THE SIMPLE DIALOGUE OF My People

RECOLLECTIONS OF
HOBOKEN PLAYWRIGHT,
LOUIS LaRUSSO II

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Hoboken Memoir

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of The Hoboken Historical Museum
and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

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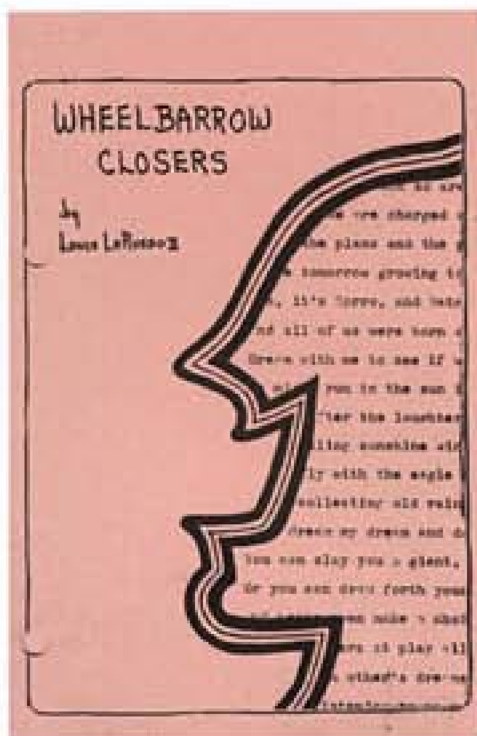
Cover photograph: Louis LaRusso II, ca. 1978. Photo by Brian Hamil. Overleaf photograph: Louis LaRusso II and "Willie the Weeper" on the Holland America Line piers, Hoboken, NJ, ca 1954. Donated by the Estate of Louis LaRusso II to the Hoboken Historical Museum, courtesy of Donna Truglio. Unless otherwise noted, all images used in this chapbook are from the Museum's collections.

*After two or three years of writing garbage,
I discovered something about myself.
My problem as a writer was that I wanted to
write from my imagination, from what I
considered was an incredible hipness...
So the plays I was writing were all about
how hip I was and how clever. But [then]
I started to write about my family and
Hoboken, and things that meant something
to me. It was such a snap, from the bonds
of what I believed, to be who I was. I came
to life. I came to life in this simple dialogue
of my people.*

Louis LaRusso

FEBRUARY 6, 2003

Right: Signed, undated photograph of Danny Aiello, from LaRusso scrapbook.



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Partial List of Plays by Louis LaRusso

Hello, Thank You and Goodbye (trilogy of one acts, performed off-Broadway, 1972)

The Poets (performed off-Broadway, 1973)

Momma's Little Angels (performed off-Broadway, 1974 and 1978)

Thanksgotten (St. Benedict's Church, 1974, 1975)

The Honeymoon (performed off-Broadway, 1974)

Lamppost Reunion (performed on Broadway, Tony and Drama Desk nominations for Best Play, 1975)

Wheelbarrow Closers (performed on Broadway, 1976)

Knockout (performed on Broadway, 1979)

Marlon Brando Sat Right Here (performed off-Broadway, 1980)

Notes of An Unfinished Spring (performed off-Broadway, 1982)

Vesper's Eve (1985, Dramalogue Award)

Stooplife (1986)

Sea Mother's Son (1988)

Sanctimonious Monday (performed off-Broadway, 1996)

The Black Marble Shoe Shine Stand (performed off-Broadway, 1997)

Sweatshop (performed at the American Theater of Actors, 1998)

A Slight Case of the Shorts (performed off-Broadway, 1999)

The Zebra (performed off-Broadway, 1999)

Hobo Christmas (performed off-Broadway, 2000)

Selected Books for Musicals

Saturday Night Fever (rewrite, 1977)

Platinum (1977 with Tommy Tune)

Dreamgirls (1981 with Michael Bennett)

Broadway Babies (1982 with Tom O'Horgan)

Selected Screen Credits

Beyond the Reef (1983)

Hell Hunters (1986)

The Closer (1990, based on his play, *Wheelbarrow Closers*)

Louis LaRusso II, ca. 1978. Photo by Brian Hamil.

Louis LaRusso II
(1936-2003)

Hoboken-born playwright Louis LaRusso II was a prolific chronicler of working class life in his beloved hometown. He was the author of more than 70 plays, at least half of which featured stories from his own life, or the lives of family members, childhood friends, and neighbors. Through Broadway and Off-Broadway productions of his plays, generations of theatre-goers came to know the sometimes hard-working, sometimes hard-drinking, and always tough-talking people LaRusso had known during the forties, fifties, and sixties, the ones he considered "his people": the longshoremen, boxers, bookies and swag dealers, women who worked at sweatshops and at lunch counters, and members of "The Hoboken Four," a singing group that had once included a young, blue-eyed crooner who became an international star.

For many years LaRusso lived and wrote in the same Willow Terrace row house where his mother was born. He maintained this home during the years he lived in Los Angeles (1983 to 1995), when he focused on writing—and rewriting—screenplays, including *Saturday Night Fever*, *Beyond the Reef*, *Hell Hunters*, and *The Closer*, based on his own play. When he realized (as he explained to a *New York Times* reporter in a 1999 interview) that "art is a dirty word in L.A.," he returned to Hoboken.

Educated at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, LaRusso was a recipient of the Jean Dalrymple Lifetime Achievement Theater Award, and proudly listed Danny Aiello, Paul Sorvino, Diane Baker, Maude Adams, Janet Sarno, Ron Perleman, and John Travolta among "the esteemed list of performers who have graced my words." Many others, including a few legendary directors, are men-

tioned in this chapbook, which is derived from two taped interviews conducted by Chris O'Connor at Mr. LaRusso's home, 111 Willow Terrace, on February 6 and 13, 2003. Mr. LaRusso died later that month.

Transcripts of the original interview have been deposited at the Hoboken Public Library. A large collection of Louis LaRusso's photographs, playbills, and other materials relating to his career was donated by his estate to the Hoboken Historical Museum archives for future display in Museum exhibits and for study by scholars of Hoboken history and the American theater.

Louis and Maria LaRusso, the playwright's father and mother, Keansburg, NJ, ca. 1934.

LaRusso (left) and a friend, Georgie, at Camp Gordon, Georgia, ca. 1955.

