

AN AFTERNOON WITH DI DONATO

By Tom Johnson

In the summer of 1985, I conducted an interview with Pietro di Donato at his home on Long Island's North Shore. I found the writer, with pants legs rolled up to his knees, clamming in the shallows along the beach with a neighbor boy. We carried the bucket of clams back to his house and began to speak as he shucked the clams and prepared a salad from greens grown in his garden.

We sat under a shade tree. Di Donato talked. I listened. The tape recorder ran until its batteries faded.

I left both disturbed and heartened. Di Donato was, and always will be, an enigma. There are moments when his words can be described as genius. At other times, his language is base, coarse, sexist, racist and patently offensive to anyone who is not like him or does not think like him at that particular moment. Then you wonder if perhaps this great talent, who was ignored nearly into oblivion, had not been ruined by his own venom.

But you know better. You know that you've met an honest man, a former master bricklayer, a writer, and that he's at work on a major piece he's calling "The Gospels," a surrealistic journey through the apocalyptic post-modern era.

In the summer of 1991, I set out for another interview. Though six years had gone by, di Donato greeted me warmly. He was excited because VIA: Voices in Italian Americana (a cultural review published by Purdue University) would be dedicating an issue to him. And in it a significant part of "The Gospels" would be excerpted for the first time.

The excerpt is called "The Last Judgment," in which he brings his nation to trial for conduct in the Vietnam War, focusing on the My Lai massacre. In both style and substance, the piece is brilliant, difficult, angry, ambivalent, ambiguous, horribly funny and often bitter. As was di Donato.

Q. Do you see the role of writer as rebel or prophet to be disappearing?

A. Yes . . . [George] Orwell and [Marshal] McLuhan were correct. Our greatest impediment in society is the state of language today. Words are continually misused, often purposely. Literary people are begging to be slaves. This is a cartoon-character age with cartoon people. And our writers have simply become cartoonists without substance.

Q. Are they all cartoonists?

A. No. I still admire Gore Vidal's essays. Vidal speaks for me. But as for fiction writers, I can't think of anybody I really respect. I don't know the young people too well, like [Don] DeLillo and [John] Sayles, but it seems to me that all writers today are meretricious. They don't want to kick the asses they're kissing. They're afraid of being called communists. They're afraid that no one will support or publish them. There is a kind of economic terrorism that pervades the literary scene. And it seems to me that in

the end, they all want to be Hollywood. They all want to make money.

Q. In your estimation, is the "economic terror" of our times as powerful as the McCarthy Era terror was, in terms of driving people into silence?

A. It is more subtle now, but perhaps it's ubiquitous. This has the cooperation and collusion of nearly everyone. If you criticize the [Ivan] Boesky . . . people will say, "Oh, you're just jealous because you're not in on the gravy." It's the attitude of the entire nation. That goes for the clergy. For the schools. For everybody. There's no inspiration. There's no deep, healthy, dramatic idealism. Those days are gone.

Q. Are you saying that all the previous movements, the labor movement, the civil rights and peace movements, have become meaningless? That it's merely become a fight between the ins and the outs — if you're in, you fight to stay in; if you're out, you fight to get in? There's no longer ideology or idealism?

A. It's chaos . . . America has lost its sanity . . . It's become one more Third World nation. You see it in our everyday lives. You see it in the phenomenal expansion of junk foods. You see it in garbage movies that Hollywood is turning out: the deluge of pornographic and perverse movies, the glorification of ugliness.

Q. What you're describing is decadence. How does a society become decadent? What lies at the root of that?

A. I think that television has a lot to do with it. Definitely. We have people portrayed as caricatures. The weatherman or anchor people who think that they're stars . . . You can see that they're gloating that they've become millionaires. Ugly people. I don't need to mention names. They're legion. There's no dignity any more. Everything's a Hollywood horror show. The emphasis upon the weird, ugly and horrible. They're no examples for children of a better way of life.

Q. Let's shift gears. Your biography, "The Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini" (St. Martin's Press), is being reissued. Tell me about its origins.

A. I wrote the screenplay of the story for 20th Century Fox many years ago. Sophia Loren held the rights and was going to play Mother Cabrini. They paid me very well, but in researching the story I fell in love with the life of Frances Cabrini. I don't love gods. Gods don't exist; I love human beings who are good. Her life was so refreshing and so real. She was more courageous than any men I know. She founded parishes, orphanages, schools, hospitals. She put her words and deeds together. So in 1959 I wrote the story for a screenplay. But they decided not to do it, because Loren was doing something else. So my agent brought the material to McGraw-Hill, and they gave me a contract to do a biography. It became the choice of four Catholic book clubs . . . I presented the Pope with a gold and leather copy.

Q. You talk about Mother Cabrini as being "good." Do you see the world as divided into good people and bad people?

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said that when the pair traveled to Italy, they were treated like royalty. So powerful was his reputation in Italy, his brother said, that the Red Brigades invited him to investigate the kidnaping and murder of Prime Minister Aldo Moro. He produced a story on the Moro case for Penthouse magazine that received the Overseas Press Club Award in 1978.

