

Southampton Press

John Monteleone

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By Renee Schilhab Gordon

Leaning forward in a chair in his living room in Sag Harbor, John Monteleone is talking a mile a minute, gesturing, making faces and stabbing the air with his finger.

Mr. Monteleone is a man who has a lot to say, and he says it in machine-gun style. The 36-year-old actor, playwright and screenwriter who moved here from Centereach last month because he liked the area's scenic beauty and less frantic pace, spoke in an interview last week about the acting classes he plans to give here, his desire to get involved in the local arts community, and the ideas he tries to convey in his writing.

An artist-in-residence and adjunct professor at Dowling College in Oakdale, where he teaches acting and produces and directs plays, Mr. Monteleone says that the truths he has learned throughout his life are a focus of his plays.

High on the list of those truths is the belief that society loses a sense of community, caring and identity when individuals shed their roots or backgrounds and become more alike. Another idea is that some of society's ills, such as poverty, homelessness and crime, could be solved if people were more aware of others and the nature of other people's problems.

Asked where he gets his ideas, Mr. Monteleone lets loose with a boisterous laugh. "I don't know," he said, taking an uncharacteristic pause to think about it, "I guess I write to get things off my chest."

An imposing presence at six-foot-one, Mr. Monteleone sports a beard, wire-rimmed glasses and wavy black hair that falls to his shoulders. Without really resembling either one, he calls to mind Richard Lewis, the comedian and actor, and actor Al Pacino, whom he admires but resists comparisons to.

Since 1985, Mr. Monteleone has been teaching acting at Dowling College. As the

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college's artist-in-residence, he produces and directs his own plays as well as classic and contemporary works, sometimes performing in them. His job at Dowling seems similar in some respects to playwright and director Jon Fraser's post at the Southampton Campus of LIU.

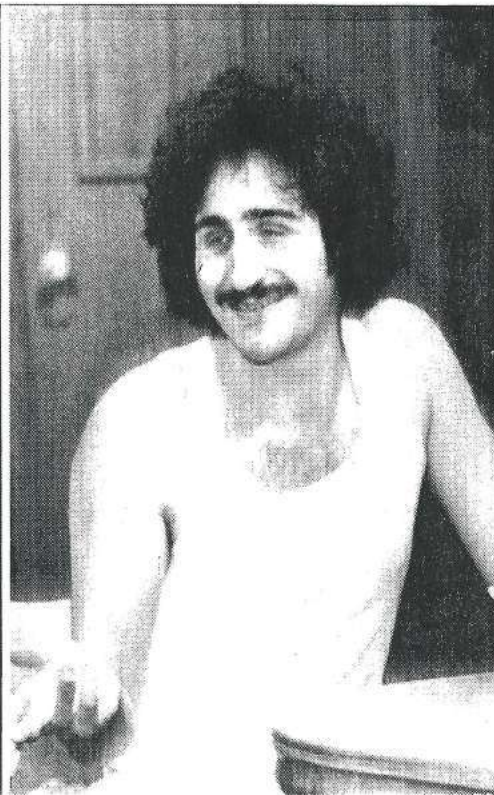
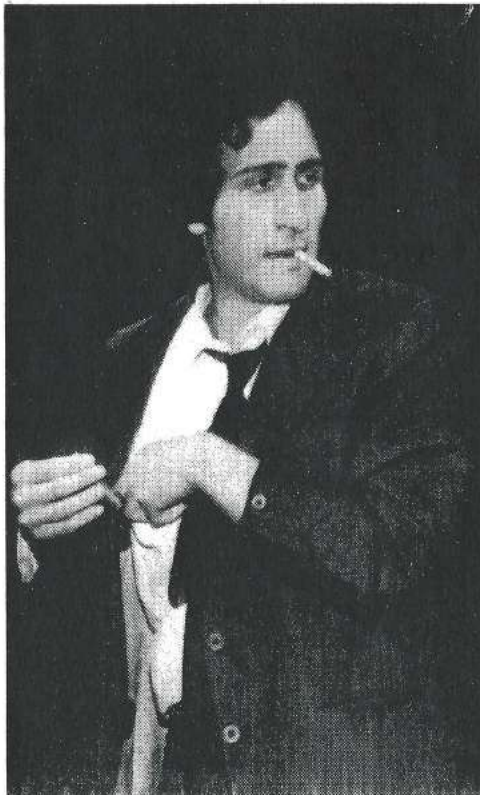
In addition to having appeared in more than 40 productions, in venues ranging from off-Broadway to schools, he has written a screenplay, "The Garden," about a man and a woman who learn to appreciate themselves, others and nature, and authored 14 plays—of which a half-dozen have been staged, including "The Box," "Homesick," and "Charade."