A Blue Collar Town

My mother was born in this house, in 1900. Her parents were, literally, fresh off the boat. But she was born here, which just lends to the magic of the house. I didn't live here. It was my grandparents' house. People always get confused about that. When I say my mother was born here, they presume I lived here. My mother lived here. When she went out on her own and got married, we lived elsewhere. This was my grandparents' home. When both of them were gone, she took it over, which was in the late '50s. She lived here until she passed away in '69.

[When I was growing up,] Hoboken was great. It was a blue-collar town. My father was a longshoreman. My mother worked in a coat factory, a sweatshop. We were poor, but nobody knew it. We wanted for nothing. We ate great. Our homes were clean and warm, filled with love and camaraderie. The streets were crawling with friends who really loved you, and you were protected by the neighborhood, when your parents were at work. There were so many people in the neighborhood keeping an eye out for you, if anybody was sick. It was really wonderful. We got in trouble once in a while, did something we shouldn't have done, but we didn't go the wrong way. No, growing up in Hoboken was something I wouldn't have liked to miss. If you learned anything, it was friendship, forging friendships.

I grew up on Sixth and Monroe, right around the corner from the city dump — a pretty low-class area, right before the railroad tracks. It was all Italian. [At that time, Hoboken was] Italian and Irish. The generation before mine, they really were bitter enemies. But not in my generation. We put it together. We were in the same streets, in the same schools, and we put it together. And we were friends. I never heard a bigoted word in my house. I never heard my parents say anything about being Irish, and to my Irish friends, I don't have that kind of feeling. That wasn't a part of their thinking.

Life seemed so full [when we were growing up here.] We never went into the city. We played basketball. We just filled up the time with each other, when we weren't working. We'd usually check in, in the morning, praying there were no ships. Well, if there were no ships, nobody worked.

[My father's life, as a longshoreman, was] tough. You'll read about him, if you read all the plays. I know that's a lot. But eventually you'll get to it. I was closest to him. We worked together on the docks. By the time I was eighteen I got my "bi-state" pass, and the coast-guard pass, and I was in a steady gang on Pier C.

You're the laborer. You take the cargo off the palettes as they come down. The cargo came in on trucks. You would have a round circle of palettes to [go to] different locations, and you would put them on A,B,C or D. There would be guys with forklifts to come and take them right to the dock, and load them off and put them on the ship.

So I worked the docks. A couple years. Until I went in the Army in '55. They used to have a deal where, rather than wait until you were drafted, when there was a draft, you could push up your draft, to get it over with. So rather than being called, arbitrarily, when you were twenty-three, you could be called when you were eighteen or nineteen. You could get it over with.

I did my basic training at Fort Dix, in Jersey. Then I went to do MP training at Camp Gordon, Georgia, and I ended up being stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas, in El Paso. The Army is — when you're living it, it's not very pleasant. But when you look back on it, you laugh at all that stuff. While you're living it, it's a big interruption.

Opposite: Notebook kept by LaRusso when he was studying at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, New York, ca. 1957.

On Stage/Back Stage

Well, when I came out of the army, I was on the GI bill, which is something they gave you in those days, to further your education. In '56 I went to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, thinking I might want to be an actor. It was all tenacity, founded in nothing. I just thought myself a good-looking guy who would probably get laid a lot, if I went to acting school. So I did, and I did. [Laughter] It was fun. It was a lot of fun.

After my second year, one of my teachers was directing summer stock in Groton, Connecticut. So he invited me. He said, "You're a young kid, you ought to do small roles, but it's really good for you to do it, and you should do it." So the first role I got was Chooch in *Hatful of Rain*, which was a nice role. Harry Guardino played it on Broadway, a small, interesting, kind of guy.

[But] I hated it. I absolutely hated getting on stage, and being so completely naked. I went backstage after the show and I grabbed Harry, and asked for George, the director. I said, "Harry, I'm sorry to do this to you, but I can't do this.

This is not for me. I gotta get outa here." He said, "Lou, you can't walk out of a show that runs a week. You've got to stick here for the week." Well, okay. That makes sense. I can't mess it up. I stayed the week, and I left when the week was over.

I come back to New York. My best friend had moved into Greenwich Village, in a loft, and was painting. So I moved in with him, and found myself writing plays.

I had written short stories, poems. I've always written. I was published when I was five. When I was in kindergarten, the teachers asked all the kids to bring in a Christmas project. Most kids brought in crayon drawings of Christmas landscapes and Santa Claus. I brought in a poem called "Christmas Bells." They were so shocked that a five-year-old kid could not only write, but rhyme, that they sent it to the local newspaper, and they published it. So I was published at five.

So, yes. I've always written poetry and short stories and things like that. It was always a part of my everyday life. I never knew it was going to be a career, until that time. I'm living in the loft with Nicky. He's painting, I'm bored to death; I start writing. And now because of my couple years at the American Academy, I'm writing plays. It just felt natural.

Return to Hoboken and the Urgency of Life

The entire decade of the '60s I spent in Boston. I was kind of a maverick/n'er-do-well/wannabe/this-and-that, [though] I thought of myself as a writer. I was writing one-act plays. I was writing screenplays, which I never got produced. Everything was terrible. But it never bothered me. It never made me think less of my chances. Call it retardation. I just believed there was something in me that was special, as a writer, and I was going to find it.

LaRusso in front of 111 Willow Terrace, Hoboken, ca. 1975.

My mother passed away in June of '69, and it really messed me up. At the time my brother was living with me up in Boston. We drove down in the middle of the night. She had had a heart attack. She held on until we got here, and she died. Boy, did it hurt. It hurt a lot. She was only sixty-nine, a very healthy woman.

But it made me realize the urgency of life. Up to this point I was basically partying. Boston's a great party town, especially in the '60s — the beginning of free love, hippies — it was wonderful. But when my mother passed away, the urgency of life just struck me, and I kind of got together with the facets of my soul, and said, "What are we going to do? Are we just bullshitting ourselves about having this artistic drive, or are we going to pursue that?" And I knew I had to do it. I used to say, back in those days, that my mother made me a playwright. Because if she were still alive, I'd still be partying someplace, I think.

So I went back to Boston and liquidated everything. She had left this house to my aunt, Angie, who lived, then, with my sister, around the corner. So I bought the house from Angie, and basically began the struggle. I moved back in October of '69, and that was my thirty-fourth birthday. By my fortieth birthday, *Lamppost Reunion* opened on Broadway.

