

**REFLECTIONS ON A TOTAL IMMERSION INTO
THE WORKS OF FRANK GAGLIANO**

BY

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***Nobody's leaving this world buddy
Without their shirt-tail dirty
Or their hands a little bloody ...***

-- Bruce Springsteen from his song "The Big Muddy"

Life is suffering.

-- The first of Buddha's Four Noble Truths

Compassion – (noun) Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it. ***From the Latin 'com' – together, and 'pati' – to suffer. Thus, literally meaning to suffer together or to suffer with.***

**That means there's pain.
It's all right then.
Yes.**

-- Madeleine Favorini; from *The Total Immersion of Madeleine Favorini*
By Frank Gagliano

The journey of the “total immersion” into the works of Frank Gagliano begins on a subway platform in New York City with a distressed man named YAM staring down the edge of the platform obsessively worrying about the fate of his hat, which has fallen onto the tracks. He is ... ALONE. His watch has stopped and he is suffering from amnesia. He wants nothing other than to figure out who he is, get his hat, and get out of there unscathed, without being forced to “get involved” with those he encounters. It culminates with the slight of frame, dutiful to a fault, fully conscious, “forty-six year old depressed and discarded WOP-American lady,” Madeleine Favorini, staring down her fears on the literal edge of the universe and eternity itself, where she at last acknowledges and accepts with a wistful smile the inescapable presence of that which she, and all of us, spend most of our lives trying to avoid feeling – PAIN. From *Conerico Was Here to Stay* through to *The Total Immersion of Madeleine Favorini*, in works that take the forms of a children’s play (*The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeleine Gimple*), a fairy-tale extravaganza for adults (*The Prince of Peasantmania*), solo character tour de forces (*My Chekhov Light*;

The Farewell Concert of Irene and Vernon Palazzo), musicals (*From the Bodoni County Songbook Anthology; The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer; Congo Square*), and even an unsung voodoo chamber opera (*In the Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau*), Frank Gagliano emerges as a playwright with a voice that is singular, a scope that is wide, and a sense of humor that is delightfully irreverent. Time and again he displays a willingness to look directly into the harsher aspects of our lives, and with a great sense of play ask us, like so many of his protagonists, to compassionately say yes to the mess of life in such a way that we may emerge with what is most important – the best of our humanity in tact.

Lots of people have gotten so intellectual that they lose a sense of the divine entertainment that playing involves. They forget its called 'playing' for a reason. It's sport with personality, cultivation, and taste.

– Pianist, Tzimon Barto

One will never be able to accuse Frank Gagliano of being a writer who has forgotten that it is called 'playing' for a reason. When within the first few minutes of the play *Conerico Was Here to Stay* the character YAM, “under great pressure,” – a phrase dear to Gagliano,

and a state of being which he always makes certain his characters are experiencing from the get go – makes a phone call seeking help only to be offered “Fellatio? Anal Gratification or the usual? ... Also flagellation. Anilingus – and kissing,” one comes immediately into contact with Gagliano’s irreverent sense of humor, and his unflinching willingness to “go there.” Shortly after that the Blind Man comes along, cursing the fact that the only one of his senses the “big braille bastard in the sky” sharpened was that of “Pain!” Nonetheless, sensing YAM’s presence, he attempts to enlist his help in getting him out of the station. When, unable to corner YAM and overcome by the “crazies” the Blind Man proceeds to fall onto the tracks only to yell up after a pained silence “You wait. You just wait. If there’s ever a God again. He’ll punish you,” it is abundantly clear that you have been introduced to a writer who is very playful. From *Conerico Was Here to Stay* forward Gagliano has never lost that all important sense of play. It has served him well, allowing him to traverse from the polluted streets of Manhattan (*Paradise Gardens East*), to the mythical confines of that slice of Americana, that everyone resides in yet yearns to get out of, known as Bodoni County (*From the Bodoni*

County Songbook Anthology), to the fantastical country of Peasantmania (*The Prince of Peasantmania*), to the bowels of New Orleans (*In the Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau*), and ultimately to the edge of the universe via a gynecological examining table that takes wing (*The Total Immersion of Madeleine Favorini*). It has, with the exception of, and by his own admission, the somewhat constricted *Night of the Dunce*, allowed him to play loose and free in the areas of style, form, and structure. Increasingly, in play after play, a balls to the wall embracing of the theatrical and a full out calling upon the imagination of the audience is evident. Yet he doesn't do it by upping the ante of heavy "production" elements or values. Instead he continues to strip away, determined to put his fierce wordplay front and center in riff after aria-like riff in the hands of actors who must be fearless in "putting it out there," all with the intent that nothing is done that is not in service of the story being told. He doesn't try to compete with film or television. He restlessly quests to take you to the places only theatre can take you until finally you end up suspended in the great void of the universe riding nothing but that gynecological examining table.

