Rachel and Nonie at Aurora's 75th birthday party, 2002.

Nonie was the only reader in her family, but sure wasn't the only reader in ours. My childhood was filled with evenings (and mornings and afternoons) sitting with Nonie as she read me stories, and as I got older, reading stories to her as well. Many of my earliest memories, even aside from reading and baking, are moments shared with Nonie. Hunting for pebbles in the backyard in exchange for pennies, so they wouldn't catch in the lawnmower. Setting up the rickety card table in her cramped living room to assemble Thomas Kinkade jigsaws. Eating exactly one maraschino cherry from the little jar in her refrigerator. Watching "Jeopardy!" and yelling out wrong answers.

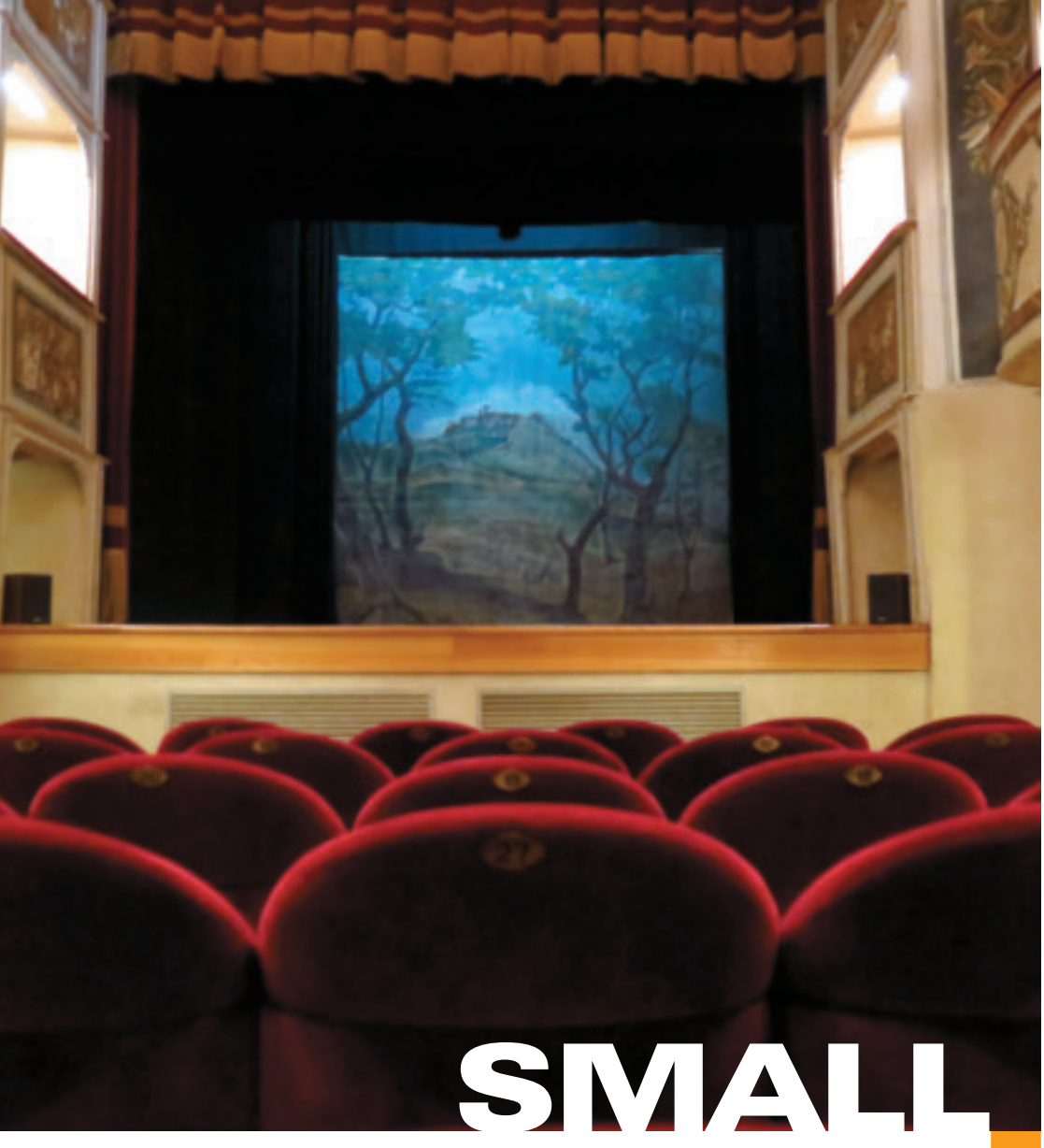
It's easy to underestimate the value of our own stories. After all, we lived them. They seem commonplace, but what is mundane to us may someday be an important piece of someone else's backstory. Our lives intertwine and overlap.

