don Nigro to write a play commemorating the 500 year anniversary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage; he called the play *Mariner*. In *Mariner*, Nigro weaves history, literature, myth, and contemporary politics into his creation of a Columbus Tale. Many of the characters from the play lived in the fifteenth century and have become famous and/or notorious in their own right: Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, Prince John of Portugal, and the Grand Inquisitor Frey Tomas de Torquemada, to name a few. Several events of the play historically occurred; however, it is through the lens of Nigro's imagination and opinion of the history surrounding Columbus that we view the details of these events. Any history of these epic figures is based on a person's version of what really happened. Not only is Nigro looking at Christopher Columbus as a historical figure, but he urges his audience to remember that above all Columbus was a fallible human being; a fact which is generally overlooked by the condemning or aggrandizing annals of history. Contextualizing Columbus's situation and time period along the way, Nigro compares him to misunderstood artists of the second half of the twentieth century; there is also a bit of the writer in his version of Columbus. An inquisition in Purgatory is the setting of the play and a metaphor for the culture wars of the late 1980s and 1990s in America. Nigro has created a play that gives the audience his take on the life of Christopher Columbus, his time, and his relevancy to a world 500 years after his history altering voyage. According to Hayden White in *Metahistory*:

The ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for understanding the present ones. (22)

Nigro's balance of the many versions and ideas regarding Columbus and his treatment of religion within the play reflects his ideological position; his comparison of events from Columbus's time, including the references to the inquisition with the trial of Cincinnati museum director Dennis Barrie, show the audience his thoughts on implications that can be drawn from the study of these events to help contextualize his historical present. It is with this focus on ideology that I examine *Mariner* throughout this chapter.

*Mariner* presents a judgment of Columbus's actions in life. A trial is being held on the wreck of the Santa Maria. Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition Torquemada is the Judge, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's daughter, Princess Juana, acts as Columbus's defense, and a shadowy, cloaked figure, which remains silent for the majority of the play, represents his prosecutor. Columbus's memories materialize as he describes his life starting from when he arrived shipwrecked on the Portuguese shore, moving through his journeys back and forth between Spain and the "New World." Nigro presents Columbus as a sailor, womanizer, lover, husband, obsessed visionary, and, perhaps most importantly, a product of his time. Nigro is not justifying Columbus' life, in fact he points out that as Columbus becomes more and more possessed by his nautical dreams he loses touch with his humanity. In the end, Torquemada punishes Columbus for his lechery and pride, sentencing him to 500 years in purgatory, after which time he will be admitted to heaven. The prosecutor, outraged by the lax sentencing, reveals himself to be a representative of all of the native people who were enslaved and/or killed by Columbus and the frenzy of exploration and exploitation that followed in his wake.

Torquemada, a product of 15<sup>th</sup> century European values, does not let the death and enslavement of these “savage people” weigh on his decision, for him Columbus was doing his “Christian duty” trying to save the souls of “the savages” by enslaving them and teaching them the Christian way of life. Although absolved of his sins, however, Columbus is still left alone at the end of the play comforted only by the mad Juana.

### **Ideology - Columbus**

Opinions on Christopher Columbus are wide ranging and diverse. Praised as a hero for so long until revisionist history of the late nineteenth century caused scholars to turn their backs on Columbus ignoring much of the good, they lost sight of the fact that he was just a man, not the epic hero as he had previously been portrayed. One can get lost in the veritable sea of Columbus research including various accounts, biographies, logs, journals, and articles, and this is just considering the work that claims verity. As Nigro points out in his notes “All statements about Columbus could be lies” (141); any account of Columbus and his voyages relies partly on imagination since there is a lack of evidence and the accounts are created from other historical documents and from the log books written by Columbus himself. For this reason, I have kept my historical Columbus research limited to a select few well-known and often cited works. Until the second half of the nineteenth century most scholarship on Columbus painted him as an epic hero.

One of the most well-known Columbus accounts is Samuel Eliot Morison’s *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, published in 1942 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1943; it is considered by many still today to be one of the definitive biographies of Columbus. Morison took an empirical approach to his study of Columbus, setting out on a re-exploration of his four voyages across the Atlantic. Little attempt is made by Morison to address

