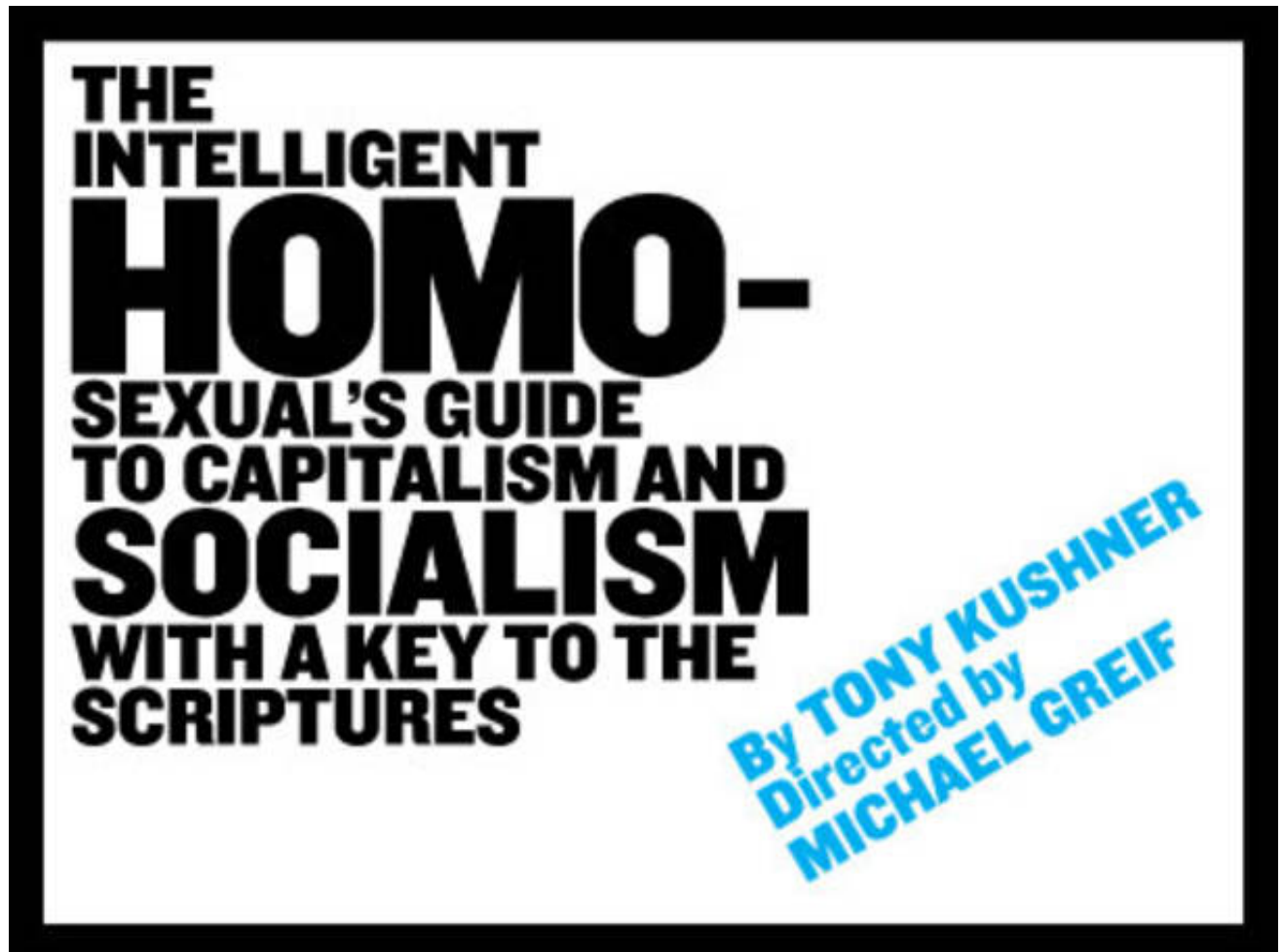




The “Intelligent Homosexual”’s Italianità

George De Stefano (May 16, 2011)



Why do the critics ignore the ethnicity in Tony Kushner’s new play?

Tony Kushner has titled his new play “The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures.” But he could’ve just as well and perhaps more accurately called it “The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism.” That title – which was that of a 1997 John D. Calandra Institute conference in New York and the book of papers from the conference – comes



closer to encapsulating what the play’s about than the lumpy one he chose, with its nod to George Bernard Shaw and Mary Baker Eddy.

The play centers on the Marcantonio family: father Gus, a retired longshoreman and disillusioned former Communist; his sons Vito and Pier Luigi (who has the unfortunate nickname Pil); his daughter Maria Theresa (who has the even more unfortunate and heavily symbolic nickname, MT, pronounced “empty”), and Gus’ sister Clio, whose social and political idealism has led her from the Carmelites to Peru’s Shining Path guerillas. Gus has summoned them to the family home in Brooklyn to break some disturbing news: he is selling the house, and he plans to commit suicide.

Unlike “Angels in America,” the two-part epic of an America suffering from AIDS and Ronald Reagan that made his reputation, Kushner’s new play is strictly realist. “iHO” – Kushner’s own shorthand -- eschews the magic realism of “Angels” in favor of high-voltage family drama indebted to Miller, O’Neill, Odets and, to a lesser degree, Tracy Letts’ “August: Osage County.”

