

Anthony Caputi

December 22, 1924 – February 6, 2008

Tony Caputi, Professor of English and Comparative Literature in the College of Arts and Sciences, was a major scholar, a stellar teacher and mentor, a wonderful colleague, a loyal and trusted friend, a polished and talented actor, and a gifted administrator. Most importantly, he was a terrific human being.

A 1956 Cornell Ph.D. degree following a 1949 B.A. degree and a 1951 M.A. degree at the University of Buffalo, Tony stayed on at Cornell as an Instructor in 1956 but within a decade had climbed the ladder to full Professor. He published three important scholarly books—John Marston, Satirist (1961), a revision of his dissertation; Buffo: The Genius of Vulgar Comedy (1978); and Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness (1988). For decades, students have learned from his splendidly edited Norton Critical Edition entitled, Eight Modern Plays (1966). Tony was also a writer of fiction; he published a critically acclaimed novel, Storms and Son (1985), as well as a fine earlier novel, Loving Evie (1974). Nothing speaks more to his academic distinction than the fellowships he held: the Guggenheim in 1964-65, a Senior Fulbright in the same year, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship in 1971-72.

During two sabbaticals, Tony and Adrienne resided in Rome and Paris, setting a pattern for extended travel abroad upon his retirement in 1991. He loved to practice his Italian and French during his travels. Essential equipment for these adventures included a pasta strainer, durably stashed in his suitcase for preparing his favorite food-type, and a list of worldwide outlets for theater-tickets inscribed in his address-book for access to his favorite cultural pursuit.

Tony served as English Department Chair in the mid 1970s. Competent and fair-minded, he would artfully disguise feelings towards the very few colleagues he felt were being difficult or selfish, but he would always try to see the point of view of others.

In 1984, Tony joined the Comparative Literature Department as its Chair, a position he held for six years. Tony had, for many years before then, offered a widely successful course in Italian, English, Spanish, and French drama from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, cross-listed in English, Theater Arts, and Comparative Literature. During his

administration of Comparative Literature, Tony negotiated delicate transactions between and among recent joint members and their home departments; he brokered new appointments of one full junior member and one full senior member; and he stabilized an increase of fellowship and teaching assistantship opportunities for graduate students. The department's shape has borne his imprint since then.

As his Comparative Literature colleague Walter Cohen remarked in his eulogy at Tony's memorial in May 2008:

"This or that faculty member, myself included, would complain, and Tony, always unflappable, would respond calmly, never get upset, and keep things going. The effect of all this, over time, has been, well, dramatic, though again in an ironic sense. Comparative Literature has long since been marked by a remarkably high degree of collegiality, by a consistent success in reaching consensus on most decisions, and, more important still, by an ability to disagree civilly and even in friendly fashion when consensus proves impossible, to reach a decision by majority vote, and then cheerfully to move on."

A loving father, he is survived from his first marriage to Marjein by his three daughters: Pauline, Carol, and Mary; his son, David, predeceased him.

Tony had a surprisingly old-fashioned elegance and formality in his demeanor and speech. When Tony expounded on a play, a novel, or a movie, and wanted to clarify a point he had just made, he generally used the phrase "that is to say," a turn of expression that was, in fact, never out of place in the longer flow of his remarks.

Tony had a very fine and developed intellect, which he expressed with an extraordinary deftness, lucidity, and precision of speech. Tony wore the mantle of his learning easily and had vast array of interests from acting in plays, attending films, and fiction writing to horse racing, squash, tennis, and baseball, but he was also a learned man and deeply committed teacher and scholar.

An exceptional athlete, Tony took pride in being physically fit. On the squash court he was an enthusiastic, ebullient and optimistic teacher; on the tennis court an appreciative, curious, and enthusiastic student. And that combination informed so much of his zest and joy in the university and the world beyond.

Tony never forgot where he came from or that he was an urban Italian from Buffalo teaching in a department, which, especially in his early years, he felt, had the whiff of Ivy League pretensions. He was proud of his ethnicity.

All of us remember Tony's zest for living, his wit, and his flair. And we also remember his incredible capacity for understanding other people, empathizing with them, and making them feel appreciated. He was fun to be with because he was articulate, intellectually curious, loved conversation, and embraced life as if it were a play in which he performed, an elegant meal or a beautiful woman. For him, the entire world was a stage; and polymath that he was, he played many parts.

Tony loved Ithaca—notwithstanding his impatience with Ithaca winters—and the surrounding area, and took great pride in the creation of the Gee Hill house and grounds he lived in with Adrienne in rural Virgil. He built his country home overlooking his land with a beautiful mountain view; here his evening meal, often with friends, to whom he would enthusiastically discuss his rural life, was still an important daily occasion.

Not surprisingly for a man who defined the concept of friendship in his very being, Tony had a very wide circle of friends, and was deeply loved by many in the Cornell community. He was an open, authentic, and enthusiastic friend who always made people feel that he was very glad to be with them.

A passionate and energetic man with many enthusiasms—theater and movies, France and Italy, food and wine, to name a few—he brought his passion and energy as well to his friendships. His conversation with friends was always animated and often even physical. When he spoke about something he cared about (and he cared about nearly everything), he would reach out to grab you by the arm or the shoulder, as though his words had to flow from his entire being, and so that no separation would exist between you and him. If you were walking with him, his arm would go around you as he talked.

Didn't we all relish our time with him? In our mind's eye, we can see Tony's wonderful smile with which he would greet a friend while shaking one hand and giving his shoulder a warm squeeze with the other. In his book on Pirandello, Tony wrote of how Pirandello, despite his rather dark view of the world, understood the possibility of creating a rich life for oneself. Tony did Pirandello one better by creating a rich life not only for himself, but also for his family, friends, and for so many others privileged to know him.

Daniel R. Schwarz, Chairperson; Stuart Blumin; William J. Kennedy