And the orgiastic wordplay is important to mention here. One cannot encounter Gagliano's work without appreciating the aria-like riffs that become in many ways the hallmark of his plays. So much so, that they eventually led to the writing of the solo pieces *My Chekhov Light* and *The Farewell Concert of Irene and Vernon Palazzo*. Some of it is downright silly with names such as Jeremiah Spittle, Hymen "Hy" Colonic, and, lest we forget, the Sicilian bandit El Bandido Grandido (he of the legendary schlong). But many of the riffs deserve the term aria for their inherent musicality and internal rhythms that can't help but be felt and honored when performing them. Give yourself over to them and they do you rather than you doing them. And that is as it should be when encountering good writing. This is most evidenced in *In The Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau*. A play openly acknowledged as an unsung opera. The characters flat out announce their descent into an aria, giving it its own title before proceeding. In the grand aria "Once the rage was over, I fell into the void of deep despair" the Man says, "I love great music; understand it; studied all the theories of all the past great minds and saw how

great music was shaped — *must* be shaped.” By the time the piece is finished it has proven itself so worthy of the term aria that one almost wishes they could hear it put to a melody and sung. But then you quickly realize that to set it to music would be redundant. Gagliano’s words are music enough. It is not surprising then, that Gagliano has on so many occasions made the transition from playwright to lyricist in a seamless manner. Many times in these riffs he finds a poetic quality that echoes the efforts of writers such as Tennessee Williams. Make no mistake, however, Gagliano’s voice is unique. Tennessee Williams never wrote anything like the infamous “vacuum vagina” speech at the end of *The Total Immersion of Madeleine Favorini*. It is classic Gagliano, and in many ways it is him at his best. It’s audacious, irreverent, and hysterical in its description of a woman at last being “opened up totally,” enabling her to feel “one long tunnel; from my pasta pit up to my mouth.” When she proclaims herself the “Vacuum Vagina of the World,” sucking in “all the world’s debris,” and anointing it all with “her life’s fluid,” you may momentarily fear it has gone over the top. But the genius of it lies in the context. For Madeleine this is her grand ecstatic enlightenment moment. She has

been on a hero's journey from the beginning and for this previously "sewn up," "depressed and discarded WOP-American lady," this is nothing short of Jesus' seeing the dove descend on him after his baptism, or the earth trembling beneath Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment sitting at the foot of the Bo Tree. Performed in this spirit it succeeds not only in its audacity, its humor, but in its ecstasy. It takes Madeleine to a place of transcendence that in a few moments will enable her to unmask El Bandido and give him his long awaited "full-out rest," which then enables her to successfully face what she fears most.

However, it is vital to note that all of the wordplay and "playfulness" does not prevent Gagliano from making us look at the raw, unpleasant, facts of our existence square in the eye. He continually brings them unrepentantly into the light. In a pivotal song in *Congo Square* the character confidently asserts that "the way of the world is despair." Paralyzed by fear and cowardice, in *Conerico Was Here to Stay*, YAM does nothing while the Girl with the Cello is raped by gang members. In *Father Uxbridge Wants to Marry*, Father Uxbridge, a

symbol for a church that no longer speaks to the needs of its members, believes that violence is the “common denominator and may very well be at the heart of our age’s soul.” Uxbridge is “frightened” and “losing it,” and is making Morden, who has come to him for counsel, into nothing other than a guinea pig. He asks Morden to “work with him ... and together pray to God that we do find that the soul is at base a murderous one.” And even in *In the Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau*, as Marie at last finds within her that most necessary human trait, compassion, the moment is counterpointed with the bloodthirsty satiation of Adrienne becoming a “real star” – one that is “conceived in violence, revenge and blood.” Where Marie finds compassion in death, Adrienne discovers that stardom is “infinitely more important for me to spawn than a baby.” She embraces that stardom and assumes Marie’s throne, while, fading from life, Marie can only warn her of what karmic fate may await one with such a thirst.

So this vital playfulness does not protect you from encountering life in all of its despair and pain. *The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer* is

about just that. Jackie has made an art of avoiding tears and pain by laughing at everything. Even after he dies by slipping on dog-do and hitting his head on a Volkswagen fender he laughs. When told by God, which is actually a Board of Directors, he can't get into heaven until he learns how to cry, Jackie opts to stay in Limbo – refusing to let “compassion stop my laugh.” Jackie is then taken on a journey intended to break him at last. Along the way he is reprimanded for his “goddamned seeing-through-it-all laughter.” His family implores him to see that “we cry from our pain, but laugh and love, too,” and chide him by saying, “How dare you stop us from loving you?” Eventually, Jackie cries and exclaims “Oh God! I feel the pain of knowing I never was knowing my family's pain.”