the controversy surrounding the questions of where Columbus was originally from or what manner of man he was. Chapter Two, titled “Genoa,” aims to discuss from where Columbus comes, according to Morison. The opening sentence of the chapter reads: “There is no mystery about the birth, family or race of Christopher Columbus” (7). He does not spend time on what he considers to be a moot point; even though the debate on Columbus’s heritage continues today. Nigro too accepts the general consensus on Columbus’s background, which can be seen in Columbus’s first flashback, an introduction to the character Lucinda and her mother in Portugal: “I am Cristoforo Columbo, from Genoa, an Italian mariner and the Dutch ship I was sailing on sank last night in the tempest” (15). Nigro creates a set of given circumstances for Columbus that read like they could have been taken out of Morison’s book. Morison’s work focuses on what manner of sailor he was and where precisely he might have traveled in his voyages. Obviously ignoring the contentious Columbus issues is understandable to Morison’s overall objective; however, it does not erase these events and their effects on the man and his legacy. Morison’s creative research method and his obvious interest in Columbus as a seaman shape his account. At times Nigro’s writing of Columbus emphasizes the sailor’s creative thinking, use of resources, and most importantly his excitement and love for travel and discovery. In a scene where Columbus describes the first sighting of the “New World” he is interrupted by Juana and Torquemada and becomes frustrated. “But I want to tell you about the landing on the island, our landfall was glorious, it was magnificent, a moment in history which—” “... it’s the summit of my life...” (84). However, Morison represents only one perspective on Columbus.

Revisionist history books were ubiquitous in the decades approaching the Quincentennial of Columbus’s first arrival in the “New World.” In 1973, historian Alfred Crosby published *The Columbian Exchange* that focused on the disease brought over with the Spanish sailors.

Historian Francis Jennings published a book in 1975 with the foreboding title, *The Invasion of America*. Well known revisionist author and Professor James Loewen published *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus: What Your History Books Got Wrong* in the opportune, and no doubt well planned, year of 1992. Nigro attempts to address these sides or opinions of Columbus as well, within the play. The character of the Prosecutor raises the detriment caused by Columbus and his voyages. He refers to Columbus and his men “devouring” the natives, enslaving them, and causing genocide of the native South, Central, and North American inhabitants. Nigro appears to have taken these differing opinions of Columbus into account in the creation of his Columbus while not wholly committing to the vilification or heroism of the man. As Nigro himself points out in his notes, “[a] playwright is also limited by his own experience and prejudices – one is Italian, so one is inclined to be sympathetic to Italians” (132). Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to present the audience with variant sides of Columbus, so it is on the onus of each person to choose for themselves how they will perceive the life and accomplishments or iniquities of the famous explorer.

This is not to say that this is a “balanced” characterization, as Nigro does endow Columbus with a conscience. Although his first concern tends to be exploration and his theories, Nigro’s Columbus dwells on whether or not the savages have souls and the implications of his voyages. Here we get more than a hint of the author’s take on the man. Again, as he states in his notes,

One is devoting one’s life to an impossible task, to create a serious and enduring body of dramatic literature in a time and a society which does not value theatre [...] so one finds one’s self tremendously sympathetic to a man confronted at every turn by hostile and contemptuous authority figures and obsessed by doing an even more insanely impossible thing – sailing west to get to the east. (133)

While never fully committing to a traditional or revisionist view of the Italian sailor, he is a relatable character, which begins with Nigro's ability to relate to the Columbus from history, or his idea of that Columbus. Creating a non-relatable Christopher Columbus would have been a valid choice for a playwright who was strictly revisionist or someone who did not believe that there was value to Columbus's expeditions. In scenes like those titled "Savages" and "Doubts" we get a glimpse of Columbus's morality weighing on him. In the end Juana does not turn her back on him, although everyone else has. In his construction of Columbus as an empathetic character Nigro betrays his point of view. Surely Nigro holds sympathy toward Columbus, otherwise he would not have written him in this manner. However, Nigro appears to be a realist, otherwise he would not have incorporated all of the different views on Columbus into his version of the man.

A superficial, feminist reading of the play may result in a negative view of Columbus as he is clearly presented as a womanizer. During his Inquisition, the first story portrayed for the audience is of the young Lucinda talking to her mother about the sailor she has found washed up on the shore. This scene references the tale that Columbus washed up on a shore in Portugal after a shipwreck in the 1470s. Although her exact age is not listed by the playwright, she comes across as a girl in her mid teens. She says to her mother, "when I bent down to look at this body, it put its hand up my skirt and caressed my buttocks" (14). This somewhat lecherous view of Columbus is maintained as he goes on to seduce almost every woman with whom he comes into contact during the play. His goal in seduction often begins with personal gain: ships, an audience at court, or pure pleasure. Columbus charms these women not maliciously or at times even purposefully and he does not have cruel intentions for these women. He appears to honestly enjoy their company and his ignorance is as much to blame as his libido. Later in the

play he wakes up in the bed of a recent acquaintance's cousin after a night of drinking; by this point the audience has become accustomed to the running joke that Columbus cannot control the results of his irresistibility.

BEATRIZ. Oh, but I found you immensely charming. Otherwise I certainly wouldn't have let you sleep with me.

COLUMBUS. Oh, GOD, this keeps happening to me. You must forgive me, it's not my fault, I'm Italian. (49)

Upon closer examination, it is clear that the women have a choice in the seduction and have apparently been willing participants. In fact, in a manner reminiscent of the Italian commedia dell'arte, the women are portrayed within *Mariner* as the voice of reason. King Ferdinand is bested by Queen Isabella numerous times. Philosophical statements made by Columbus's wife Felipa and his lover Beatriz are profound. Even Juana's monologue regarding the differences in madness demonstrates that although she may be mad, she is nonetheless insightful. Nigro goes on to display that women in the fifteenth century were mistreated in general, not just by Columbus:

COLUMBUS. [I]f you objected to anything we did, why didn't you say something?