By all accounts, including his own, di Donato was a flamboyant and boisterous man, blunt and opinionated. Having faced the harsh brutality of life when his father died in 1923, he lived alienated by authority. He kept his promise to his mother and was a conscientious objector during World War II.

On Tuesday, di Donato's family and friends gathered at his home on Strong's Neck, a spit of land north of Setauket, to share tales of his life. Most knew he was still working on the manuscript of a novel. Some even noticed the new brick wall.

Upstairs was the empty workroom of a writer, a typewriter covered, while in another room there was a wall filled with the framed covers of his books. There was a fire in the hearth he had built with his brother John almost a half-century ago, when he moved his family from Northport.

The house he built in 1944 is now surrounded by other homes that close off the view to the nearby waters where he went clamming. In those waters he met one longtime neighbor, Ray Pfisterer. "The first time I met him, we were both out in little boats fishing," Pfisterer said, "just the two of us on Conscience Bay, and he came over and began gesticulating about

himself, his novel . . . I thought he was a real nut . . . but over the years he mellowed. We'd go walking together, every morning and night. I came to think of him as the squire of Strong's Neck."

Di Donato wrote "Christ in Concrete" in Northport. He lived across the harbor from the Centerport estate of William K. Vanderbilt, for whom di Donato shoveled snow during the Depression. Years later he would write, "In many cases death is a blessed escape for the hard up who live in hopes and die in despair, but death for a millionaire is a Greek tragedy, an irrevocable farewell to la dolce vita, lovely orgies, myriad pleasures, ego, power, divine food and drinks, cute deviations . . . a veritable paradise lost."

A decade ago, di Donato wrote of his own life: "I had been denied adolescence, and then with quick money that came so fast that it did not seem real, I went on an extended Roman holiday, fleeing from all responsibility." He went to Cuba, and there he told Hemingway that he was afraid he would be a one-book creature. Eventually he came to the realization that he had created a near masterpiece, and that perhaps he could never duplicate it.

"Every great artist has one unblemished masterpiece . . . after the one supreme aria, we cry, farewell to virgin altruism."

Cuomo said, "It was sad that he never appeared able to bring himself to that level of accomplishment again. Or at least it was never recognized that he had brought himself to that level again. Apparently he emptied himself in 'Christ in Concrete.'"

After he was diagnosed with cancer in October, di Donato told a close friend, Claire Mettewie of Stony Brook, he wanted two more years to finish his work.

A. Every good man and every good woman is a Christ. And the rest are criminals, perverts, misbegotten. That's why we have drugs, criminality, frauds, wars. America is . . . a puritanical, hypocritical English country in its sensibilities. Maybe America has not suffered enough. If America had been bombed like the rest of the world during World War II, maybe we would be different. If this were a real Christian country, we'd beg forgiveness from the unseen powers that be in the heavens. We'd beg forgiveness for our slaughters and massacres of men, women and children. But killing has become a game show. From the White House right down to the gutter. . . Is it for show business? I think so. Everything is show business. The death merchants are called defense contractors. When I was a kid the Defense Department was called the War Department. Now you invade another country, and you call it defense.

. . . Petronius rued the day weapons were invented. Give people weapons, and they will use them against others or even against their own people. You cannot get people to work together, but you can easily get them together to go to war. That's nothing new. Except that now we're even destroying the environment that gives us the ability to live. In my "Gospels," in the chapter called "The Last Judgment," I'm about to write that I bring Bush and his kind to trial. We will assume that they've been assassinated by Iraq terrorists and now he's down in Hell. The judges probably will be Martin Luther King, Paul Robeson, Angela Davis, Corialanus and a few other worthies. They will try him for genocide.

Q. That's a pretty harsh judgment, isn't it?

A. We know that Bush is a murderer: a conscious, deliberate murderer. He's disrespectful of humanity. He operates with machine politics tricks: the Willie Horton thing, the "read my lips," the lies. As soon as he got into power, the Wimp became a Ghengis Khan. And the Congress and the Senate folded up, let this ridiculous man dominate them. Is there any hope for America? No, there's not. So in my "Gospels" we bring him to trial naked. I'm going to try him for the so-called precision bombing. For all of the kids who are dying from the disease that it caused. For what was done to the environment. There was no war. It was a massacre. Every little bit of exploded flesh will speak. Every organ. Every bone.

Q. So you still see a refuge for justice in art? Through art you can at least imagine a justice that can't be achieved in life?

A. Yes, because it's impossible to hope that someday there will be a dialogue of sanity among living people. That's too much to expect. Crimes are increasing daily. It's discouraging. You have to drive defensively. You have to think defensively. You have to live defensively. / ■

Tom Johnson is a free-lance writer with an interest in Italian-American writers. He interviewed Pietro di Donato at the writer's home in Setauket July 7.



Mallory Hattie

Pietro di Donato and Gov. Mario Cuomo, who called the death of his friend 'a great loss.'

"He was funny about some things," Mettewie said. "To some intellectuals, well, he would say he was just a plain bricklayer, but to most people he preferred to be known as an author . . . You know it was something in him. It was important. I got to the hospital too late, but there I found this little note he had printed and put at the end of his bed: 'I'm Pietro di Donato, author of Christ in Concrete.'"

Staff Writers Charles V. Zehren and David Behrens contributed to this story.