

Playwright's POV

I Write for Them...

by Dina Morrone

My parents are not writers. They never finished high school. My maternal grandfather could not read or write. When he immigrated to Canada in the late 1950's from a tiny village in Calabria, in Southern Italy, he had to sign his paycheques by putting an X on the dotted line. It isn't that my grandfather wasn't a smart man. He most certainly was. It's that he and so many others like him never had the opportunity to obtain a formal education because poverty was a harsh reality and daily survival was a first priority. My parents and my ancestors were people of modest means, living in primitive conditions. They were farmers who cultivated the land for wealthy crop owners. Daily life consisted of intense physical labour, caring for each other in the immediate and extended family and occasionally attending mass. Education was considered a luxury. Children were not encouraged to continue their studies because they were needed in the fields to do manual labour. There wasn't much in the form

of entertainment either. They didn't have any books or newspapers and there weren't any television sets. Two families in the village had a radio and two had a phonograph to play records. A few self-taught musicians, one was my paternal grandfather, played the mandolin and sang at weddings and family celebrations. My parents tell me that the only real form of entertainment they had was storytelling. "We would sit around the fire, which was also the only form of heat and light in our home, and we would listen to the adults tell stories with such enthusiasm and dramatic pacing that it felt like I was watching a live stage performance. They really got into it." When I asked about the subjects of the stories, she smiled and said, "Anything and everything. Some stories were only intended for adult ears, but it didn't matter. We'd still listen in." She chuckled, "Of course we didn't understand them. Other stories included rhymes, children's fairy tales, old family tales, stories of counts, barons and kings that once ruled the south, and even of ghosts and spirits that some claim lived in the area."

My parents' poverty, their daily struggles and eventual immigration to Canada, have granted me the opportunity to live a much better life. I grew up in an Italian household in Thunder Bay, a small city in Northern Ontario. I spent my childhood writing stories, skits, sketches, poems, and wrangling groups of friends to put on plays and shows. Another thing I did was play with Barbie dolls. This continued until I was in high school, which is not something



The playwright's maternal grandparents Filomena and Rocco Tarsitano with her mother Angelina (far left) and her mother's siblings in Italy

most girls are still doing in their teens. But I didn't care. I loved the role-playing and storytelling. The dialogue I was giving the dolls was spontaneous and improvised. I was basically writing on the spot and didn't know it. One day, a friend who didn't know I was still playing with Barbies announced a random piece of trivia she had heard on a television game show. "Children who play with Barbie dolls will make good writers." (She was one of those book smart children, mature beyond her years, who always quoted passages and statistics.) At the time, her comment made

"what change other than death requires more courage than leaving 'home' to immigrate to another country?"



The playwright's parents, Angelina and Riccardo Morrone immigrated from Calabria in Southern Italy to Thunder Bay to start a new life. Here they are pictured on their thirteen day journey on the Augustus Genova.

no sense to me. I didn't see how the two were related because truthfully I had no idea what the career of being a writer was. In my household, the kinds of career choices my parents discussed were things like School Teacher, Secretary, Bank Manager, and of course none of those appealed to me.

I was the first woman in my family on both sides to leave home and attend university. It was monumental. My parents were emotional at the prospect that I would be getting an education. I certainly felt the pressure to please. I enrolled in Business Administration because it was something my parents could understand. It made sense to them. But, I quickly realized that it wasn't for me and I switched to Fashion Design. I graduated from Ryerson University and went on to pursue acting. I have resided in Toronto, Antigua, Rome and Los Angeles. I have travelled plenty and seen many fabulous places. I've experienced things my parents could never have dreamed of.

After settling in Los Angeles, I found myself recounting stories about my travels and travails. I was always being told how funny I was, which was always followed by the question, "Are you a writer?" Each time the answer was a puzzled no. A few years later, I decided it was time to take action and I began to dedicate myself to writing. I enrolled in creative writing classes at UCLA. At first, I wrote long hand in scribblers because I couldn't type. I then spoke into a tape recorder. When I got my first computer, I pecked away with my index fingers. My typing improved and suddenly I was writing short stories, monologues, screenplays, full-length plays, and even a solo show called *'The Italian In Me'* which I've been performing for several years.



The playwright's paternal grandparents (far left) Marietta and Giuseppe Morrone and great grandparents (center) Rosaria and Gaetano Morrone in Italy.

A few years ago, a story came to me through a chance phone call I had with my mother. She told me that a moose had wandered out of the forest across the street and gotten himself stuck in the neighbour's camper trailer. This apparently caused quite a stir. The street had to be shut down. The fire department, police, news station, and the Ministry of Wildlife were called in to rescue the animal. Her phone rang incessantly as concerned friends and relatives were curious to know what all the fuss was about. When I hung up the phone with my mother, I just knew I had to write the story of the wayward moose. And so began the incredible journey of my full-length play, *'Moose On The Loose'*, a comedy about an Italian family and a Canadian moose that meet

up in a fictional town in Northern Ontario called Way Up Bay.