SECOND NATIVE GIRL. I was given by one man who was red to another man who was white. My objections had nothing to do with it.

COLUMBUS. I fail to see what the minor complaints of one little savage girl could possibly have to do with the fate of my immortal soul. Why don't you ask about the glorious accomplishments of this voyage? (91)

Note that these characters aren't given names, there is a set of three of them (to objectify them in the manner in which they are objectified in the reality of the play) and they are simply referred to as FIRST, SECOND, and THIRD NATIVE GIRL. For a moment, Nigro reminds us of the

general ill treatment of women and first nation peoples of the time period, reminding us that this was not something specific to Columbus. Writing with subject matter from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century could be an excuse for misogynistic tendencies. Nonetheless, Nigro in his tongue-in-cheek style makes a conscious effort to go against the ideals of the time period regarding women and displaying his own ideals.

Colonialism must come into play in any Columbus story which attempts to create a well rounded account of the explorer. A shrouded figure looms in the distance at the end of Act I. In the second half of the play, the audience is introduced to the person behind the cloak, the Prosecutor of the trial, a man who is representing all of the Native American people who were affected by Columbus's expeditions. Throughout the questioning that proceeds from the Prosecutor and Torquemada, Columbus remains aloof of any harm he may have caused. He tries desperately to make them understand the wondrous accomplishments that he believes he has made.

TORQUEMADA. So you didn't find the Emperor of China.

COLUMBUS. No, but we found many pine trees.

PROSECUTOR. Which you immediately cut down.

COLUMBUS. We discovered the island of Hispaniola.

PROSECUTOR. Which you enslaved.

COLUMBUS. Which we colonized. And we found gold there.

PROSECUTOR. Which you stole.

COLUMBUS. The natives were more than happy to trade with us.

PROSECUTOR. For items that were worthless.

COLUMBUS. Not to them. Worth is a relative concept. (90-91)

In this scene, Columbus comes off like a child who has an answer for every question his parents throw at him when he is caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Again, Columbus is not being portrayed as conquering the natives with malevolent, deliberate force. Instead he believes he is perfectly justified in his actions and is oblivious to the moral responsibility which was absent from his interactions with the Native Americans. Nigro makes no compunctions about the reality of Columbus's beliefs; however, he reminds us of Columbus's era, making us consider the fact that equal rights and human rights were not phrases that existed in the vocabulary of most Europeans within the fifteenth century. Although we may not agree with Columbus's methods, we do need to keep them in context before we judge him against modern standards.

### **Ideology – Treatment of Religion**

A play set in Europe in the fifteenth century dealing with historic events would be awkward, if not inaccurate, without reference to Christian religion. Italy, Spain, and Portugal are countries that were known for their strong religious ties to the Catholic Church during this period. Queen Isabella was a famously devout Christian and Torquemada, a Dominican Friar. All of these details help to set up both the time period and the moral sentiment surrounding Columbus. In his satiric tone within *Mariner*, which (as was discussed in Chapter 1) Nigro often employs in his plays, his ideological view regarding religion can be gleaned. Within the first few lines of the play, Nigro establishes where we are, the tribunal judging Columbus's earthly deeds with adjudicator Tomas Torquemada, who introduces himself as such and then goes on to describe himself as "God's humble instrument" (11), which seems earnest enough. However, the

deeper we get into the play, the more clearly Nigro makes his opinions concerning the church and religion in general.

During a scene when Columbus has gone to church to get the attention of a wealthy ship-owner's niece, the audience gets a first glimpse of Nigro's tone:

NURSE. Felipa, you mustn't touch this person. You've not been introduced. People are staring. We do not embrace the poor here, this is a church. (20)

This character of the Nurse pleads with Felipa, the ship-owner's niece, first with social mores and when they don't work she invokes the idea of propriety within the church. Although the line is comical, there is an undertone of sarcasm attached to it. As the play and characters develop, so does Nigro's tone regarding religion and the Catholic Church, which becomes both stronger and more evidently caustic:

BEATRIZ. [T]he Queen's busy deporting the Jews from Spain and stealing everything they own.

COLUMBUS. That sort of talk will get you roasted like a chicken.

BEATRIZ. I don't care, I think it's a horrible, cruel, stupid and very unChristian thing to do, don't you?

COLUMBUS. If they don't want to leave they can simply convert.

BEATRIZ. Maybe they don't want to convert. What do YOU know about it?

COLUMBUS. I know about it. My mother's people converted.

BEATRIZ. You're Jewish and you have no compassion for these people?

