

SPOTLIGHT ON: STEVE SCIONTI, Actor & Writer

by Ed Wierzbicki

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For a Middletown kid who was kicked out of Jerry's Pizza over twenty-five times, Steve Scionti the adult is doing just fine. The actor-writer, who recently re-rooted himself in Connecticut after a career in LA and elsewhere, has taken the memories of his youth and the colorful characters of his Sicilian family to create a high-energy, one-man play: *Hear What's In The Heart—A Shoemaker's Tale*. Scionti will perform every Thursday night this spring, May 16-June 20, at the Oddfellow's Playhouse; just a stone's throw from his grandfather's shoe shop, St. Sebastian's, and the Middletown neighborhoods that shaped him.

Co-written and directed by Tony Award-winner Anthony Crivello, the production captures much more than a nostalgic look at the days of youth. *Hear/Heart* is a living tribute to the "immigrant generation who gave," and a coming of age comedy with plenty of Sicilian high-jinks and insights. Scionti's committed performance takes us inside that secret, contemplative place in one boy's life that often clashes with the testosterone-driven culture and teen realities of a working class town. Over the course of 85 minutes, he transforms himself into numerous larger than life characters, while also navigating across the footlights to connect with the audience—all in an effort to make vital self-discoveries about his life, family, and future.

I recently spoke with Steve about the development of his play and multiple characters; about the challenges of acting solo; about his family; and how he and director Anthony Crivello collaborated.

Your one-person play is centered around growing up in Middletown and the relationship with your Sicilian-born grandfather. How did he influence you as a person and performer?

He always supported the arts. He used to love when I would dance around as a kid. (When) I was ten years old, that's when the movie *The Sting* was big, and *Rag Time* and *Scott Joplin*-- and my grandfather used to come over on Saturdays for dinner. One night I'd just happen to grab his hat and start dancing around. He was always intrigued and he looked at my mother and he said--this is what he's going to be doing the rest of his life.

So when did you start to get serious about dance and about performing?

My grandfather was always encouraging it; because I loved Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly--loved to sit and watch *Singin' In The Rain*. It came to the point where he said to my mother: "Why doesn't he start tap dancing?" So I started taking tap lessons when I was 13 years old at Miss Beth's School of Dance. I got a lot of ribbing needless to say, because in a blue collar town like Middletown, it wasn't cool to dance.

What else do you most remember about your grandfather?

The way he lived his life, is the way most people should live their lives. He helped people. He had a heart of gold. He was a beautiful man. He was respected. And he also paid for my first dance lessons! How many Sicilian grandfathers do you know that pay for their grandson's first dance lessons?!

Why a play? What inspired you to begin the project?

I was in an Acting Company in Los Angeles; 1993-94 when I moved out there. And the Artistic Director, Mel Shapiro—a wonderful human being and very inspirational to me—and we used to have our coffee breaks outside of class and I would tell him stories about Middletown—and characters. And he said—“Start coming in next week, and your assignment is to come in with a tape recorder and start improving.” And I said, “No--C’mon.” He said, “No-no, you’ve got some material.” He was a very hard man to make laugh, and I used to crack this guy up all the time. I never thought this was going to go anywhere. That’s a scary thing.

Then what? What was the next step? Did you do what he advised?

So about a year went by, and he said: “Present something to the class” and I kind of fell on my face and got discouraged. A friend of mine who’d got me into the company—and we’d done the 30th anniversary production of West Side Story with Jerome Robbins—he said “Steve—let me kind of help you with this.” We worked on it another year, and next thing you know, we did it for Mel, and Mel said “OK—now you’re ready to perform this.” We ended up doing a six-week run at the Zephyr Theatre in Los Angeles in 1997.

Wait, wait—I’m going to go back to something you said earlier. You said “And that’s a scary thing.” Why? What do you mean?

The actor’s worse enemy is.... (*he points to his head—emphatically-- several times*): “Oh my God, what are they going to think of me? Do I stink? Am I a phony?” You get embarrassed. *You get scared*. When you are talking about personal things. When you are breaking the fourth wall, and you are talking about something very personal, you know, it’s scary. It’s intimidating. The first time I went out and did the performance, I had such severe cotton mouth (*he laughs*). I couldn’t even speak because I was so scared.