A six year struggle. Not bad at all. I came back and sort of isolated myself, doing all kinds of shit jobs — tending bar, driving taxis — whatever I could get that didn't require my mind.

I started writing. I don't know why I was so confident, because I look back on the writing now, and it was so simplistic. But something made me believe. Something deeper than the results of my work kept me believing. After two or three years of writing garbage, I discovered something about myself. My problem as a writer was that I wanted to write from my imagination, from what I considered was an incredible hipness. I wanted to write from that core. So the plays I was writing were all about how hip I was and how clever. They were high-concept ideas. The worst kind of writing. Hollywood writing.

But what happened, as the years were going by, in just a short couple years, I started to write about my family and Hoboken, and things that meant something to me. It was such a snap, from the bonds of what I believed, to be who I was. I came to life. I came to life in this simple dialogue of my people.

Finding a subject matter that meant something to me made all the difference in the world to me, as a playwright. I like to think of myself as a colloquialist, kind of a Palooka of playwrights. Yet, I'm always in conflict with the poet I started out to be. It's been an unusual trip.

Churchyard Playhouse

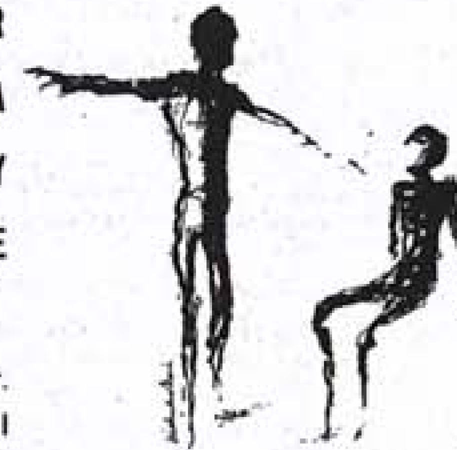
I have this best friend I grew up with my whole life, Nick Bari, [the painter I mentioned earlier.] I was bugging him to help me find a location in Manhattan where I could do a play, in 1974. We're driving up and down the West Side in midtown, stopping at everything that looks like a loft or a garage that could be used for a theatre, and we're getting

NICHOLAS BARI PRESENTS

THANKSGOTTEN

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY LOUIS LA RUSSO II

GLEN ZEITLER
MILDRED DANA
PATRICK BEATEY
GEORGE AXILTREE



DICKSON SHAW
ABIGAIL LEWIS
CHARLIE SUNUNU
ROBERT KREUTZER

stage mngr.
RON RINALDI

asst. director
LISA MENDE

every wed.-thurs.-fri. at 8pm starting oct.30

CHURCHYARD PLAYHOUSE
342 W. 53rd ST.

Advertisement for Thanksgotten, *LaRusso's first play at the Churchyard Playhouse, New York, ca. 1974.*

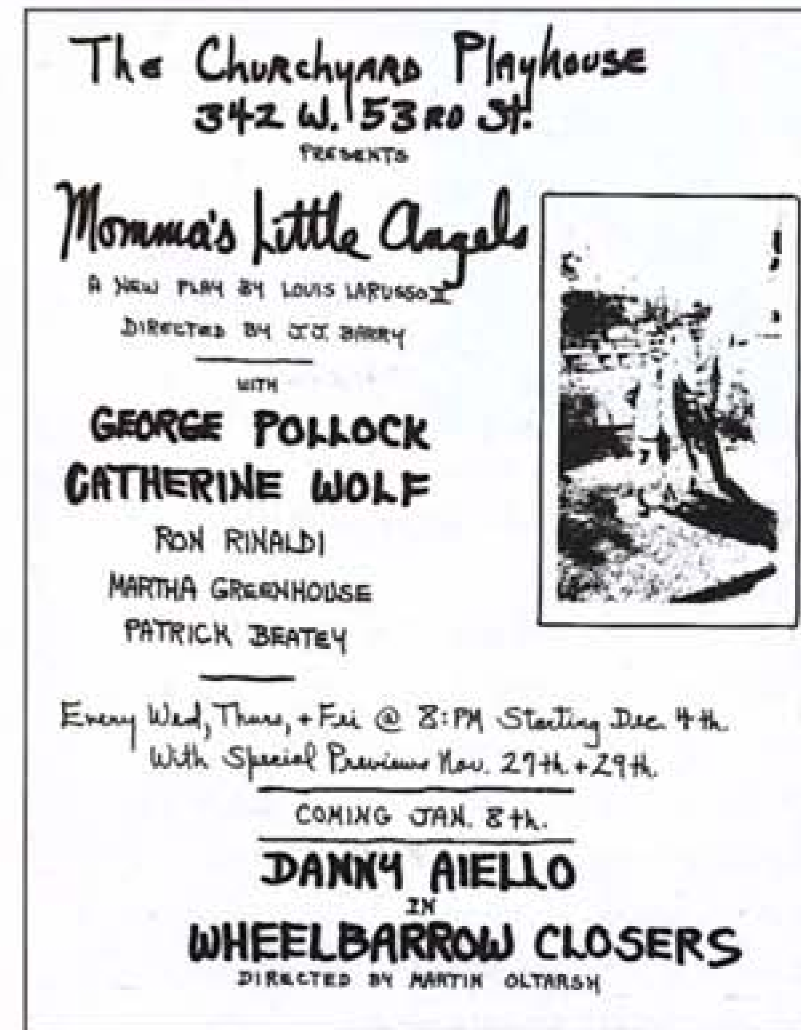
nothing but negatives. We come upon this church, St. Benedict's Church, on 53rd between Eighth and Ninth. We pull over, go into the rectory, knock on the door, and this Puerto Rican priest answers the door. He speaks some English, and I tell him — he has a rectory that's at the back of a courtyard, and they had a small church, that, if you came in the front it was a church, and if you came around the side, it was a bingo hall — so I said to the priest, "I'd like to rent the bingo hall as a theatre," and he said, "Well, the Pastor, that's his pet project. He has bingo Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. There's no way he's going to alter that.

That's his baby. He brought that when he came here, it's very successful, and there's no way." I said, "Can I speak to him?" He said, "Well, he doesn't speak English, but I'd be glad to have you meet him." He came out and we chatted. He was a nasty little guy. But I made my point, that I was so desperate that I would do my play on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday — his off-nights. Then he said, "Fifty dollars." I'm thinking he hates me, and he says, "fifty dollars" — in English — and I said, "It's a deal." That quickly, I went from being a panhandler with nothing, to a guy with a theatre on 53rd and Eighth Avenue. It was like a miracle.