COLUMBUS. Keep your voice down. I have dead ancestors who used to be Jewish. I'm a Christian. As long as you convert, they don't kill you. I think that's fair. You make choices and you accept the consequences. (65, author's emphasis)

Beatriz and Columbus's dialogue demonstrates several of Nigro's view points. First, it gives the audience his attitude toward the events surrounding the Spanish Inquisition, while relaying another theory about Columbus, there are those who believe that Columbus's family might have been of Jewish descent. Again he has Columbus speaking very earnestly, but there is a sense of mordancy in his lines, "As long as you convert, they don't kill you. I think that's fair." Lastly there is Beatriz, who is Spanish and presumably a Christian. She is a common person, not of nobility, and she is a woman, not someone whose opinion would have been highly regarded during the 1400s. And yet, she is the one who speaks up for the mistreatment of the Jews by the current government. Commenting on how "unChristian" the behavior of the government is seems to make Columbus nervous. Her concern for humanity is more than what is displayed by many of the other characters within the play, especially, the male authority and religious figures.

A later scene between Beatriz and Columbus further validates these points:

COLUMBUS. They can't have souls.

BEATRIZ. Who? The King and Queen?

COLUMBUS. The natives we brought back. They can't have souls.

BEATRIZ. Why can't they? They're people just like us.

COLUMBUS. Because they're not Christians, they can't be Christians because they know nothing about Christianity, therefore, if they had souls, they'd be damned to hell, so they can't have souls, because God would not be that cruel.

...

BEATRIZ. Wait a minute, listen, they ARE people, like us, Christopher. If we have souls, so do they. You mustn't think of them as not human. That is not a Christian thing.

COLUMBUS. Then it's our duty to make them Christians and save their souls.

BEATRIZ. Maybe you don't need to save their souls. Maybe God's not such a religious fanatic as you think. (96-97, author's emphasis)

Again, we see Nigro's flawed Columbus trying to make sense of his situation and again the satire toward religion: "God would not be that cruel." Beatriz, to answer Columbus's initial vague question regarding whether or not the ambiguous "they" have souls, first assumes he is talking of Ferdinand and Isabella, about whom they had been previously talking, but this again is a hint of sarcasm regarding the inhumane acts that had been carried out by the royalty and church. When Columbus corrects her that his question was regarding the "natives" Beatriz does not seem to understand how it could have been a question. To Beatriz, the answer is obvious. She is the only one in the play who is not one of the "natives" who refers to them as people. Again she brings up the proper Christian thing to do. Later in the play Torquemada refers to her as a whore, and Columbus makes the connection between the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Drawing this connection between Beatriz and Mary Magdalene Nigro's philosophy comes through; Beatriz stands out as a character who is compassionate and sympathetic, but someone who traditionally is not considered to be religious or pious. In Nigro's world, the most pious and zealous, like Torquemada, are not necessarily humane or compassionate.

Nigro's Torquemada, comes across as narrow-minded and self entitled.

TORQUEMADA. Is there anyone present moronic enough to want to say anything on behalf of this wretched sinner? No? Good. So, consequently—

JUANA. I do. I want to say something.

TORQUEMADA. No. you don't

JUANA. Yes I do. You have to let me speak, it's in the rule book, look it up.

TORQUEMADA. There is no rule book. God whispers the rules in my ear as I go along. (11-12)

An “above the law” attitude can be attributed to Torquemada in this quotation. He answers to what is presumably considered a higher law, his god. Those who may not believe in “God” could take issue with this manner of thinking, the point which Nigro sardonically makes. Because those in power, King Ferdinand and, more importantly, Queen Isabella, also believe in this god, Torquemada has been placed in a position of power, of judgment. Presumably his role within the church has prepared him for the position given to him, to be a judge of morality and ethics, but whose ethics and rules is he using? This is a very Foucaultian issue. Torquemada is the greatest authority because both his God and Queen have made him so. No further explanation is given and no one challenges his claim. It is as if he has made himself the authority.

Although Torquemada claims to be an impartial judge of Columbus’s deeds he never lists the criteria by which he is judging. Toward the end of the play Nigro displays Torquemada’s main concern within the trial:

TORQUEMADA. What concerns me here is why you did not do more to turn these savages into Christians?

COLUMBUS. We tried to convert them.

PROSECTUOR. You told us about a kind and loving God and then you made us into slaves and slaughtered us. You were the savages. For what you did to us alone you deserve to burn in agony in the flames of your Christian hell run by your forgiving Christian god forever.