The critical response to the play, which opened May 5 at New York’s Public Theatre, has been mixed, although there have been some [rave reviews](#) [2]. The critics have admired the play’s intellectual ambition and breadth, its passionate engagement with grand world-historic issues, and the committed acting by the cast, several of whom are Kushner veterans. But they’ve also faulted it as too didactic, awkwardly structured, and overlong.

What the reviews, whether negative, mixed or favorable, share is a shocking – to me anyway – obtuseness about the play’s ethnic milieu -- its italianità. I began by suggesting an alternative title – not a particularly marquee-worthy one, but one more attuned to the play’s subject matter. Critics note that Kushner’s main character is named Gus Marcantonio. But not one of the reviews I’ve read, and I’ve read quite a few, notes the significance of Gus being a cousin of Vito Marcantonio, the U.S. Congressman who represented East Harlem from 1935 to 1950, and was the most successful radical elected official in U.S. history. Or that Gus is quite literally mourning the “lost world” of political radicalism that Vito embodied and which once gave Gus’ life meaning.

But how could the critics miss it? The living room of the Marcantonio home in Carroll Gardens – a masterpiece of realistic set design by Mark Wendland – is dominated by a large, framed photograph of the Congressman. In some ways, he is the presiding spirit of the play and its lodestar. Aunt Clio, pointing to his photo, rebukes Gus by saying – in Italian – that Vito would be “turning over in his grave.” Pil, Gus’ gay son, speaks with pride of Vito, noting that he was called “the bread of the poor” by his constituents, and recounts his early death from a coronary while he was engaged in political work. Pil’s speech is also remarkable for its nuance. Pil honors Vito, but doesn’t romanticize him, noting that he too readily followed the Communist Party line, even when it came to the Hitler-Stalin Pact which in 1939 divided Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The play also includes a surprising plot twist involving Italian immigrant anarchism and Gaetano Bresci, the anarchist who assassinated Italy’s King Umberto in 1900.

But the play’s italianità isn’t all political. Vito, Gus’s youngest child, is the only one who doesn’t speak Italian, a metaphor for his alienation from his father and siblings. Kushner even gets in a joke



about ethnic stereotyping: the Marcantonios, as one character remarks, must be the only Italians in Brooklyn who can't cook.

And yet somehow the critics overlooked all this, as if the characters' ethnicity was entirely incidental. Not a single review that I've seen has acknowledged that the Marcantonios are specifically Italian American leftists, shaped both by the Italian radicalism of their immigrant forbears and by their experiences as Americans of working class origins. One critic who did note the Marcantonios' ethnicity, the Los Angeles Times' Charles McNulty, remarked that he wasn't "entirely convinced that he [Gus] was Italian."

I wonder what it would have taken for McNulty to have been sufficiently convinced. As played by the Italian American actor Michael Kristofer, Gus is recognizably a Brooklyn paisan, in his physical appearance, his accent and speech patterns, and body language. Maybe if he'd let loose with a few "Madonn"'s or "va fongools"? Or had tomato sauce stains on his t-shirt? Or boasted of a cousin in "the mob" instead of one who was a radical politician?

Gus in fact reminded me of an actual Italian American leftist, former New York Assemblyman Frank Barbaro. Like the character of Gus Marcantonio, Barbaro, from the Brooklyn Italian village of Bensonhurst, was a radical longshoreman who organized his peers against their exploitative and mobbed-up bosses. When I interviewed Barbaro a few years ago, he used such Communist lingo as "the balance of forces" when talking about the struggles on the Brooklyn docks. In Kushner's play, Gus Marcantonio utters the very same phrase.

That the "critical community" is oblivious to Italian American radical history (and evidently completely incurious about it) isn't surprising. Who among today's chattering classes knows much about radical history of any kind? We live in what Gore Vidal has called "the United States of Amnesia," where history is what was on CNN the other night. The critics' failure to come to grips with the ethnicity in Kushner's play also is a product of so many decades of pop cultural representations of Italian Americans as mafia thugs and uneducated and crude (but earthy!) urban proles. Italians were leftists? Who knew!

But Italian Americans themselves bear some responsibility for this situation. For many of us, becoming American meant denying or forgetting our radical past, whether anarchist, socialist, or communist. After my Sicilian-born, communist grandfather died, my parents threw out all his leftist newspapers and memorabilia – a perfect metaphor for how we've too often dealt with our history.

I admire Tony Kushner, and am grateful to him, for retrieving and dramatizing a piece of this history. I do agree with some of the criticisms of his play. Its dramaturgy admittedly is imperfect. The director Michael Greif hasn't quite met the challenge of orchestrating the scenes of contrapuntal dialogue, wherein the main characters, arranged in discrete groupings, are all speaking simultaneously. He also could've lowered the decibel level in some scenes. We paisans don't always yell to make a point. And some judicious editing of the somewhat overstuffed script would've helped. But those flaws shouldn't deter you from "The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures," a singular, often thrilling work that respects, and even challenges, the intelligence of its audience.



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