Now I had to come up with fifty dollars. So we hustled around and we got the fifty dollars, and started. I had done a couple of projects when I first got to New York from Boston. I did a film project, and in it I put together some actors. One of them was a bouncer at the Improv, named Danny Aiello — which was the beginning of our long history — and George Pollock. So now it was time to go to work, and I bring these guys back into my life. We started out with a play called *Thanksgotten*, because it was November by then, and we were mounting our first production. This was a Thanksgiving play. It's unlike anything you would expect from me. It's magical. It's like this silly fantasy about this grumpy old guy having a visitation from some ghost.

Anyway, it was a way of getting everybody together and getting the ball rolling We got some good reviews. But reviews, at that level, can be had by just being kind to the critic. It was not a very good play. But then I realized, again, why did I do that? Just because it was November? So the next play I did... I did each play four weeks — that's what they allowed you at Equity — I did *Momma's Little Angels*. It changed everything.

Momma's Little Angels



Flyer for LaRusso play, Momma's Little Angels, *at the Churchyard Playhouse, New York, ca. 1974*

The first [full-length] play was *Momma's Little Angels*, and it changed my whole life. It was a play about my mother's passing. It changed my whole life. All of a sudden people were reading my work and passing it on. You could feel the different energy, and I understood what was going on. I understood that I had found myself; that I was, after all, not this half-brilliant, far-out, abstract, self-proclaimed genius. I was just this "merchant of the streets." And when I was able to connect with that, beautiful things started to happen. People started to come. People started to believe, and I was headed in the right direction.

I did a play called *Wheelbarrow Closers*, which I starred Danny Aiello in. I ended the season with something I had written for these actors, as we were working month after month. That play was called *Lamppost Reunion* [based on Hoboken-born Frank Sinatra's membership in a group called the Hoboken Four. When they sang on a nationally broadcast radio show, they became a popular act. After touring several months, Sinatra went solo and went on to greater fame.]

Lamppost Goes to Broadway

We mount *Lamppost Reunion* [at the Churchyard Playhouse.] All of a sudden we have producers coming in saying, "We want to bring this to Broadway," and it was like, wow. It got picked up by some jerky guy. He produced it for Broadway, and it got great reviews.

My first play on Broadway, I got nominated for a Tony. It was the biggest hit on Broadway, so I wasn't surprised. As a matter of fact, I was very disappointed that I didn't win. (Tom Stoppard's play, *Travesties*, won.)

Everything changed. I never used the Churchyard Playhouse again. It all happened so fast. One year. One season. I never looked back. After that it was all up. I never looked back. My whole life changed. I went from a cab driver to a Broadway star. Literally. I was the toast of Broadway.

It was just a magical moment. We were a bunch of baby-pantsed nobodies. We were treated like kings. Danny Aiello won the Theatre World Award for "best newcomer on Broadway."

[With *Lamppost*, I wrote from my own experience and also with certain actors in mind.] It was a great combination. First of all, because of my partnership to Hoboken, I was able to interview the guys who actually were those people. They're members of the Hoboken Four. They were real pissed off at him, so they gave me all their gripes. And, of course, having my own actors to write for went to the heart of it.

[There was some controversy surrounding the play.] Well, there was a lot going on at that time. First of all — I guess there's no way for you to know all these things, but the guy who played Fred Santoro was Gabe Dell. Well, Gabe Dell was a very prominent Broadway actor at that time. He was

Opposite: Clive Barnes's New York Times *review of* Lamppost *and a photograph from the performance, from LaRusso's scrapbook, 1975. Opening night tickets for* Lamppost Reunion.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1975

'Lamppost Reunion' Is Stage Surprise

George Pollock, left, Frank Quinn, center, and Gabriel Dell

By CLIVE BARNES

There is a curious Broadway specimen known as a "sleeper." The unwary might think that a "sleeper" was a merely a "walker" who had dropped in his tracks—but, no, a "sleeper" is a show that has arrived in town with no particular attention or publicity being given to it, no particular star names hung on it and with about as much chance as might be accorded, say an attempt by Abraham D. Beame to secure his party's Presidential nomination for 1976. Not much attention was paid to "Lamppost Reunion," which opened at the Little Theater last night. But it might well prove to be a sleeper—a play that is unexpectedly, although not at all, undeservedly successful. For it is a humdinger of a melodrama.

•

This season is apparently going to have as many bars to it as Alcatraz—coming up later in weeks ahead is a revival of "The Time of Your Life," and then "Kennedy's Children." Like them, "Lamppost Reunion" is set in a bar—a nasty, sordid hangout in Hoboken, N.J., where the bartender uses the ladies' room because the mens' room is too much for even his none-too-delicate sensibilities. It is the kind of bar you could only love if you could call it home—and even then you would probably only tolerate it.

It is 3:30 A.M. The bar is closing up. There is Biggie, the bartender of the kind who ought to be called a bar tough, and one customer, nursing a broken arm and gently dozing over his drink, Mac, a token, tiny, feisty Irishman in an Italian neighborhood. Suddenly, Tommy enters, insists on a drink. These guys have known one another all their lives. They kid a little. The door opens, and two men come in, one wearing a camels-hair coat, and the other continually ready to either take it off him or put it on him—not so much a gentleman's gentleman as a slob's slob. It is a world famous singer and his gopher.

The singer is Fred Santoro, who has just had a sort of a triumph at a New York concert—his voice is fading, but his fans aren't—and he suddenly thought he wanted to revisit his old haunts in Hoboken, particularly the Lamppost Bar. Here are his friends, or rather his friends of 20 years ago. Freddie has become a big, big star, a world personage, a millionaire. His cronies have stayed in Hoboken. Can one go back, can you go home again? And what is left of home?

Five men, boozing the night away, remembering old times, reliving old laughs, fingering old scars—a few revelations, a few moments of confrontation, a few of those miasmic visions found reflected in the empty bottom of the umpteenth whisky glass. Perhaps it will remind some of Jason Miller's play of a few seasons back, "That Championship Season," and although "Lampost Reunion" owes nothing in material or matter to the earlier play it does have the same air of boozy reminiscence and alcoholic honesty.

