

# A Flowering Career

*Tony Lo Bianco portrays NYC Mayor Fiorello La Guardia in one-man show*

By ROBERT GOLOMB

**M**ulti-award-winning actor Tony Lo Bianco should be an authority on the important role that a teacher can play in the life of a student.

## REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Currently starring in the critically acclaimed one-man play, “The Little Flower,” Lo Bianco — whose 102 performances over a four-decade movie career include major or starring roles in the films *The Honey Moon Killers*, *The French Connection*, *Blood Brothers*, *The Story of Jacob and Joseph* and *Marciano* (the last one a TV movie production), and whose career in television includes starring in the iconic 1980s series *Police Story* — credits his initial interest in acting to his 11th grade English teacher in Brooklyn’s Grady Vocational High School.

“It was my wonderful teacher Patricia Jacobson who provided the spark that got me to first think about a career in acting,” said Lo Bianco, who has also directed and produced scores of hit movies, television shows and plays. Sitting comfortably in his grey club chair in the middle of his spacious living room in his Upper West Side apartment, Lo Bianco, speaking softly, described how he wound up attending a school designed almost exclusively for students with mechanical interests and abilities, although he had no interest in such studies, and described how Patricia Jacobson came to play such a decisive role in his life.

“It might seem strange to people today that a kid with no interest in anything having to do with mechanics wound up attending a vocational school,” said the actor. “But for me it was an easy decision to make. ... Grady was just a block from my house in Brooklyn and my big brother Joey was already going there. ... I come from a very close-knit Italian family. ... My two brothers, Joseph and John, and I loved doing things together. ... So at Grady it was my big brother Joseph and I. ... And although the subjects I was taking were putting me to sleep, I was still having fun while in high school. ... I starred as a first baseman on the [Grady] baseball team. ... And in my junior year, after baseball season ended, I went to



Tony Lo Bianco is currently starring in “The Little Flower” (right), a one-man show about former New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. He has acted in a number of films, including *The Story of Jacob and Joseph* (left), which was filmed in Israel during the Yom Kippur War.

Bianco won an off-Broadway Obie Award for his role as a washed up baseball pitcher in “Yanks-3, Detroit-0, Top of the Seventh.” He then moved on, in a revival of Arthur Miller’s “View from the Bridge,” playing the character Eddie Carbone, an uncle

the boxing gym in a Flatbush boys club, trained and entered the NYC Golden Gloves in 1953, I believe. Won the first fight by knockout. Lost the second by decision.”

And it was at this point in his life, Lo Bianco continued, that Jacobson began to play a prominent role in his life and dreams. Concluding that he had no future as

fatally obsessed with his teenage niece — a role for which he won an Outer Critics Circle Award and was nominated for a Tony.

Lo Bianco said that he loves performing on stage because “there are no second takes in the theater ... There is no place for missing lines or making mistakes. ... You have to get it right the first

**‘I felt that remaining in Israel would be my way of showing my support for the good, brave and courageous people of the state of Israel. If they could withstand bomb attacks, so could I.’**

either a baseball player or a boxer, Lo Bianco began to listen to Jacobson, who had been telling him for a while that she believed he had natural acting ability. At her suggestion, he entered and won a class drama contest, and then entered and won a school drama contest, and finally entered and won a borough-wide drama contest. “I owed this success to Mrs. Jacobson,” Lo Bianco, his voice now more animated, told me. “She selected the passages from the dramatic works I read for the competition. ... She also helped supply me with the belief that I could become an actor if I worked hard and always strove for perfection.”

Movie and television fans and critics have seen that dramatic perfection Jacobson first instilled in him in high school, played out on the small and large screens over the span of his long career. And so have theatergoers and theater critics. In the early 1980s, Lo

time. ... It often brings out the best in an actor.”

**B**ased on the rave reviews he has received to date, what has arguably brought out the best in Tony Lo Bianco has been his performance in the role of Republican New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia in “The Little Flower.” The play (which I had the pleasure to see in Manhattan’s Dicapo Theater) is set in Mayor La Guardia’s City Hall Office on December 31, 1945, the final day of his three terms in office. Those 12 years, 1934-1945, saw the middle to the end of the Depression and spanned the events leading up to, and the fighting and winning of, World War II.

In this one-character production, La Guardia, as played by Lo Bianco — who also wrote, produced and directed the play — reminisces about the tragedies he endured in his life, (he lost his 1-and-a-half year old daughter to spinal meningi-



tis and lost his wife six months later to tuberculosis. He later remarried and adopted two children;) details his political career leading up to his election as mayor, (he rose up through the ranks of Republican

and whose father was a Catholic of Italian heritage, also reminisces about the role the mayor’s Jewish roots played in his life and political career, as the actor dramatized an ethnic tale indigenous to the New



**Tony Lo Bianco**  
as Joseph in “Jacob and Joseph”  
**I Stand with Israel**

politics, moving from city alderman to New York City attorney general to congressman;) recounts his support of President Roosevelt during the turbulent and tragic years of the Depression and World War II, (he was an outspoken supporter of both Roosevelt’s New Deal economic program and the war;) and lists his greatest accomplishments as mayor (among many other achievements, he reorganized the New York City Police Department, created a merit-based civil service system and led a successful fight against the rampant political corruption that had plagued the city for half a century).