Although my main character is a talking moose, my 'moose' play is more moose-as-metaphor than actual physical moose when it comes to understanding the assimilation process for the immigrant cultures of Canada, of which I am a product.

***“as different as we all
think we are, somehow
we are all the same, more
or less, when it comes to
family”***

'*Moose On The Loose*' is the examination of the Tappino family beginning with patriarch Rodolfo, matriarch Pina, their daughter Maria and her husband Giuseppe, who left the Mediterranean warmth of southern Italy in the early 60's for a better life in 'America' and ended up in 'Moose' country on the ice cold snowy shores of Lake Superior, in Canada, where windchill drops temperatures to minus forty Celsius. Way Up Bay is not what they envisioned at the beginning of their long voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, but Way Up Bay is where they settled, raised a family and eventually even called home.

The play is about personal, cultural, and generational change; more specifically, the courage to change, and what change other than death requires more courage than leaving

'home' to immigrate to another country? I chose humour over melodrama to tell this character-driven, humanist comedy- how can it be anything else with a title like '*Moose On The Loose*' - where behaviour is the story and every character is given time to be seen, heard, and remembered. Whether they stand at the center or the edge of the narrative action, each is important.

What the characters say and how they say it affects all of us. And because the play is about an Italian family, it also includes carefully observed broken English in order to differentiate the generational layers within the family and to address the courage it takes to live in a language culture that isn't your own.

The long road from my parents' life in



Los Angeles cast of Moose On The Loose

(L to R back) Nick McDow, Tom Badal, Mike Lorrie, director Peter Flood, (middle) Jemma Bosch, Laura James, Producer Stephen Rivkin, Dina Morrone, Jack Kutcher, Johnny Ferretti, Roger Cruz, Celina Yun (Front seated) John Cygan, Corinne Shor, Grant Venable, Connie Mellors

Southern Italy, to the phone call with my mother, and on to the world premiere of *'Moose On The Loose'* in Los Angeles, California at Theatre West, was a daring and winding one. At the first staged reading of my first draft, fellow writers laughed at the situational comedy, but when the reading was over, several claimed they were confused about certain aspects. Questions like, "What does 'plugging in your car' mean?" Or, "What is windchill or minus 40 Celsius?" Or "Why would anyone want to live all the way up there?" The one that really got to me was, "Why are some of your characters speaking with such thick Italian accents? When did they get off the boat? Last week?" As a first generation Canadian, I gasped. I wasn't making fun of anyone or exaggerating accents. I was just simply trying to be as authentic and

respectful towards my parents and others just like them. I took a deep breath and with restrained emotion explained that my parents, like many others who had immigrated to Canada in the early 60's, stayed with their own kind. An Italian ran the corner store. The bank manager and the doctor were sons of Italians. The people they worked with were Italian and at home we only spoke Italian. For

" if I was going to do justice to the piece, my actors needed to understand the place, the people, the culture "



On set at Magnus Theatre - Moose On The Loose directed by Mario Crudo

(L to R back) Director Mario Crudo, Playwright Dina Morrone, Viviana Zarillo, Nick Babtsikos, Robert Bellissimo, Linda Goranson, Scott Maudsley, Danielle Nicole

*(Front seated) Paul Amata, Danny Johnson, Sam Moses, Wesley Graham, Amanda Barker-Timpano
(Missing Alice Ombash)*

some of my fellow writers, the concept of not speaking English in North America was very foreign as this was not their reality growing up in places like Texas, Ohio, or San Diego. The thing about Los Angeles is that although it's an international city and people come from all over the world to work in television and film, I feel that the portrayal of ethnic people is still very stereotypical. Most think that all Italians have dark hair, love garlic, eat spaghetti and meatballs, and that they all sound like the characters on *The Sopranos* or *Godfather*. I knew it was going to be a challenge to try and explain the difference between a first generation Canadian/Italian and an American/Italian. I had my work cut out for me. I went back to my script and reexamined where I could make elements clearer without making it too didactic.

“I think of how lucky I am that they made such an incredible sacrifice when they immigrated to Canada ”

As soon as I felt comfortable with my script, the perfect cast was assembled, a press release was announced, rehearsals began, and I went to work shaping aspects of Canadian culture, the Northern Ontario lifestyle, the Italian/Canadian immigrant experience, hockey, Tim Horton's, and moose with my actors so they could truly embody the people I had written about. I felt that if I was going to do justice to the piece my actors needed to understand the place, the people, the culture.