His stage adaptation of "The Diary of a Madman," based on Nikolai Gogol's classic short story and produced at the college, earned rave reviews from *The New York Times*. In what was called a "powerful" solo performance, Mr. Monteleone played a civil servant who struggles to preserve his dignity as he descends into madness. The actor later staged and videotaped the play at The Theatre Row Theatre in Manhattan and is now trying to sell the tape.

"Mr. Monteleone meets the almost impossible task of portraying a demented man who is sinking into the quagmire of hopeless melancholia by finding out elements of humor that fit like pegs between layers of tragedy. There is no time when Mr. Monteleone steps across the boundary between performance integrity and excess," Leah D. Frank wrote in *The Times*.

Mr. Monteleone, who has taught private acting classes before, is now gearing up to offer acting classes on the South Fork. But that isn't all he wants to accomplish here. He also wants to act, produce his plays at local venues, collaborate with local artists, and produce films. Especially captivated by the thought of the famous artists who currently have homes or once resided here, he mentioned the late novelist John Steinbeck at the top of a list that could include such other notables as the novelist Peter Matthiessen and the playwrights Edward Albee and Joe Pintauro.

Currently, there are acting classes taught by Mindy Washington at the Southampton Village Cultural and Civic Center for those who want to study the craft. The only other place for acting lessons accessible for East End thespians is at the Gateway Theater in Bellport.



A few of the many faces of actor and playwright John Monteleone: clockwise from upper left, in "Design for Murder," "December in New York," "The General and the Jew," "The Zoo Story" and "The Diary of a Madman." Mr. Monteleone, who recently moved to Sag Harbor, currently teaches drama and mounts productions at Dowling College in Oakdale.

"I really want to work out here," he said. "I can't stress enough that I'd like to get involved in the artistic community."

Friend's Death Led to First Role

Mr. Monteleone was born in North Babylon, the only child of an Italian-born mother who sang opera at Carnegie Hall and a second-generation Italian father whose eclectic work history included stints as a paint store owner, barber and shoe salesman.

During the 11th grade, Mr. Monteleone's depression over the death of a close friend who accidentally drowned propelled him himself by trying out for a school production of the 1920s musical "Good News." He won the role of the Irishman "Pooch Kearney" and his spirited performance earned raves from his teachers and friends.

"I discovered I had talent. A feeling told me I was attracted to acting," he said.

Armed with a theatre scholarship after graduation, he entered the drama program at Dowling College, where his mentor was Ned Bobkoff, who worked in the 1960s at the experimental La Mama theatre in New York City. For his performance at the school as Yank Smith in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape," he won the semi-regional finals in the American College Theatre Festival. Yet despite such early successes, he grew frustrated with the limited scope of Dowling's drama program. After two years, he left to study at the Tisch School of the Arts in Manhattan.

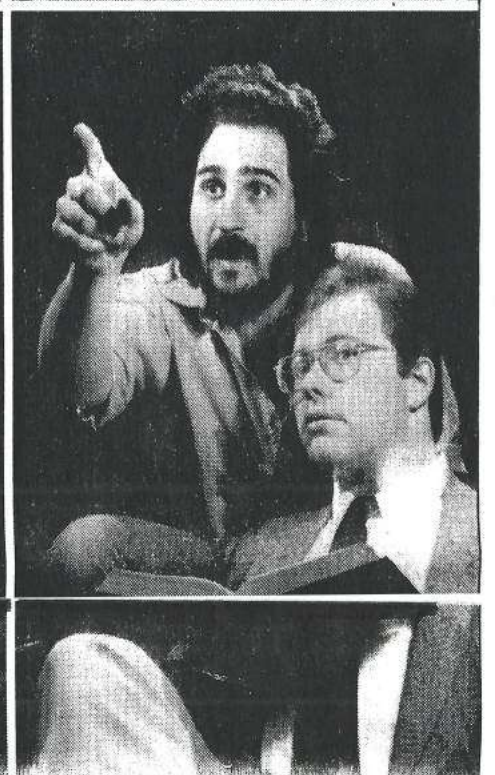
At Tisch, his interest in drama flourished. In an intensive program he likened to "boot camp," he studied acting, singing, dancing, voice and movement and performed in plays including "The Dragon," "Geography of a Horse Dreamer," and "Monkey." His teachers included such notable talents as Joseph Chaiken, founder of the Open Theatre in Manhattan in the 1960s, the director Robert MacBeth, and acting instructor Peter Kass.