TORQUEMADA. I will decide who goes to hell, thank you. (100)

Torquemada does not fret over the enslavement, rape and pillaging, theft of natural resources, the diseases which the Europeans brought over that wiped out whole tribes, or the general treatment

of the native people caused by Columbus and his men, rather he wonders why more “savages” were not converted to Christianity. A typical judgment of missionaries from the sixteenth century and beyond is that they preached and converted, but had little concern for the native people, with which they interacted, beyond that. Torquemada does not address Columbus’s behavior toward the Native Americans as part of his inquisition, in fact quite the opposite; he not only refers to them as savages, but at the end of the trial he finds Columbus guilty only of “lechery” and “pride.” Torquemada then sentences him to time in Purgatory, equaling the apt amount of 500 years, after which he will be granted entrance into heaven. In true Fifteenth Century Roman Catholic fashion, Torquemada condemns Columbus for his sins of the flesh, but is not affected by his crimes against humanity. When the Prosecutor attempts to argue with Torquemada’s judgment citing the issues of slavery and genocide, Torquemada’s reply is “can we call these creatures human beings until they’ve become Christians?” (128). Nigro inserts an accurate level of disregard for the Native Americans by the white Catholic male characters, reminding the audience just who the judge is historically. The world of the play is Purgatory, a concept from Christian dogma, it is then accurate to have a judge from that world have the ideals and prejudices that correlate to it. Nigro is not saying that this is a fair judgment of Columbus or his actions, but he posits that this might be the judgment that would come from this particular group’s set of ideals and beliefs. In fact, it could be inferred that Nigro himself does not hold much stock in the opinion of someone like Torquemada, whose focus should be on humanity in general, but was more concerned with strict adherence to a set of rules constructed by other fallible, European, white men.

### **Implication – present as seen through past**

At the end of the acting edition of *Mariner*, Nigro has included his notes. Interesting points can be gleaned from perusing these notes, historical references, influences, and Nigro's philosophy toward theatre. One note that particularly stood out to me was within his section on notable persons from the play. Within the portion on Torquemada:

There is a direct line of decent from the reasoning of the Inquisition to the reasoning of Hitler, to the reasoning of contemporary religious and political fanatics and advocates of censorship. The inquisition is alive and well and living in Cincinnati, putting directors of art museums in jail. (Nigro 137)

Not only did this note stand out to me, but it made me research the event in Cincinnati about which he was speaking, and then re-read the play, with special attention to not only the character of Torquemada, but also with attention to ideological implication on the part of Nigro, connecting this play of events which occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to what was happening in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S.

Before delving into the topic of the strains of Nigro's ideology within *Mariner*, it is important to first understand the events which were occurring in Ohio in 1989 and 1990, and subsequently across the U.S., when Nigro was writing the play. The inquisition of the late 1980s and early 1990s, to which Nigro refers in the quotation from his notebook, is part of what is often referred to as the American "culture wars." Specifically he makes reference to Dennis Barrie, the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Arts Director, who was arrested after allowing a traveling collection of photography by Robert Mapplethorpe to be displayed at the museum. This show, "The Perfect Moment," a retrospective of the late Mapplethorpe's work, consisted of 175 black and white photographs. Of the 175 there were 7 photographs which were considered "obscene" by religious leaders and conservative politicians and spurred the controversy leading

to a charge of pandering obscenity and child pornography on both Barrie and the museum (Johnson 22). Barrie was acquitted after a mere two hours of jury deliberation (Lacayo). However, the fact that he was arrested and indicted in the first place is what caused upheaval amongst advocates of art and freedom of expression.

In a 1991 keynote address to the College Art Association, Barrie called for action within the arts community. He called for a stand for freedom of expression in the U.S. Barrie's choice to display the traveling exhibition of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's caused both controversy and Barrie's indictment and trial in 1990 when the exhibition was deemed obscene by several prominent, conservative law makers, including Senator Jesse Helms. Always contextualizing historical events for a modern audience, Nigro has tapped into the connections between Columbus's time and his own within *Mariner*, a connection that would not have been lost on the Ohio audience to which this play premiered.

A parallel has been made by Nigro between conservative politicians of his time, Senators Helms and D'Amato, and Torquemada of Columbus's time. Conservative conviction fuels both the senators and the inquisitor, although 500 years separate the men, Nigro seems to suggest that the ideological backgrounds of the men are not so different, making a further correlation between conservative politics and their tendency to be tied to religion. "Piss Christ," a photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine, by Andres Serrano, also sparked attention from conservative Christian Groups. Serrano's work was funded by a \$15,000 grant from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, an organization who receives a portion of their funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). As the work was partially funded by tax payers' money, this became the impetus for political and religious attention. However, when reading the commentary of these community leaders, there is a tone of moral condemnation occurring within

the language that they have chosen to discuss the issue. New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato was quoted in the *Washington Post* describing his opinion of "Piss Christ": "a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity [...]" and goes on to call Serrano's work "trash" (qtd. in Kastor n. pag.). Religious leader Reverend Donald Wildmon told *Newsweek*, regarding Serrano's work, "I find it extremely offensive that my tax dollars are used to promote anti-Christian bigotry." Underneath Wildmon's statement is a quotation from Serrano that his work refutes "organized attempts to co-opt religion in the name of Christ" (qtd. in McGuigan, et al 68).