Everything was progressing beautifully with



Playwright Dina Morrone with her parents Angelina and Riccardo Morrone on Opening Night of Moose On The Loose at Magnus Theatre in Thunder Bay, Canada

preproduction until the day a journalist called to do a written piece on my play. Her first question was a long winded one that left me speechless, “Why do you want to do a play in the Los Angeles June heat about Canada and an Italian/Canadian family, in the dead of winter, with a moose as a main character? Why wouldn't you want to go do it up in Canada? Are people in L.A. going to get it? Do you think they're going to come out in the heat to see a play about the cold?” I wanted to cry and scream but instead I took a deep breath and politely said, “Because Los Angeles is where I live.” That was all I could muster up. I hung up the phone and immediately called my producer. In a panicked voice I blurted out, “We can't go on with this show in Los Angeles. It's going to fail!” He calmed me down and assured me that the play would be moving

forward regardless. That night, I couldn't fall asleep. I tossed and turned as I thought to myself, I'm making a big mistake opening my play in L.A. It must be a sign. What if she's right?

The play opened to rave reviews. Los Angeles audiences laughed and were moved. They enjoyed learning about the Canadian/Italian experience and Canada. They even identified with the characters and the family dynamic because as different as we all think we are, somehow we are all the same, more or less, when it comes to family. And the moose was a huge hit too. They were so supportive that not even the blistering June heat could stop them from lining up to buy tickets. I learned a very valuable lesson; don't listen to the opinions of just one or two people when it comes to your art. If a story is authentic and real, it will resonate with your audience no matter which

city it plays in.

In the spring of 2014, Magnus Theatre, in my hometown contacted me and enquired about producing 'Moose On The Loose'. I was ecstatic and jumped at the offer. On April 10, 2015 my play had its Canadian Premiere in Thunder Bay- to thunderous applause.

Like the moose that had wandered out of the forest to see the city, I had left Thunder Bay many years earlier to see the world. Now my play about that moose and my parents'

“if a story is authentic and real, it will resonate with your audience no matter which city it plays in.”



Photos of the Los Angeles production of *Moose On The Loose*, directed by Peter Flood. (Left): Dina Morrone and- Johnny Ferretti (Right): John Cygan and Eric Allan Kramer. Images courtesy of Theatre West.

immigrant journey, coupled with my first generation Canadian upbringing, was coming back to the place where it all began. The 'moose' had come full circle.

It's hard to believe that just one generation ago, my parents were struggling to survive and working under duress for crop owners and today, Magnus Theatre is the second theatre in North America to present the story of their journey. And it's also hard to believe that I now live in Los Angeles, a city of incredible wealth, which is a stark contrast to my parents' reality when they were growing up in Italy. I think of how lucky I am that they made such an incredible sacrifice when they immigrated to Canada.

I write for my parents, my grandparents and

all my ancestors who were great storytellers but whose stories were never written because they could not write. I write for all of them collectively because they are all a part of who I am today.

And as for the neighbour's game show trivia comment uttered to me when I was in my teens, "Children who play with Barbies will make good writers," those words have stayed with me all these years. I don't know if there is any truth to the comment. I'll let the audience be the judge of that. In the meantime, I'll just keep writing.

And to the moose who wandered into the city, I say thank you. You never know where your inspiration to write a play about your family will come from.



Opening Night production of Moose On The Loose directed by Mario Crudo at Magnus Theatre in Thunder Bay, Canada.

(L to R actors) Danny Johnson, Linda Goranson, Wesley Graham, Dina Morrone, Robert Bellissimo, Paul Amato, Danielle Nicole, Amanda Barker Timpano, Sam Moses

(Front Row) - Director Mario Crudo with actress Viviana Zarillo. (Missing cast member Nick Babatsikas)



Magnus Theatre, Thunder Bay ON



(photo credit: Matt Jevne)

“I was always being told how funny I was, which was always followed by the question ‘Are you a writer?’ ”

Dina Morrone

Dina Morrone’s love of storytelling was passed on to her by her Italian immigrant parents and grandparents. As they went on to recount colourful stories of their life back in the Old Country, Dina would listen in with ears and eyes wide open and try to imagine what that world was really like. From an early age, she was writing stories, sketches, skits, plays, short stories, and talent shows. At one point she entertained the idea of becoming a journalist, but decided that creative writing and performing were her calling. She has worked in Canada, Italy, and currently resides in Los Angeles where she works as a Writer/Actress/Voice-Over Artist/Theatre producer.

Dina’s solo show, *The Italian In Me* and her full-length play *Moose On The Loose* were both produced as main stage productions in Los Angeles and both received rave reviews by critics and audiences. Comedy legend Mel Brooks wrote about *Moose On The Loose* “I cannot tell a lie... MOOSE ON THE LOOSE is really funny and surprisingly moving.” Norman Jewison said of *The Italian In Me*, “Not since ‘Moonstruck’ have I seen such Italian wit, humour and charm. Fabuloso!” Dave Depino of Backstage West wrote, “Her profound scene with Federico Fellini is written and rendered to perfection.”

Dina is a graduate of Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. She has also attended Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, John Cabot in Rome, and UCLA in Los Angeles, and she is a proud member of Theatre West’s Writers Group.