

**“I pray sometimes for an unplanned vacation. Something to humble me in the eyes of nature and disaster while I’m reaching out towards the wilds of Africa when all of a sudden an unusual telegram arrives from Beverly Hills: STOP! THE SHOW IS FINE. SEE YOU AT SIX, STUDIO FOUR, LOT NINE! California is nothing more than hollow sounds from a cathedral. There is no mass for actors after seven-thirty. Everyone, the hustlers, prolific, persistent, youngish stout hearted, ambitious, sensitive, lustful and all human have left for Malibu and the tomb of the Unknown Actor.”** Tom Signorelli

In 1978, the MGM movie *Hide in Plain Sight*, “wrapped” in Buffalo, New York. On July 3, 2010, Joe Di Leo suggested I contact Robert Viharo and Tom Signorelli, two actors from that movie who befriended me and ask them to write about their experiences while filming here. Good idea!

That evening I called Signorelli who lives in New York City and left a message for him to call me. I called Viharo in California and he agreed to write.

I was cast in *Hide in Plain Sight* because of Robert Viharo. As such I was able to join the Screen Actors Guild. Entrance to that Union is classic *Catch 22*, i.e. Q: How do you get a part in a movie? A: You must be a member of the Screen Actors Guild. Q: How do you get into the Screen Actors Guild? A: You must have a part in a movie.

After receiving my SAG card, thanks to Tom Signorelli, I worked on various movies in New York City. In those days I stayed at his apartment and when he visited he stayed at my home.

I knew much about his life. He grew up as a half-Irish-half-Sicilian “deez, dem and dozers” on Brooklyn’s mean streets. He graduated from Lafayette High in Brooklyn in the late 1950s with a full athletic scholarship to UCLA where he got rid of the “Ds” and put in the “Ts.”

He was extremely bright, and funny with an eclectic albeit chaotic thought process. After college he spurned offers to become a professional baseball player and chose instead to become an actor. That decision led to some movie roles in California. He returned to Brooklyn and was happy to be home because he was hanging with sports guys, which is what every actor wants for his lifestyle, acting Italian, and making everybody happy.

He was accepted by The Actors Studio in New York and trained with Lee Strasberg; training that led to roles in *The St. Valentine’s Day Massacre*, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Thief*, *Prizzi’s Honor*, *The Sicilian*, and others too numer-

ous to mention. On TV he starred in *Dream Street*, *Law and Order* and he acted on Broadway with Dustin Hoffman in *Death of a Salesman*. During rehearsals at the Broadhurst Theater, Tom would call me from a dressing room phone and from room speakers I could hear Dustin Hoffman and John Malkovich as they interacted on stage.

Prior to that, in the late 1970s Tom received a Tony nomination for his direction of “*Lamppost Reunion*” an Off-Broadway play about a mega-star who returns to his hometown of Hoboken, New Jersey.

Tom Signorelli ultimately became disenchanted with acting. In a letter to me he wrote, “the public doesn’t know that the scene was done twenty-nine times before someone said, ‘print it!’ The public! It demands that you make them dream of illusions. Wasn’t he strong, wasn’t she beautiful, are you this or are you that? Romance, where are you? You see what I mean, Joey? It’s nothing! It’s blah, blah, and let’s act!”

“Italy, that’s where you make movies. Life there is a natural. You’ve got to act where your roots are otherwise it’s a paid vacation filled with tedious travel, secretaries, arrangements, dinners and foreign juices that water your insanities. Acting is good if you stutter then you get to say it twice. Why say anything twice? Acting does something to your brain and to your sense of feel. It gives you a false sense of security. Acting makes you feel you need to stretch out against defeat.

You can’t make an error when you’re locked into an image and dreams fade when you do Shakespeare young and Neil Simon as a middle aged twenty-seven. It’s tough reaching down and not up! Acting is a great profession for dancers and causes, and cops, and Italians and narcissists. You’re always testing what you’ve known you know. The director knows, the star knows, the studio knows, the agent knows. Who does a play anymore? Where are the new plays, the new playwrights?”