Without my grandmother's letters, I might never have been transported to the villages of Nonie's Italy. I wouldn't have heard of a few young children struggling to learn English as they attended *scuola di prima* in the United States. Because of her letters, I have a better sense of where I come from, who I am, and where I'm headed. ▲

Rachel Bicha is a writer and a student in Los Angeles, Calif. If she's not running between classes, studying in the library, or biking to her favorite coffee shop, she's probably planning her next adventure. Follow her on Instagram @rachel_beak.

Rachel Bicha with her grandmother, Aurora, in 2016 in Rachel's childhood backyard

Karina Bicha



SMALL wonder

The World's Tiniest Opera House

At the highest point in the tiny Umbrian hill town of Monte Castello di Vibio sits an equally **tiny gem of a theater, Il Teatro della Concordia.** Lovingly preserved and open to all, it is the smallest opera house in the world—with all of 99 seats.

By Frank Van Riper

Photos by © Goodman/Van Riper Photography

Inside the Teatro della Concordia

Ancient arch in Monte Castello di Vibio

The theater's restored ceiling

As a boy, I remember listening to opera, broadcast live on the radio from the Met in New York City every Saturday, as my mother, the former Carmella Casullo, vacuumed our walk-up apartment in the Bronx. The soaring voices and dramatic music easily overpowered the Electrolux as slowly, inexorably, I formed a lasting bond with this touchstone of Italian culture.

Decades later, as I stood for the first time in the elegant confines of the Teatro della Concordia, those feelings surfaced again as recorded arias played while my wife, Judy, and I walked through what seemed like a miniature world of gilt, trompe l'oeil and red velvet.

The theater was built at the beginning of the 19th century and opened in 1808, during the Napoleonic wars. Nine wealthy Umbrian families financed the theater to reflect and support the cultural ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood (hence "Concordia") that went beyond the goals of the French revolution. Immediately, the theater was a point of pride in the small hill town, though it took decades for its tiny interior to be decorated with trompe l'oeil paintings, first by artist Cesare Agretti, and later by his son Luigi, who, amazingly, began working on the theater when he was only 14. The father-and-son effort, completed in 1892, combines decorative work on the theater's bell-shaped ceiling (cherubs, nymphs, birds, flowers), heraldic shields on the stalls (touting Italian greats like Dante and Goldoni), a painted backdrop depicting the town of Monte Castello di Vibio, and a captivating and whimsical treatment of the walls of the upper-floor lobby making the room look as if it were hung with tent-like tapestry—complete with a pussycat peering in over the folds.

Claiming the mantle of smallest opera house, or smallest theater, in the world was not without controversy. There are far smaller performance spaces all over, and not just in Europe. However, only Teatro della Concordia is a faithful reproduction, but on a much smaller scale, of much grander European and Italian theaters. It has a classic bell-shaped floor plan, proscenium stage, dressing rooms, and ticket booth—even a grand staircase entrance at the front of its building. In short, Teatro della Concordia arguably is everything that La Scala is in Milan, or La Fenice in Venice, but in miniature.

My parents were far from rich (it was a Bronx walk-up, remember), but mom made sure to set aside money every year for her nosebleed tickets to the Metropolitan Opera, especially after it moved to its luxurious new home at Lincoln Center in 1966. On the rare times I accompanied my ➤

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parents, I was in good company: some 3,800 opera lovers filled the huge Lincoln Center opera house.

It was a similarly overwhelming feeling decades later when Judy and I enjoyed a sold out performance of "Cosi Fan Tutti" at the Kennedy Center opera house in Washington—along with nearly 2,400 other opera lovers.

How different it is in Monte Castello di Vibio. The whole town has only slightly more than 1,600 souls, meaning that the entire population of Monte Castello di Vibio could fill the Metropolitan Opera House—twice—with 600 seats to spare. Even La Fenice in Venice, a restored space I adore for its intimacy, not to mention its over-the-top opulence, can hold a thousand people.

Every January, we bring our Venice-in-Winter photo workshop groups to Teatro La Fenice to photograph from Napoleon's box. And every year our students are overwhelmed by what they see. This rare combination of intimacy and grandeur makes it feel as if you could wear the opera house around your shoulders—like an elegant scarf or stylish yet comfortable coat. The feeling is hard to imagine if you have not been there.