The play has been written by an Off Off Broadway veteran from Hoboken himself, Louis LaRusso 2d. If this had been a novel it would have been a roman à clef, but what a play based on a thinly disguised living personage is called I cannot recall. However, it seems safe to assume—or perhaps it might turn out not precisely safe to assume—that the hero, Fred Santoro is not entirely dissimilar from Frank Sinatra. But it does not matter one way or another—what counts is the way Mr. LaRusso has kept his ear close to the bar, and has observed the way reunions point up present differences as well as past memories.

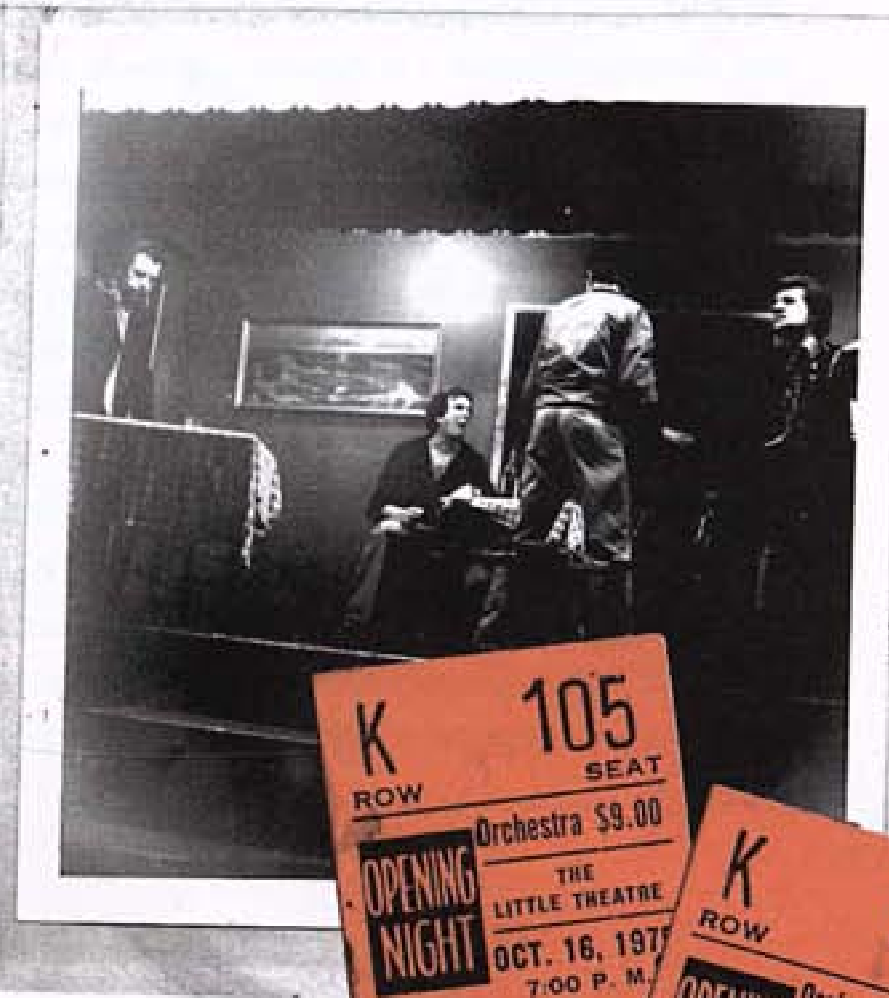
•

The language is as raw as the liquor, and it is the kind of bar that sserves very raw liquor. But it has a feel for life to it, and almost documenatry precision of place, period and people, and there is this interest in the way five men can interplay on one another during a few brief and sodden hours. Parts of it—including the ending—are quite beautiful in their sense of occasion.

The bar has been designed by Robert U. Taylor so realistically that in the intermission the audience must feel tempted to try to buy a drink from it—a marvelous piece of verismo stage setting—and Tom Signorelli's direction and his five actors are absolutely perfect.

Danny Aiello as the bartender who was nearly a big-time singer and is now softly embittered, Frank Quinn as the cynical combative Irishman, Frank Bongiorno as a happy kind of good-news man no bars should be without and George Pollock as the put-upon hanger-on, are all in their ways ideal, but best of all is Gabriel Dell as the tough singer, who gives a performance of complex subtlety that is a joy to watch.

So—if you have a strong stomach—see "Lampost Reunion," and when you do, watch out for the strangest program credit I have ever seen in my life. It reads: "Mr. Garofalo's Evening Clothes designed by Jacques Bellini." Guess who Mr. Garofalo is? He's the producer. What's Italian for mazel tov?



THE LITTLE THEATRE

JOE GAROFALO

Presents

LAMPPOST REUNION

by
LOUIS LaRUSSO II

with

DANNY AIELLO
GEORGE POLLOCK
FRANK BONGIORNO
FRANK QUINN

and

GABRIEL DELL

Directed by
TOM SIGNORELLI

Scenery by ROBERT U. TAYLOR
Lighting by SPENCER MOSSE
Costumes by JUDY DEARING

Production Stage Manager PAUL AUSTIN
General Manager ASHTON SPRINGER

CAST
(in order of appearance)

Biggie	DANNY AIELLO
Mac	FRANK QUINN
Tommy	FRANK BONGIORNO
Jubby	GEORGE POLLOCK
Fred	GABRIEL DELL

ACT I
THE LAMPPOST BAR, 3:30 A.M.

ACT II
SOMETIME LATER

ACT III
NEAR DAWN

THERE WILL BE TWO INTERMISSIONS

Program for Lamppost Reunion, *The Little Theatre, New York 1975.*

originally one of the Dead End Kids, a wonderful actor. He was the one who survived the Dead End Kids. He got great reviews in *Lamppost*, and he was a maverick. Gabe Dell was a hippie. He was a hippie who just wasn't up for following anyone's path. He just wanted his own life. He was kind of an abstract, very bright guy. One night he was cussing everyone. We were all leaving the theatre together, at night. We were all newcomers to Broadway, and we were all depending on each other. The Little Theatre, where it ran, was on 44th Street. That theatre is now called the Helen Hayes. We used to walk around the corner, through Schubert Alley, to Charlie's, which was a restaurant where everyone hung out, in the business. So this one night in particular, we go in, we have our usual hamburger, fries and coffee, hang out a couple hours. I used to park my car down on Ninth Avenue and 45th. Gabe Dell lived between Eighth and Ninth, on 45th. So it was customary, at the end of the night, for he and I to walk down that street together. He would stop at his place, and I would walk the extra thirty yards to the parking lot. This

night, we're on the corner of Eighth Avenue, and he says, "I've got to meet a friend." I said, "Oh. Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to Jilly's." You don't know who Jilly was, probably. Jilly was Frank Sinatra's bodyguard, right-hand man, and he had the hottest restaurant in New York, on 52nd, between Broadway and Eighth. It was a great hot spot. And I said, "Are you crazy? Walking into the mouth of the enemy?" There had been all kinds of rumors about how pissed off they were about the show. He said, "Hey, I'm not gonna live my life in fear because of these assholes." All right.