After his graduation from Tisch with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Mr. Monteleone worked in the theatre in New York City, primarily in off-off-Broadway plays including "The Butler Did It." In classic actors' fashion, he earned a living by waiting tables, answering telephones, pumping gas, and running an elevator at NYU.

But by 1983, increasingly dissatisfied with the "dumb Italian street type" roles he was getting, and concerned about his mother who was ill on Long Island, he packed up and moved to Farmingdale, where he started his own acting school. He also began in earnest to write plays with meatier roles for himself.

Themes of Transformation, Growth

Inspired by playwrights such as Sam Shepard and Samuel Beckett, by his own observations, and even by news reports on television, Mr. Monteleone writes about forgiveness, alienation, the disintegration of the family and transforming oneself through increased awareness. Some of his plays have farcical elements, and all are laced with symbolism, comedy and tragedy.

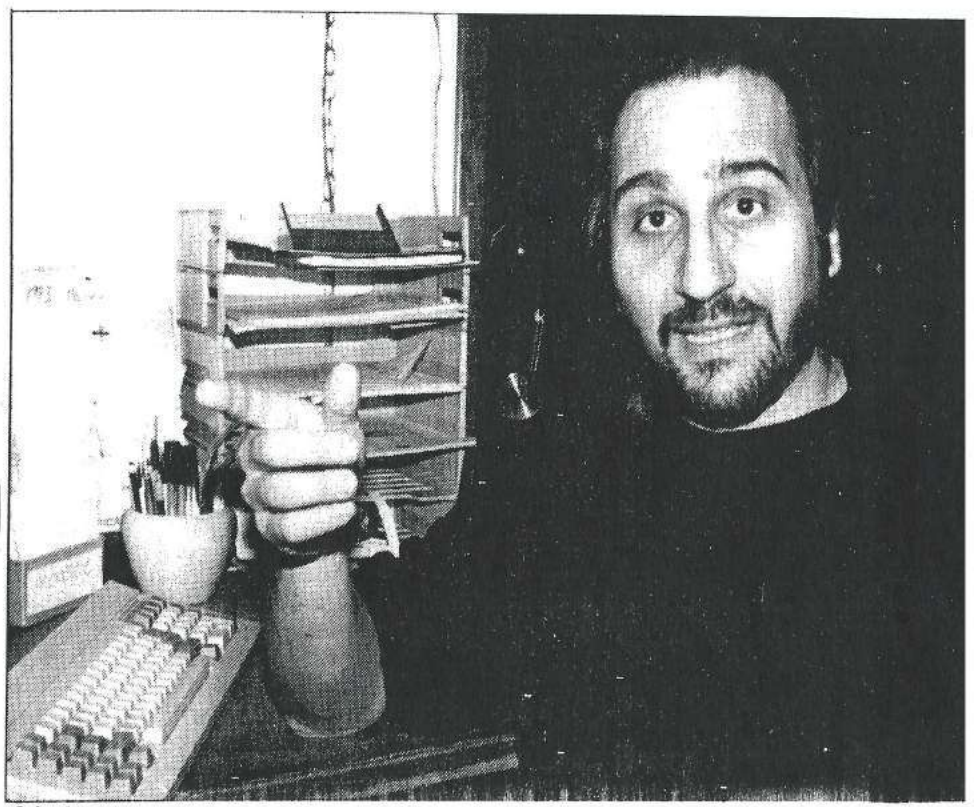


His contemporary comedy "Farmland," about real estate foreclosures in the farming community, is a metaphor, he says, for purity and how bureaucracy can cause a person to lose dignity. "Home," an absurdist one-act play, explores the modern family in the context of an increasingly frightening world.

One of the actor's own realizations greatly influenced his work. Raised to view himself as an Italian-American with strong ties to the Catholic church, he later discovered he could reject such values and adopt a set of his own. This discovery prompted him to write "Homesick," a one-act play about a dysfunctional family (not his own, he says) and a young man who seeks his identity.

Writing nearly every day in the home where he and his wife Carol have a sweeping view of Sag Harbor Cove, Mr. Monteleone also spends a lot of time on the phone, getting information about local theatre companies, offering to do readings of his plays at local establishments, and inquiring about the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor, where he said he would love to work.

"It seems like there's definitely something going on in theatre here," he said. "It's not middle-of-the-road Long Island looking for musicals, mysteries and farce. People are sophisticated, and there's real potential for interesting theatre."



John Monteleone makes a point during an interview at his Sag Harbor home.

—RSG Photo