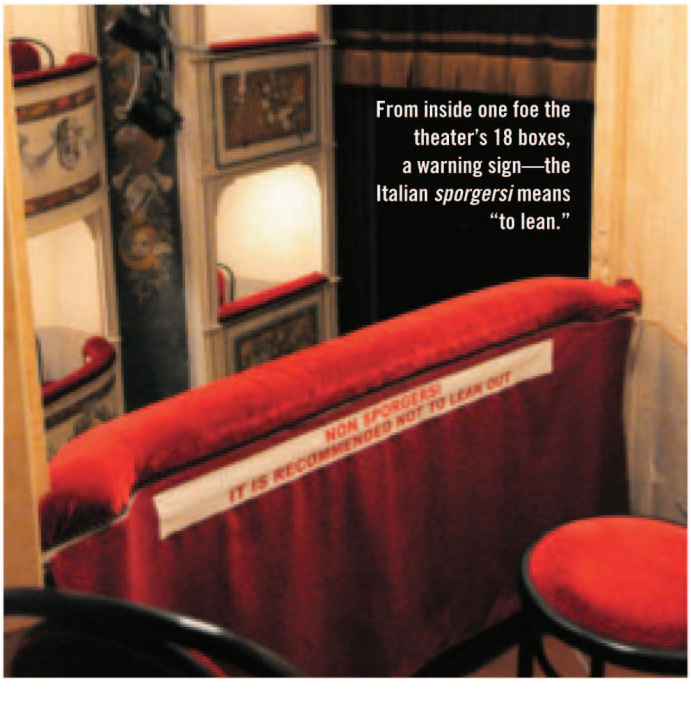
Above: Box seating at the Teatro d ella Concordia

Right: Theater's 19-century trompe l'oeil paintings

Of the Teatro della Concordia's 99 seats, 37 red-velvet theater seats are on the ground floor facing the stage, and the remaining 62 high-backed chairs are scattered among 18 intimate boxes that ring the theater on two upper floors.

A wonderful photo from 1929 shows just how popular the little theater was. The grainy image shows a lot more than 99 folks crowded onto the main floor and into the stalls for who knows what kind of performance back then. You cannot look at this photo without flashing back to the wonderful crowd scenes in the 1988 film "Cinema Paradiso."

All manner of entertainments have taken place in the Teatro. In 1945, an 18-year-old unknown named Gina Lollobrigida played in the Eduardo Scarpetta comedy "Santarellina." It was one of the first public appearances in a career that would see Lollobrigida become an international film star, a respected photojournalist, philanthropist—and 2008 Lifetime Achievement awardee from the National Italian American Foundation.



From inside one foe the theater's 18 boxes, a warning sign—the Italian *sporgersi* means "to lean."

Though it survived the World War II years intact, the theater closed in 1951 and fell into neglect. In the 1960s, the stalls collapsed and it appeared that Teatro della Concordia would go the way of the fictional "Cinema Paradiso." In fact, there was a plan to raze the building and create an open town square in its location. Happily that scheme foundered after townspeople agreed to pay extra taxes to help begin needed restoration of the historic building.

In 1981, the town formally purchased the theater and restored it under the direction of architects Paolo Leonelli and Mario Struzzi. When construction was begun, they discovered that the theater's existing wooden pillars were strong enough for the interior to be restored in its original form.

Today, the theater enjoys popularity in proportion to its tiny size. It regularly features concerts, recitals and plays (and also can be rented for civil weddings.) In fact, the theater, not to mention the town, could hardly accommodate much more attention beyond a tour bus or two—and even that would be a stretch.

While the best way to get to see the Teatro della Concordia is by car, Monte Castello di Vibio does not even have in-town parking. You park at the base of the town and start walking. Since it is such a small place, the walk is not onerous. The well-kept stone houses and buildings are gorgeous, and the view from the top is splendid. Still, a horde of tourists wielding selfie-sticks is perhaps the last thing Monte Castello di Vibio needs.

A 19th century document describing the Teatro's opening noted that its creators "made it little so it would be proportionate with their town." With remarkable prescience, the document added that "civilization is not measured in volume or square footage." Or, for that matter, in foot traffic. ▲

Frank Van Riper is a Washington, D.C.-based photographer, journalist and author who works in collaboration with his wife and professional partner Judith Goodman. For information on their book, "Serenissima: Venice in Winter," and on their photography workshops in Venice and Umbria, go to www.veniceinwinter.com and www.GVRphoto.com. You can read Frank's online photography column at www.TalkingPhotography.com.