Serrano is making a statement about his beliefs regarding religion through his artwork. However, he is being branded with language that makes him sound like a heretic by religious leaders and conservative politicians. Ideologically, this is not so different from what was happening to the so called heretics who had beliefs that did not align themselves with those who were in power and were persecuted for it during the Spanish Inquisition. Though the form of persecution might be different, the idea is still the same, a larger point that Nigro is making using an inquisition as the setting for his play. Nigro is reminding his audience of another moment in time when innocent people were victimized for having beliefs which were contrary to the norms imposed by organized religion.

It appeared in a time of hysteria [...] The hysteria that was generated created the right moment for what was happening [...] for forces to be released that were quite terrible – and believe me, they were quite terrible. And these forces still exist. (Barrie 29-30)

The above quotation taken out of context (originally spoken by Contemporary Arts Center director Dennis Barrie, regarding the conditions existing during the tour of the Robert Mapplethorpe show) sounds as if it could be referring to the hysteria created during the Inquisition. Crime and misrule of Castile had made it quite chaotic as Isabella was taking the throne; in addition to anarchy in her kingdom she faced the threat of bankruptcy in her coffers.

At the time the Catholics considered the Jews their enemy since they were responsible for the crucifixion of their Savior. But the major point of contention the Catholic Church had with the Jews was that a rash of those who had converted to Christianity, were renouncing their new faith and returning to Judaism. This was the cause for the formation of the tribunal of the Inquisition (Sabatini 42-84). As Barrie stated regarding the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, “the hysteria that was generated created the right moment for what was happening.”

In her 1997 work, *The World of Christopher Columbus: Imperial Spain 1469-1598*, Emma Lou Thornbrough discusses the Spanish Inquisition within the context of its time:

Agents of the Inquisition traveled about collecting evidence of heresy. A suspect who confessed voluntarily was usually given a free pardon [...] (46)

Thornbrough’s description of the Inquisition is eerily suggestive of events that occurred during the culture wars. Senator Jesse Helms gathering press materials and catalogues from the Mapplethorpe exhibition to bring to the attention of the Senate, and Senator D’Amato’s act of tearing up a catalogue from the “Piss Christ” exhibition on the floor of the Senate sounds like “agents” “collecting evidence of heresy.”

In regards to “suspects confessing voluntarily,” the events which occurred at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In June 1989, Christina Orr-Cahall, who was the director of the Gallery at the time, canceled the showing of the Mapplethorpe exhibition *The Perfect Moment*, which was scheduled to open at the Gallery in July. This event occurred before the situation at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center with the same traveling exhibition. Orr-Cahall’s decision to cancel the show was prompted by Senator D’Amato’s denouncement of Serrano’s “Piss-Christ” on the Senate floor in the previous month (Gamarekian 22). Perhaps too close to home for Orr-Cahall, having the Senate in her backyard and amid rising fear of losing

funding from a crackdown on the NEA, Orr-Cahall chose to “confess voluntarily,” in a sense, that the Mapplethorpe show was “obscene” which gave her gallery a free pardon from the wrath of the Senate. A decision she would come to regret because of the backlash it caused within the arts community (Lacayo n. pag.). Although it spared her and the gallery the fate of Dennis Barrie and the CAC, it did result in her almost immediate retirement.

It is in a scene between Juana and Columbus where Juana speaks on the differences in types of madness where Nigro’s viewpoint on these antics of the culture wars comes through. She first defines the “destructive madness” as resulting “in tyranny and violence, physical and psychological, to others and to one’s self” (123). This “destructive madness” of which she speaks could be equated to the frantic, destruction of reputations and livelihoods of artists and performers as a result of religion being used to further a political point within the culture wars. Senator Helms labeled the work of Mapplethorpe as offensive, speculative, and homoerotic and child pornographic; and these labels stuck. Helms based his opinion on 7 photographs of a collection of 178. Suddenly the oeuvre of Mapplethorpe’s work, which includes portraiture and still life photography, was considered by those who had never laid eyes on a photograph of his, to be homoerotic. Helms would go on to propose budget cuts and restrictions to be placed upon the NEA in their grant making policies, which will be discussed further regarding similarities to Queen Isabella and Helms regarding fund appropriation. A direct result of Helms’s proposal of restrictions, would affect four performance artists -- famously known as the “NEA 4”-- removing their funding for what was considered obscene content.