Tom and I discussed the Theatre, the Arts, and stories of his friendships with unknowns who became stars. He knew that every time you turned around a new guy is there and everyone is younger. Generations pass. Brando, Montgomery Clift, Michael Gazzo, Tony Franciosa, and John Garfield are dead.

In 1981 Tom was on a shoot in California. I wrote to him to ask what's happening. His response: "I'm acting. What else? It's dull! Dull and demeaning! Nodding to what you simply cannot respond to or no longer accept. Every five years I want to try a light comedy and stop reading faded yellow movie reviews. Out here it's don't convince, merely perform! It's boring! Applause trickling down empty rivers of weekends in the countries of ex-lovers, sitting by lakes of lazy, lonely gaps of guilt and time, and your dream, like the dreams of excellence slips by, loafing through ideas, comparing one's self with others. I feel a tremendous sense of loss walking to the stage. Why? Why can't an actor be alone? What draws him to the inferior mirrors he must break, control, and re-make? It's so absurd! And with the Goddess of hypocrisy swimming in his chest the actor opens another shirt to the warmth of public opinion and vanity."

"Joey, they sell distance out here. Emotional distance. And if it gets difficult with sunlit days and nights hitting hard, one misreads the barometer of youth, failure, success and lies. People's needs become my only concern. I despise the rehearsal of my life. I'll mix feelings with convenience, trade upon them and always wonder how the dark voices of my past have become room tones. You hide the bad dreams and the false applause and you scream! Life becomes a basic scramble. You start to throw it all over for that split-second of feeling less wrong, less stupid and less taken. There are no alcoves for the sun! There is an echo in space; an echo of us. The night brings desperate hours spent searching how young or how old I've become. One becomes tired and indifferent under the lazy, false California sunbeam and one learns from endless disappointments. Maybe. And yet, Joey, if you were here and had something nice to wear you'd probably hang out like me and everyone else. That's what's happening in California."

Tom Signorelli loved Buffalo and its people. He vis-

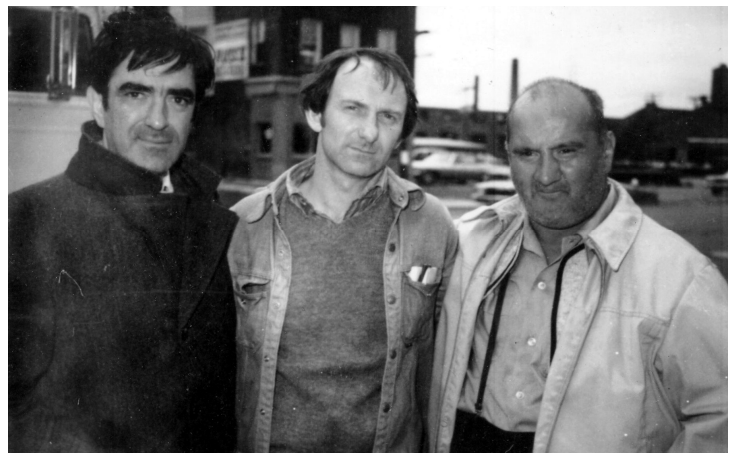
ited numerous times and for many years and often with a pretty woman. His favorite thing here was listening to Jackie Jocko at the Cloister, the Park Lane, and more recently at the Hyatt Hotel. To Tom, Buffalo and Brooklyn were interchangeable. He said "Buffalo is a small Brooklyn and if you put Buffalo Italians on a Brooklyn street corner and put the Brooklynites on a Buffalo corner no one would know the difference."

On Monday, July 5, 2010, at 8:40 PM while in my car my cell phone rang.

I let it ring. A beep indicated a message. Later I listened to the message. It was from Tom Signorelli. He always said funny things. That night he joked about fireworks, the 4th of July, New York, etc. He made me laugh. But then his mood changed. He said, "Joey, we're getting old. Getting old. Call me."

Something in his voice made me sad. I said to myself, I'll get back to him about writing for Per Niente Magazine.

Wednesday, July 7th came and I still hadn't called. That evening, my phone rang at 11:15. I answered. It was Jackie Jocko. He said a woman from New York City who didn't have my phone number called him at the Hyatt and said "Tom Signorelli died last night."



Joey Giambra Tom Signorelli Junior Catalano

1978