Street scene in Monte Castello di Vibio

1929 photo of the Teatro della Concordia

The film won its star an American Comedy Award for Funniest Actor in a Motion Picture, and it launched the film career of a then largely unknown performer who would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role. In 2015, the Writer's Guild of America ranked it no. 83 on its all-time list of funniest movies. And the American Bar Association Journal rated the film no. 3 on its list of the 25 Greatest Legal Movies.

Beechum County Courthouse in Monticello, Ga., site of the film's courtroom scenes

Photo by Chris Credendino

Still Funny After All These Years

The 25th Anniversary of MY COUSIN VINNY

By Douglas J. Gladstone

As fans celebrate the 25th anniversary this month of the release of "My Cousin Vinny," it is ironic that its screenwriter and producer, Dale Launer, didn't initially have high hopes for the film, and at one point thought it was "un-releasable."

Launer put great effort into researching the script for this celebrated courtroom comedy in which a brash, untried New York attorney, Vincent Gambini, and his sassy, classy, Brooklyn girlfriend, Mona Lisa Vito, travel to a small town in rural Alabama to defend his innocent cousin facing murder charges. Renting a car in New Orleans, Launer drove through Mississippi and Alabama, and then down the Gulf Coast. The road trip provided inspiration for scenes that ultimately found their way into the film: Launer's car got stuck in the mud; all of the restaurants where he ate had grits on the menu; and he actually experienced a screech owl's "unearthly call."

"It wasn't that I didn't think I had written and produced something that was good," Launer says. "It's just that I'd get the dailies on videotape and I was disappointed. The film didn't play out the way it had played out in my head.

"I mean, I'm happy it's well reviewed and well received by so many people," he explains. "But it was only until I watched it with some friends of mine that I was able to get a sense of how funny it was and saw what worked."

Others knew sooner. "First and foremost, it's just so very, very funny," says actor Ralph Macchio who played William Gambini, Vinny's young cousin and one of the defendants. He attributes at least part of the film's success to "the fact that it's an iconic American comedy which grew more popular on cable television.

"It pays off every time because it gets more clever and smarter on each viewing," Macchio says, adding that the film "resonates in a weird way to people, which helps explain its staying power. Whether it's two kids who are in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the scene where Vinny is awoken at night by the train coming through the town, we've all been there."

Macchio calls it "a beautifully crafted fish-out-of-water comedy that has withstood the test of time. And that's a credit to Dale's script."

The actual Sac-O-Suds convenience store in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in "My Cousin Vinny" was set.

Photo by Chris Credendino

Jonathan Lynn directing Ralph Macchio

Courtesy of Jonathan Lynn

"My Cousin Vinny" director Jonathan Lynn with Joe Pesci and Marisa Tomei on the set

Mitchell Whitfield, who played William Gambini's co-defendant, Stanley Rothenstein, agrees that the fish-out-of-water theme was central to the film's appeal. "I am from Brooklyn, and when I moved out to Los Angeles, I experienced my own share of growing pains," Whitfield says. "The thing that stands out is…Vinny was worlds away from what he was used to."

Whitfield also attributes the film's success to the "fantastic" performances of Joe Pesci (Vinny) and Oscar winner Marisa Tomei (Mona Lisa)—neither of whom were available to be interviewed for this article.

Critics agreed their award-winning performances were hilarious. In his Baltimore Sun review, Stephen Hunter wrote that the film "allows Pesci enough room to let his considerable comic talents explode." As for Tomei, Carrie Rickey, formerly the film critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, praises Mona Lisa for not just her comic edge but for "having the spunk and native intelligence of Italian American girls, so often undervalued and thought to be airheads when they are anything but."

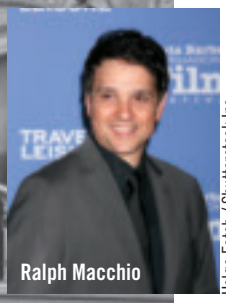
Launer says the duo's relationship was one of "friendly, playful one-upmanship," and their deft comic interplay was fueled by their great relationship when the cameras weren't rolling. In an interview for the Bravo series, "Watch What Happens Live," Tomei noted that Pesci "actually has a real beautiful voice" and "one of the things that we did a lot is that he would play the guitar and we would sing standards on the set."

The film also earned accolades in the legal world. While critics have pointed out that defense lawyer Vinny's visit to the defendants' prison cell would not occur in real life, the film is nevertheless praised by lawyers for its authenticity.