It is the need for accepting the presence of and allowing oneself to feel the pain inherent in life that continually resounds as a major theme in Gagliano's work. And almost always the character's acceptance of that need is made possible, in part, because at some point in their journey they will have a pivotal moment in which they

realize, and state aloud, that they are ... ALONE. It is here that it is

helpful to quote Arthur Miller:

“My conception of the audience is of a public each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or a hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind; and in this respect at least the function of a play is to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them. If only for this reason I regard the theater as a serious business, one that makes or should make man more human, which is to say, less alone.”

I don't know if Gagliano has ever read that quote. Regardless, it is apparent that he holds it to be true. For as much as Gagliano recognizes that we come into and leave this world alone he knows it is equally true that, to quote Miller again, “the truth, the first truth, probably, is that we are all connected, watching one another ... even the trees.” YAM, in *Conerico Was Here to Stay*, must overcome his fear, his cowardice, and his desperate desire to not “get involved” in order to save himself and the young Puerto Rican gang member – Jesus – from the life threatening danger they are in. Upon doing so he embraces his identity, finds his humanity and is able to enter the subway tunnel at last. In *Paradise Gardens East* Sis must overcome her “terrible laryngitis” – she is mute until the very last moments of the play - just in time to keep her maniacally over-protective brother from

pushing her new found friend William Saroyan O'Neill off the ledge of her apartment window. Sis "pushes" her brother off instead. Having found her voice and her freedom she invites William to lead her out of the stifling confines of the apartment into the polluted corrupting city, whose inhabitants are "satisfied" with the event's "violent resolution."

Congo Square is described by the playwright himself as a "moving spectacle of shattered, romantic innocence." Innocence of that type never survives in a Gagliano play. For it is fool's gold, unrealistic, and symbolizes a refusal to acknowledge the messiness of our lives.

In *The Prince of Peasantmania* the very name of the protagonist is Innocent. Yet he, like all Gagliano protagonists, is forced to come in contact with life in such a way that his "romantic innocence" is shattered as well. However, his integrity and thus his humanity are not. Those things he hangs onto, and, in fact, emerges from the crucible of experience possessing them in a dimension that is deeper and ultimately truer. And he does so by allowing himself to feel compassion. Looking squarely at the "horror" all around him he concludes that "I must stay ... Because, finally – and I'll never understand this – the ones who chased me, beat me, betrayed me ...

I love them all.” Innocent stays, assumes his throne, and wisely proclaims to his countrymen “I can’t promise you victory. But I promise you we’ll win.” And what is won? Entry into true life. That is what Madeleine Favorini earns for herself at the end of her journey. She has been dutiful all her life. So dutiful she has remained on that gynecological table for two weeks waiting to find out just what is wrong with her. For here lately she can’t help but feel that something is missing inside, down below. And she is warned that with what she’s “probably got” getting out of the stirrups will kill her. But it’s clear just what Madeleine has “probably got.” She’s got what too much of humanity has got – a case of interior death. She’s functioning, she’s breathing, but she’s not truly living. And that thing missing inside, down below, is authentic life itself. Too often we, like Madeleine, go about living what amounts to inauthentic lives for the sake of the supposed virtue of being dutiful. We do this, like Madeleine, in the hopes that it will protect us from, or at least minimize our experience of feeling pain. Yet the gateway to authentic life is “total immersion.” And “total immersion” requires the acceptance that in living the authentic life and thus enabling yourself

to experience the potentially ecstatic nature of your existence, there will be pain. But it doesn't have to overwhelm you. Going through not around pain can allow you to be birthed into something better. If you can trust in the paradox that yes you are alone, but you are nonetheless connected to all that is, and willingly touch all that with the spirit of compassion, you may be able to find yourself in the midst of the "endless ... bottomless ... topless" infinity of this universe and, like Madeleine, embrace the experience of true life at last.

On a final note it is worth remembering that Gagliano has been a long time admirer of Arthur Miller, and it was Miller who said of himself "I have written as my character dictated, not to some style, and I think that's true of anybody who takes the art with some seriousness ... you write out of the middle of your belly or it won't last very long."

Frank Gagliano has certainly done just that. He has taken his art with more than just "some" seriousness. But even then one can help but feel that he is also aware that life is too serious a thing to be taken too seriously. Thus finally, and most importantly, Gagliano may write from the middle of his belly, but on the way out it never fails to go

through his heart. Throughout his work, without ever resorting to didactic manipulation or sentiment, with his treasured sense of irreverence, he asks us to overcome our fear of, and sometimes perversely, our desire for alienation and to embrace our connectedness. When we do so, we tap into that quality most necessary to fully embody our own humanity – compassion. To that invitation the wise theater-goer should take their communal seat in the dark and say as Madeleine Favorini does at the end of her journey – “YES.”