Lo Bianco in the role of La Guardia, whose mother was Jewish

York City of almost a century ago.

First elected to Congress as a Republican in 1916 and re-elected in 1918 and 1920, La Guardia in 1922 faced a Jewish challenger who had been supported by the infamously corrupt Tammany Hall, which, presumably unaware of La Guardia’s then-mostly-unknown Jewish heritage, circulated a flyer throughout the district accusing him of being an anti-Semite. Rejecting as self-serving the suggestion by his advisors that he simply declare that his mother was Jewish, La Guardia instead called on his opponent to debate him in Yiddish. Unable to speak Yiddish, (unlike La Guardia,) continued on page 21



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his opponent refused the challenge, and the Little Flower went on to be re-elected.

Lo Bianco's Little Flower also reflects on how he used the platform of the mayor's office to alert the then-pre-war America of Hitler's plans to annihilate European Jewry. (The Nazi-controlled German press called La Guardia a "Dirty Talmud Jew," a "shameless Jewish lout" and a "warmonger.")

While not included in the play, the horror of the Nazis' war against the Jews eventually impacted tragically upon the La Guardia family. While teaching in Europe, La Guardia's sister, Gemma, married Herman Gluck, a Hungarian Jew. When the Nazis took control of Budapest in 1944, Gemma and Herman were arrested as Jews and deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Herman was murdered there. Gemma, who while interred in Budapest was identified by Adolph Eichman and Heinrich Himmler as La Guardia's sister and was labeled by them to be a political prisoner — miraculously survived. Upon her death in Queens in 1962 at the age

brother-in-law of the man whose life and career I portray on stage, was a real human being who was murdered by the Nazis. ... It is beyond the ability of the human mind to conceive, I believe, that there were six million Jewish men, women, girls and boys slaughtered by the Nazis as the world looked on in silence."

Lo Bianco's connection with the Jewish people goes beyond playing the role of a legendary mayor born to a Jewish mother, into playing a real role in the life of the State of Israel some 41 years ago. Lo Bianco said that upon his arrival at Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport on Yom Kippur, Oct. 6, 1973 to perform the role of Joseph in the movie *The Story of Jacob and Joseph*, scheduled to start filming the next day, he was greeted by the sounds of rockets and air raid sirens. As Lo Bianco was to quickly learn, the Yom Kippur War had just begun. "The producer and his staff advised all the actors to get on the next plane and go home. I wouldn't hear of it," Lo Bianco remembered. "I felt that remaining in Israel would be my way of showing my support for the good, brave and courageous people of the state of Israel. If they could withstand bomb attacks, so could I. We started and finished the film while the war was being fought. Thank God Israel prevailed."

During the 19 days that the Yom Kippur War, which claimed more than 2,500 Israeli lives, was being fought, Lo Bianco would leave the movie set to go to Israeli television studios to be on the air, he said, "to speak directly to the Israeli people to assure them that they had my support and prayers and the support of millions of Americans like me, and that they with the help of God would win the war."

I returned to La Guardia and "The Little Flower," asking the actor if there was a lesson from La Guardia's leadership and the times in which he lived that can be applied to America today. "Yes," he quickly answered. "We faced terrible enemies who wanted to destroy America then, and we face terrible enemies who want to destroy us today. ... While the economic problems of today do not compare to those of the Depression, we still live in what are difficult economic times for many of our citizens. ... The lesson we should draw from the times of Roosevelt and La Guardia is that America can defeat any enemy and overcome any economic challenge if we stay strong as a nation and united as a people. And we also need great leaders like Roosevelt

Lo Bianco speaks at a rally protesting the Metropolitan Opera's staging of "The Death of Klinghoffer," held on Sept. 22.

and La Guardia."

When not on regional tours with "The Little Flower," which takes him to theaters and entertainment centers from New York to New Jersey, South Carolina and Florida, Lo Bianco, the father of three grown daughters and six grandchildren, said he tries to spend as much time as possible with his family.

While at first reticent about dis-



cussing it, Lo Bianco devotes a good deal of his time to charities. The actor has a long history of involvement with foundations seeking treatment and cures for juvenile diabetes, Cooley's Anemia and

lupus. A passionate advocate for our veterans and our active service men and women, Lo Bianco has also volunteered his time on behalf of the USO, the Wounded Warriors and Building Homes for Heroes organizations. "We want to continue," he said, "to do every thing possible to support our wounded veterans and all our uniformed heroes who keep us safe and make America the greatest country in the world."

I left "The Little Flower" thinking Lo Bianco is a great actor, and left the interview believing he is also a great guy.

Robert Golomb is a nationally published columnist.

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of 81, she remained the only American-born woman known to have been imprisoned at a Nazi concentration camp.

When I mentioned La Guardia's sister and brother-in-law to Lo Bianco, he told me that he was already aware of them, having first learned of their tragic story while doing research for the writing of the play. "It was just another sad, painful reminder to me of the horrors that have been inflicted upon the Jewish people during the Holocaust and throughout the ages," he said. "Herman Gluck, the



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