"Lawyers love it," says Launer, proud of its ABA Journal ranking. "It has played in law schools all around the country because it addresses court procedures."

Paul Fishman, the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey, reportedly referenced one of the film's scenes at the annual Brendan Byrne Lecture he gave at Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2016. In it, Vinny ➤

Courtesy of Jonathan Lynn



Ralph Macchio

Helga Esteb / Shutterstock Inc.

Marisa Tomei

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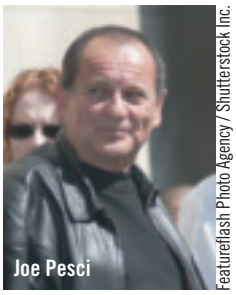

Joe Pesci

Featureflash Photo Agency / Shutterstock Inc.

Director Jonathan Lynn with actor Fred Gwynne as the judge

Courtesy of Jonathan Lynn

Jonathan Lynn on set with Austin Pendleton, who plays the public defender.

questions a prosecution witness who says he saw the murder occur and he was certain of the time the clerk was killed—because he had just started cooking grits.

In his cross examination, Vinny says the timeline doesn't match up, since the witness claimed he cooked his grits in five minutes and, as Vinny points out, "it takes the entire grit-eating world 20 minutes.... Are we to believe that boiling water soaks into a grit faster in your kitchen than anywhere else on the face of the Earth? Were these magic grits?"

Fishman reportedly told his audience: "I have taught trial techniques for 15 years using that because his cross examination is terrific."

While lawyers embrace the movie, some Italian American groups have reasonable doubt. Dr. Manny Alfano, president and founder of the anti-bias organization Italian American One Voice Coalition, says "the movie may be funny, [but] it reinforces the old negative stereotype that Italian American men are not very bright.

"From the time Hollywood was established, Italians and Italian Americans have been portrayed as mobsters, bums, bigots, buffoons and bimbos," he says in an email. "What troubles us is that there are very few positive roles. We are not asking for candy-coated portrayals, only reasonable depictions that show us for who we really are."

The film's director Jonathan Lynn disagrees: "Nonsense. Vinny and Lisa are heroes. They may be blue collar but they are intelligent, persistent and they do the right thing."

Ralph Macchio defends the film as well: "…I don't believe anything we did or said was derogatory to Italian Americans." He adds that the only negative reaction to the film he remembers came from the National Stuttering Association: "I was blind copied on a letter objecting to the way Austin Pendleton portrayed … the public defender who stuttered. And Austin was upset when he found out, because he really was a stutterer."

Louis Gallo, vice president of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America's National Commission on Social Justice, understands how Alfano could think the movie is disparaging. "It's a fine line," he says. "The saving grace is, in the end, the movie shows how brilliant an attorney Vinny is and how knowledgeable Mona Lisa is about auto mechanics. If both leads played their roles straight, the humor would have definitely been lost. The portrayal of the stereotypes is what gives the movie such endless appeal."

Georgia businessman Chris Credendino has visited the Sac-O-Suds convenience store, in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in "My Cousin Vinny" was shot. He has visited several "Vinny" film locations for his blog. A transplanted New Yorker, he says he understands the film's fish-out-of-water premise firsthand. He doesn't think the film sends the wrong message about Italian Americans at all.

"Please, I have a vowel at the end of my name. Neither I nor any of my friends are offended by the movie," says Credendino. "That's all it is, a movie. A very funny movie." ▲

The author of "Carving a Niche for Himself: The Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco and Mount Rushmore," Douglas J. Gladstone is a frequent contributor to these pages. His cover story on Associate Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of Ambassador Magazine.

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The Yo-Yo ride is aptly named

Danielle DeSimone

Beyond the Sauce

The DelGrosso Family's Wild Ride

By Danielle DeSimone

Danielle DeSimone

Enter DelGrosso's new Laguna Splash Water Park here!

Most people know the name DelGrosso as synonymous with fine Italian pasta sauce. But, unless you're from central Pennsylvania, you may not know the same DelGrosso family has owned and operated its own amusement park since 1946.

The oldest, major family-owned manufacturer of pasta sauce in the United States, DelGrosso has built a business empire by embracing the values, traditions and dedication to family handed down from past generations and passing it along to the next. In fact, today, the business is run by four generations of the family who still work hard to assure success—but manage to have fun doing it!

The DelGrosso legacy is a long one, dating back to the early 1900's, when a large influx of Italian immigrants arrived on America's shores. Like most Italian