I get a call about six in the morning, from the stage manager. Gabe Dell is in the hospital and needed six stitches, all over his face. He went there, he bugged them enough that they followed him and slashed him. So there was a lot of shit. No one could prove any of it. They flew Gabe out to L.A., to this plastic surgeon, who fixed it up somehow, and he came back and only missed one performance. He was an ornery guy; he wasn't gonna let them close the show.

There was another incident where we got word that Jerry Weintraub and Mickey Rudin were coming in to see the play. Now Jerry Weintraub was Frank Sinatra's personal manager, and Mickey Rudin was his lawyer — a real high-powered lawyer in L.A. They flew in to see the show. So everybody was real interested in what was going to happen; if they were going to sue us, and that kind of stuff. So the night comes; they come to the theatre; somebody points them out. Of course, they have the two best seats in the house. So we watched them. They don't get up for the intermission. They just sit there. When the show is over, they get up, they head down the aisle, and they're, like, looking to see — this dumb usherette points to me. They ask her a question, and she points directly to me. I'm at the stage door, at the lobby/stage entrance. I'm frozen there, now. They came over, and Jerry Weintraub said, "You Lou La Russo?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I gotta tell ya. That's the best fuckin' play I ever saw in my life."

I was shocked. He grabbed me, he hugged me. Mickey

Rudin said, "You're smart, kid. You're smart. You did it in a way that nobody could hurt ya." Jerry Weintraub ultimately signed me to a personal management contract. That's how I wound up in Hollywood. So there was a lot going on, as a result of the Sinatra camp, and Hollywood.

I wrote a play about one of my personal heroes, and the torment he must have been going through; that people in his camp saw it otherwise, shocked me. I've always been a big Sinatra fan. I never intended to get into that kind of mix. There were rumors that Sinatra came in, incognito, but just rumors. [I never met him.] One of my regrets. I adored Sinatra. I was shocked when all this negative stuff started to arise.

On the Waterfront

I was seventeen or eighteen [when they filmed *On the Waterfront* in Hoboken, on River Street and elsewhere.] You know there is no more River Street. It's now Marine View Plaza. But it was the toughest street in New Jersey. It was the Barbary Coast. Wall to wall [bars]. There was nothing but. Well, maybe the occasional restaurant, that fed the long-shoremen. On one side of the street was the docks, and the other side was wall-to-wall saloons. It was wild. It was really wild. And the making of *On the Waterfront* was such a wild time, because who knew about movies? And here were these kind of wintry, bundled-up geniuses in our midst, making this movie. We were all watching and what not, but we had no way of making sense of what they were doing.

From my own, personal perspective, I hated Marlon Brando. I was jealous. I was a seventeen-year-old kid. All the girls became crazy in love with him, and all they talked about was Marlon, Marlon, Marlon. And me, being as insecure as I was — I'm harboring all these ill feelings toward someone

Marlon Brando and extras during the shooting of On the Waterfront, *Hoboken, NJ, December 1953.*

who was soon to become my greatest hero. It was an odd time.

I met Brando a couple of times. He was a very friendly guy. I got by it. But when he first got here, I wanted to punch him in the face. I had a lot of friends who were much more together than I was at that time. I think they were okay by him. I was very insecure.

But I was there every day [while] they were shooting it on location. That's what my play, *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here*, is all about. It's one of my favorite plays. It's really a love story, between [two characters]— held at bay for twenty years. And about a couple misunderstandings, set to a back-ground of striking. He's in trouble... These are older characters. There were young characters in the piece, too. I'm a character in it, at age eighteen, and my friend, Nick Bari, is a character in it. In my plays he's called Richie.

[People can see themselves in my plays.] Some people are disappointed in my point of view of them. Others love it. They love the attention, or the tribute — whatever. You never know. It depends on the person's deepest vanity.

The first play I wrote about Nicky was called *The Artist*, and I gave it to him to read. He got so pissed off at me. He said, "You see me as such a namby-pamby?" I said, "I don't

Photos, top to bottom: Shooting On the Waterfront *in Hoboken, NJ, December 1953. The Holland America Piers are visible in the background. Actors Karl Malden (center, costumed as Father Barry) and Eva Marie Saint (costumed as Edie) surrounded by extras during the shooting of* On the Waterfront.

see you that way at all." "Well, that's what I'm reading." He hated the play. I'm sure it wasn't a very good play, but his reaction to it was shocking. It affected me. But it affected me in a way where I said, "Well, am I going to cater to his idiosyncrasies, or inadequacies, or am I going to tell the truth?" I prefer telling the truth. You'll come to that, too. The truth always works better.

[As for the way Italian-Americans are portrayed, such as in *The Sopranos*], well, I'm very much against all that. I've never written negatively about my people. I've never written them as killers or drunks. Well, drunks, of course, I have, but killers or bad people, evil people — I wrote about them as people, and what came out came out, but I never deliberately isolated them in a negative way.

Marlon Brando Sat Right Here

I probably told you [this story] already.

Now this is 1980. I have my play, *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here* running in SoHo, starring Paul Sorvino and Janet Sarno. It's doing well. So I get a call from Max Eisen, the press agent, and he said, "Lou, I just pulled the most wonderful coup for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "How would you like Elia Kazan to come see the play?" I said, "What? I would do anything to get him to come see the play." Because he's such a hero of mine. So he said, "Well, I've arranged it, but there are conditions. You'll have to pick him up, personally, at his home, on West 69th, drive him to the theatre, sit with him during the play. He doesn't want to go backstage afterward. Then you just take him home. If you agree to those conditions, he's coming." I said, "Max, any conditions. That's a double bonus to me, because I get to be alone with Elia Kazan in that half hour it takes to get from where he lives to the theatre" — which was a thrill for me. It really was.