Did you have other inspirations to help you get through—to help realize your project?

John Leguizamo—he was an inspiration to me. I saw *Mambo Mouth* in like 1988-89 and I was floored. Absolutely blown away. His experience growing up in New York was mesmerizing. Here it was, eight-nine years later—doing that.

Had you ever thought about turning it into a more traditional script, or did you always want this to be one-person play? I do recall an explosion of solo plays in the theatre happening at that time.

At the time, there were a lot of successful one-man shows. Especially, *A Bronx Tale*. But to be honest with you, I think it was a combination of both the fact that it came from my assignment (for Mel), *and* it was cool—hip. And because I’d brought a combination of characters in for Mel, it made sense—it was logical that it would turn into a one-person play. And it just happened naturally.

Out of all your characters, which one do you enjoy the most? I am making you pick a favorite!

My Uncle Manny. (*He laughs*) He’s actually my father’s youngest brother’s wife’s oldest brothers. (*a big grin...*) He was a hair dresser. A very intelligent, wonderful man. He had a hair salon in Lantana Beach, Florida. My parents had sold their house in Middletown and moved

down to Florida. And I would go in there and have espresso, and he'd have his glasses down to here (indicates the edge of his nose)—“Stefano, baby, listen...getting an espresso I love it.” And he loved women. And all these older Jewish women from Palm Beach loved him! “So Manny, what are you going to do with my hair today?” And he'd say, “What I get done with you baby, I'm gonna make you look better than Sofia Lauren—I love it! Give me an espresso baby!!”

Share with me a difficult moment or challenge In Hear/Heart—something that doesn't come easily in your creative or performance process?

I love my family dearly. But there is a segment within the piece where I struggle because of (the relationship between) my grandfather and my uncle who was the black sheep of the family—and chose to go another route. And I love him dearly. And this is where it's tough. It's easy to hide (as an actor) behind someone else's writing, or some body else's play, but when it's personal to you, because you don't want to paint that person in a bad light. I love my uncle with all my heart but he was an influence to me—not in the greatest way when I was younger—and my grandfather didn't like that.

There's music running through your production, and you sing also. How does it help shape this “family” story? Was it challenging to add the opera and the music to the project?

It came easy for me because of the different influences of music in my life. Between opera with my grandfather and father, and then you had my Uncle Carl who influenced us with Jerry Vale and Dean Martin; and my Uncle Amadeo with Frank Sinatra; and Uncle Phil who introduced us to Simon and Garfinkle and Bob Dylan...to Jimmy Hendricks—which my baby brother Antonio and I were both a big fan of. It just came easy. It all has to do with the characters.

Anthony Crivello has teamed with you to work the script and direct this recent version of the play. How has your partnership with him been?

The collaboration with Anthony Crivello has been the icing on the cake. I have learned so much. He is such a professional; such a patient human being. I have made some mistakes along the way—we all do. But I've learned an incredible amount from Anthony, including the business side of it.

When I spoke with Anthony, I asked him to describe your play in one sentence. He said: “It's about the generation that gave.” Can you elaborate on that theme for me?

I think as a society we've lost that. I think we don't know what the word sacrifice means. People from my grandfather's generation had sacrificed. My grandfather had to give up a dream. And here he is, nurturing mine. I don't think there is enough support out there for families, unfortunately, because there are so many fractured families today. And we've become a self-centered society. And that's why I take pride in having complete strangers come up to you and say, you've made me think about my family. You made me think about my grandfather. As an artist that's a very powerful thing-- to touch people's lives.

Hear What's In The Heart: A Shoemaker's Tale

Performed by Steve Scionti

Written by Steve Scionti & Anthony Crivello

Directed by Anthony Crivello

Thursday nights @ 7:30pm

May 16-June 20th

Oddfellows Playhouse • Middletown, CT

Tickets: \$20