According to Nigro, Juana goes on to define

the much more rare creative madness, that distorted and unorthodox way of looking at the world which results in creation, exploration and discovery. The problem is that to ordinary, normal people, they look like pretty much the same thing, which is why

some of the best books and people in the world tend to get thrown  
in bonfires. (123)

Note Nigro's word choice first labeling this form of madness "creative," which might bring the audience's minds to art headlines, audiences in a theatre on a university campus in Columbus, Ohio, a two hour drive from the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Juana's next line discusses the issue that "ordinary, normal people" do not understand creative madness, which is what (in part) helps them to blindly condemn that which they do not understand. When selecting the jury for the Mapplethorpe exhibit trial, the jury of Director Dennis Barrie's peers that were chosen were people who had not only never stepped into the Contemporary Arts Center, they had never entered a museum, theatre, ballet or opera performance and none of them had been to college. It would seem the objective of the prosecution was to keep anyone with "culture" or an understanding of "creativity" away from the decision making. In an amazing triumph of the arts, not only did this backfire, Barrie was acquitted by the jury, but two of the jury members wanted to learn more about the museum and became members (Barrie 30-31). Take that "destructive madness!"

*Mariner* is a perfect example of a major trend in Don Nigro's writing, his outspoken view against rigid orthodox thinking. This theme can be found both in his treatment of religion and the parallels which can be drawn to Nigro's historical present. His criticism of his age is as evident as his criticism of the past within *Mariner*. To comment on what Nigro feels is an unjust trial of his time he looks to a historic trial with an unjust judge. Torquemada's lack of true impartiality can be compared with the proceedings of the trial of Dennis Barrie. A jury was selected who had never been to an art museum, did not much attend arts events of any kind, and many of whom had not gone to college; the deck was stacked against Dennis Barrie and freedom of expression in art. In the end Barrie was acquitted by the jury and, in fact, two members of the

jury became members of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Although for Columbus, the fickle opinion of history will continue to fluctuate regarding his life, journey, and accomplishments or failures as the case may be, but for Nigro and art in general a triumph has been made. His opinions regarding the history of both events live on within this piece of art, which is one of his more performed plays. As it is performed, watched, and studied his artistic expression goes on to potentially influence and shape those who come into contact with it and possibly inspires further discussion or creation as well. Ultimately, creation, art, reaction, and thought, are the ideas that Nigro's work appears to be attempting to inspire in those who come into contact with it.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this exploration of Don Nigro's historical plays, I have examined his style and method of reimagining history on stage. Using well cited definitions of satire and comedy, I explored how Nigro generally constructs his historical plays using the genre of comedic satire. Cyclical events, dialogue, and plot lines help to display the patterns that people become trapped in within societal and personal constructs. Characters like Delia Bacon, Vincent van Gogh, Nicolo Paganini, and Nellie Bly, all driven by their own forms of creation leading to obsession, attempt to discern who or what is in control of each of their destinies. Many of them are fighting against the socially accepted norms of their respective time periods while endeavoring to find contentment in their lives. Contrasting comical absurdity with tragic undertones from scene to scene and a general mocking of established standards of behavior help to demonstrate Nigro's mode of emplotment. His versions of Delia, van Gogh, Paganini, and Bly are people trapped in a kind of comical nightmare constructed of personal obsessions. By exaggerating their situations, while still encompassing the historical truth of their stories, Nigro creates a representation of history that challenges the audience's view of the event or persons. According to Hayden White: "stories cast in the Ironic mode, of which Satire is the fictional form, gain their effects precisely by frustrating normal expectation about the kinds of resolutions provided by stories cast in other modes;" (8) although White is not referring to Nigro's work, this is precisely what Nigro does, challenging the typical views and thoughts on these historic accounts with his satiric style of storytelling and his contextualizing mode of argument.

In *Lucia Mad*, the play analyzed in Chapter 3, Nigro's language, characters, and the world of the play were all set up to display how Lucia's environment determined the expectation

of her behavior. Lucia, historically documented as mentally disturbed, has had few advocates giving a voice to her life from her perspective. With the aid of de Beauvoir's landmark work, *The Second Sex*, which addresses the established mores of female behavior of the 1920s and 30s and before, Nigro's contextualization becomes clearly recognizable. Each character that interacts with Lucia attempts to fit her into their mold of expected behavior. Clearly, Lucia does not get a say in these expectations, nor is she allowed her own vision of her life. Again, crafted like a memory, Nigro's play begins and ends with Lucia as a kind of narrator, remembering the events that the audience then gets to see on stage. Memories are fuzzy and tainted by the perception of the person remembering them. Nigro's historical plays are representing real events, from the perspective of the person who lived them, along with his own thoughts and insights into what took place. By representing the views of those who are historically the underdog, or someone whose voice is not typically recorded into the annals of history (like Lucia), Nigro widens the perspective of his audience members and asks them to consider the event within a new light.