Sure enough, I pick him up. I ring his doorbell, some guy answers and when he saw me he said, "He'll be right out." So I go sit in the car. Thirty seconds later he

Advertisement for La Russo's play, Marlon Brandon Sat Right Here, *starring Paul Sorvino and Janet Sarno, 1980.*

comes out. I jump out, say hi and blah, blah, and we start heading downtown. We get into this conversation about Hoboken and "How do you know so much?" and I kind of described who I was — I was this kid, blah, blah, blah — but he was so taken by all the names I had, because he remained friendly with all those guys. He was that kind of a guy. Is that kind of a guy. They were extras in the movie. He knew where they were, what they were doing, what they ate yesterday. He stayed in touch with them, yeah. They called him; he would always take their calls. Quite a guy, despite all the things you hear about him.

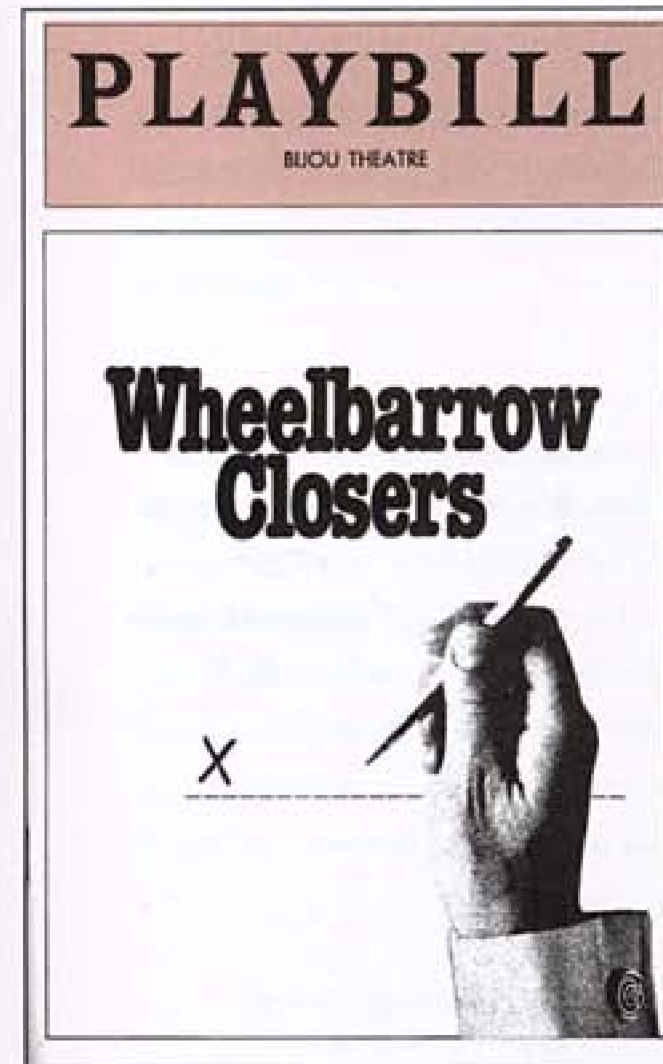
So we get to the theatre. Of course, the cast was so excited. They know he's coming, although they were forewarned that he was not coming back. We watched the play. There are lines in the play — "That fuckin' Kazan had to come to Hoboken to make his movie. Ever since, we've got to strike, strike, strike —" there are a lot of those kind of lines. He's sitting through that fine. The show is over. And he's one of those kinds of guys who doesn't tip himself off. I couldn't get any reading on whether he was hating it, loving it ...

So, finally, the show's over. He says, "You know what? I changed my mind. I want to meet the cast." That's a good sign. He doesn't say anything to me. He doesn't say, "Good show," "Bad show," "Loved it." He didn't say anything. He said, "You know what? I've changed my mind. I want to meet the cast." Oh, great. I run back stage, tell everybody that Kazan's coming, and I said we'd all meet onstage. Everybody was like children, gathering around him. He focuses on Janet Sarno and Paul Sorvino, and was very complimentary. But he seemed to have had a terrific time, and I think it was a reluctantly terrific time. I think he was coming to not like it, and wound up being caught up in it. But it was an exciting night, for me to spend — and I had to drive him home. He didn't want to leave. But it was great for me to be alone, one-on-one, with Elia Kazan.

Loving and Leaving L.A.

In 1975, I did *Lamppost Reunion*, 1976 was *Wheelbarrow Closers*, 1977 was a musical called *Platinum* with Alexis Smith. Gary William Friedman, a good songwriter [wrote the music.] In '78 I did *Momma's Little Angels* again. In '79 I did *Knockout*. In 1980 I did *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here*. In '81 I did *Dreamgirls*, with Michael [Bennett]. So I did a show every year from '75 to '81. Then I went to L.A.

I started [writing books for musicals] reluctantly. Really. Tommy Tune came to me because we were with the same agency — ICM — when he was doing *Platinum*. He had seen *Lamppost Reunion* and said he wanted that kind of gritty realism. I kept saying no, and he wouldn't have it. My agent bugged me to death, so finally I said I'd do it, *Platinum*. Which, at the time, was called *Sunset*. It went through quite a few changes. It ran about a year. A musical has to do better than that.



Playbill program, Wheelbarrow Closers, *1976.*

But now I was part of the establishment. Michael Bennett drove me crazy to fix *Dreamgirls*. That was a really bad show. It was called *Big Dreams*. But I fixed it. And that did very well. Then I did one with Tom O'Horgan called *Broadway Babies*. It was like a puppet

show. All the characters were either children or puppets. It was a regular play, a musical play.

I had so many offers. I went to L.A. [in 1982] with my own suite of offices at Universal. Oh, they gave me everything. In '77 I had doctored, while I was still here, *Saturday Night Fever.* So I had a reputation already as the guy you wanted to write your dialogue. I did quite a bit of that. If you're a playwright, if you're a dialogue writer, that's what they're going to ask of you. And I wrote twenty-four commissioned screenplays.

I loved L.A. I loved it. It just didn't fit in with my artistic soul. But the side of me that likes to chase pussy — I loved it. I just had a great time. I was making tons of money; I always had a brand-new Mercedes convertible; I lived the high life. All the top restaurants knew me, I'd just walk right in. I was The Man. You couldn't have been in a better position than I was. All the studio bosses loved me, invited me to dinner all the time. I was The Man. But it was growing on me, this need to get serious. I tried, but it was hard. Because it's such a bullshit life.