Through Nigro's perception, his versions of these historical events are crafted. It is his version of Lucia, Beckett, and James Joyce that we see in *Lucia Mad* and his version of Columbus, Queen Isabella, and Torquemada who come to life within *Mariner*. Nigro's ideology is rife within his Columbus narrative. The Italian American playwright crafts a sympathetic Columbus whose obsession with discovery sadly leads him to losing touch with his humanity. *Mariner* asks the audience to remember that Columbus was a product of fifteenth century European values and therefore cannot be held accountable under the standards and morals of our own time. Setting the play in purgatory allows him to also comment on the religious contradictions of the period and extend it to matters of his own time (early 1990s, when he was

writing this play). Nigro makes correlations between judgment standards and scare tactics used during the Spanish Inquisition by Tomas de Torquemada and the Spanish Royalty, with those used in the Culture Wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the U.S. by religious leaders and government officials like Senators D'Amato and Helms. These parallels between present and past make Nigro's play not only a lesson about past events, but a perspective on present occurrences. However, an important point being that these parallels are made by Nigro. His writing of history incorporates his view and has been crafted in a way that hints at his ideology. There can be no truly impartial account of past events, whether it is fact or fiction; the author, in creating the narrative inevitably inserts his point of view.

Nigro's historical plays, like historical writing in general, have been written by someone who was not a witness to the original event. The detail in the playwright's "Notebook," located at the end of most of his published historical works, clearly indicates that a myriad of research materials were used by him and that varying accounts were taken into consideration when compiling his take on the event. However, he is still the playwright, the author, the creator of this specific account. He took all of the facts before him and decided how to begin the story, those points he wished to highlight, details he preferred to exclude, and when the narrative was finished. Many historians write history in this way; studying accounts, diaries, journals, etc. of those who witnessed the events and using these resources to shape their version of the history. However, those witnesses were biased in their own ways and their personal perspective shaped their account of the occurrence. Nigro is not so different from a historian in the way he creates his historical plays. Capturing a historical event is much like attempting to capture a theatrical event. Once the event has past it is nothing more than a symbol of what happened and each person who witnesses the event has a memory of the event that they reconstruct once it is over.

Hayden White's method of analyzing and categorizing historical writing can be easily adapted to historical plays because of the characteristics they share. They are more similar than they are different. Nigro's reimagining of history takes the historical truth of the situation and fills in the uncertainties with imagination, or adjusts the circumstances in order to gain new perspective on the event. He does not maliciously attempt to change the original event. Nigro's Columbus does not actually find a western route to China, and Lucia does not marry Beckett, instead Nigro's characters struggle against the constructs of their time periods just as they might have done when they lived. Nigro's changes are hard to find as they are not within the details of the stories, but rather the method or style in which he presents his plays are the biggest indication of his style. Major changes can be seen in the fact that he is presenting the stories on the stage. He has created living representations with dialogue that he partly created, within a context and tone crafted by him, all of which help to promote his idea of the historic event and its relevance to his present time and society.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Nigro is not the only playwright reimagining history on the stage. White's method of interpreting the works of nineteenth century historical writers can be applied to other playwrights who appear to be reimagining history in a way similar to Nigro, potentially leading to the definition of a new genre of theatre that is neither completely fiction nor docu-drama, like Robin Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) or Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* (2001) which both focus on realistically or accurately portraying historical events on stage. This new genre of theatre that takes historical events and maintains most historical facts, while attempting to clarify them, examine them, or gain new perspective on them by meshing the facts with new circumstances, dramatizing them, reimagining them. Works like Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), which relays a story from Italian History

and comments on the Italian government of the time. Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (2000), an attempt at understanding the conversation of two scientists who were potentially discussing what would turn out to be the future of the world and the implications of that conversation. Suzan Lori Parks' *Venus* (1989), a play that punctuates the colonial attitude prevalent for hundreds of years, yet discussed so infrequently. These plays do not allow their audiences to take for granted historical accounts of the past. They present history from the perspective of the minority, from the mad, and from those who we imagine to be hero and heroines, forcing us to recognize the fact that they are indeed people, just like us, who struggle and fight to understand their place in the world. When their stories are presented to us on stage, their worlds become alive and they are more relatable than when we read about them on the page. Perhaps that is why Nigro's work flourishes on college and university campuses around the country, at learning institutions where people are considered to be most open to new perspectives and interpretations, and where they are learning history and beginning to have their established beliefs challenged.

Throughout my thesis I have maintained that Nigro's historical plays move beyond the realm of entertainment. Demonstrated that in his choice of subject matter, major known historical events and people, satirical style of writing, use of contextualization, and the inclusion of his beliefs into his work, Don Nigro has created a commentary both on the historical time from which he draws, as well as from the present time in which he is writing. By providing his audience with familiar names and situations, he can help them to attain a new perspective on their historical past and perhaps new insight into their present. What makes Nigro unique is his embracing of the fantastical and theatrical in his re-imaginings, while allowing the audience the chance to experience the world and history through the main character's point of view. Plays like *Paganini*, *Lucia Mad*, and *Mariner* are a mutation of fact and fiction, caught between both

worlds, not living fully in either one. His style of writing in these historical plays shows that Nigro shares many characteristics with those playwrights reimagining history and historical writers. Nigro stands out with through his approach of creating a dream-like, memory state on stage and stressing the poetical truth of these events. Contributing to the genre of re-imagined historical plays asking us to question what it is to write history.

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