I was there twelve and a half years. Half of it I was married, to the girl in the pink sweater. [Points to picture] But after a year or two I got rid of her. It's hard to be married in L.A. It's just so conducive to — whatever you want.

[I was brought back to the East Coast by] the need to be serious. [I still had this place on Willow Terrace.] Oh, I would never give this up. I used to bullshit myself that I was bi-coastal. But I was spending less and less time here. I bought into the bullshit. I had a great time. It was a great ride, a really great ride.

Opposite top: Opening night of Knockout, *May 6, 1979, at the Helen Hayes Theater, New York City. LaRusso is at right, with the bowtie. The play's main character, Damie Ruffino (played by actor Danny Aiello), was inspired by the stories of a Hoboken middleweight boxer, Danny Rubino.*

Collaborations

There are different kinds of collaborations.

The kind of collaboration you have with an actor is very different than one you have with a director or a producer. Danny [Aiello] was always a pleasure to work with. He worked harder than anybody I knew. He would show up off book. How could a writer not love that? The third collaboration we did was a play I wrote for him, called *Knockout.* Again, I based it on the life of one of my heroes as a child, a local fighter. And Danny was so good in that. It was the play that really made him a star, on Broadway. It was at the Helen Hayes — the old Helen Hayes. The big one. It was a hell of a production. It ran about a year. Ed O'Neill came out of that play. He played the villain. He was great.

Michael Bennett was probably my favorite collaborator, from a purely artistic point of view. I did a screenplay for Michael Bennett. That's the one I did, Francis Coppola produced it. It never got off the ground, but that was the deal. Zoetrope was producing, and this was going to be Michael Bennett's first film. Some jobs you take for the money, so if they don't happen: Next! But when you get caught up in the passion of a project.... There are so many things that can go wrong. The biggest is, you're hired by studio executive A; you

Advertisement for Knockout *at the Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway, 1979.*

turn the script in four months later; he's been fired; studio executive B will not touch his work; and the project's dead. That's the price. Too common. It's a joke.

Back to the Beginning

I came back to Hoboken from LA in '95. There was such a longing. I've been developing my plays exclusively at the American Theatre of Actors (ATA), on 54th Street between Eighth and Ninth [Avenues]. Jim Jennings is the artistic director. It's a great facility. They have, like, four theatres, and they give me the main stage, 140 seats. It's a great place to develop a new show. Anytime I want to do a play, I just go do it. It's produced.

My attitude about a playwright directing his own show is, I think it's important to direct the workshop, because there's so much to do; there's so much wrong with the first draft. If you're directing, it's like being inside a tank. If you're inside the tank you know where all the holes are, because the light is shining through. You have that advantage. You can see all the glaring mistakes of the play, if you're in the middle of it like that. Now I don't think the playwright should ultimately direct the main production of a play, but to do that first workshop, where you get all the writing problems out of the way, I think it's very beneficial. Then you have to turn it over.

[I welcome the give and take with actors.] Absolutely. I try to use an ensemble group, for that purpose. I know who they are, and I know, when they speak to me, they have something to say. I use a lot of the same people all the time. Let's get back to my roots. I said to you when I started out these concepts weren't working? I'm back to them, and they are working. I'm writing on a different level. Wherever it is you were, no matter how wonderful it was, you can't stay there. That was then and this is now, and you have to keep growing, changing, and experimenting, or it's not fun. To accomplish something is great. But then that's over, and you have to keep striving; keep looking for more ways of saying the things that are deep inside you. That's where I'm at.

The playwright who influenced me the most was Eugene O'Neill. I just had to look at Eugene O'Neill's work and faint, he affected me so dramatically. I couldn't believe that a man could say such magical things. He, to me, is the greatest playwright of all time. Higher than Shakespeare, Ibsen, Moliere. There's nobody higher than Eugene O'Neill, to me. I love them all, but O'Neill is unbelievable. It was in the middle '50s when I first saw *The Iceman Cometh*, with Jason Robards, and that fucked me up. That put me away forever. It just made me realize that there were people of untouchable comparison, and he was The Man. I knew I couldn't say all that so perfectly. Yes, it humbled me. How could it not humble you?

Poster for Sweatshop, *performed at the American Theatre of Actors, 1998, was based in part on his mother's experiences working in a Hoboken coat factory.*

While I was at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts we used to get twofers to all the shows, and I saw *Long Day's Journey into Night*. You know what my favorite is? If we were having an intellectual conversation about the brilliance of writing, I would say *The Iceman Cometh*. But the play that, for some reason, that touches me the most is *Moon for the Misbegotten*. It kills me. It just kills me. When Jason [Robards] did it, I saw it eleven times. He did it with Colleen Dewhurst. Eleven times. I couldn't see it enough. Jason Robards and Eugene O'Neill were somehow the same person. I can hear Eugene O'Neill — I can hear his pain, when Robards does it. That's not to say I wasn't influenced by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller. They were the guys of my time. I was very impressed with them.

Opposite: LaRusso in his study, 111 Willow Terrace, Hoboken, NJ, 1978.

What Changes What Doesn't

[With the fame I received, my relationships stayed the same.] Nothing changed. They were proud. I mean, my mother had passed away, but my father was very proud. He showed up at all my opening nights.

Hoboken *has* changed, a lot. I've loved it, personally. I guess because I'm an artist. So I've been in favor of the changes. It's been exciting. There's a lot of talent in Hoboken that has to find each other.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

The Hoboken Oral History Project was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years. For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico— found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families— who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project's first goal was to capture, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. With support from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, seven "Vanishing Hoboken" oral history chapbooks have been published since 2002. Series development is ongoing, as interviews continue to be conducted, transcribed, edited, and designed for publication.

In 2006, the Hoboken Oral History Project, again with New Jersey Historical Commission support, introduced a new series, "Hoboken Memoir," which gathers together the oral histories of city residents who have been prominent public figures through their involvement in the arts, city government, or community organizing. The series title is meant to suggest the several definitions for "memoir": "a narrative composed from personal experience," "autobiography," and "an account of something noteworthy."

Hoboken Memoir Chapbooks

The editor of the Hoboken Oral History Project's series of small booklets chose to call them "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> ...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Oral History Project's series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

A Project of The Friends of the Hoboken Library
and the Hoboken Historical Museum