

SIDE STREET

## *A Role That Blurs the Line Between Drama and Reality*



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David Gonzalez/The New York Times

By **David Gonzalez**

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Grandma Angelina Nunzio weaves through Times Square in her wheelchair, pushed by a rubber-faced, spiky-haired groomsman and trailed by dozens of revelers on their way to a wedding reception. Like a queen with a scepter, she waves a cane with a dangling red plastic horn.

“Touch the horn!” she shouts to puzzled passers-by. “Touch it! It’s good luck in Sicily.”

The procession makes its way down to a basement banquet room on 44th Street. Grandma, rejuvenated, goes from table to table, hugging, kissing, joking. To some, she leans in and confesses: “You know, I’ve never been sick a day in my life. Never.”

That is acting.

Grandma is the stout, earthy matriarch of the Nunzio family, one of the clans being united in “[Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding](#),” the Off Broadway show in which the audience members are treated as guests of the families. But [Annie Lanzilotto](#), who portrays her, has not been as lucky with her own health as Grandma has with hers. For the last 33 years she has been a “cancer person,” as she called herself, starting with a diagnosis of Hodgkin’s lymphoma when she was 18 and thyroid cancer in 1997. In January, a tumor was removed from her armpit.

Her immune system is compromised. Her resolve is not.

“It’s healing to say I’ve never been sick and believe it,” she said.

“I’ve thought a lot about what I want to do with my God-given time. I can’t retreat into isolation and live a protected life because I might get sick from being in touch with people.

“At this point in my life as a New Yorker,” she continued, “I’d rather risk interacting with hundreds of people than retreat to some imaginary zone where I have less contact and am supposedly protected.”

Joe Corcoran, the original producer of “Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding,” can relate, because he survived lung cancer. He had been gearing up to mount a 25th anniversary run when he met Ms. Lanzillo through his wife, who had taken a theater workshop with her. They hit it off.

“We had similar journeys,” he said. “We immediately connected.”

For all the show’s over-the-top antics, what he and the cast most aim for is to blur reality and drama.

“The show is about intimacy,” he said. “Annie connects. It’s not just this crazy wedding, but how we relate to each other. We’re all regular people who want the best for our family.”

Regular is relative. The show is a familiar flashback for anyone whose grandparents came from the hills of Sicily or Puerto Rico and settled into Bronx apartments where the furniture was sheathed in plastic, or bought boxy brick houses with tiny backyard gardens. Where Sunday meals were an all-day affair conducted in two languages. You can relate if you ever went to a reception at Luigi's in the Bronx — or Alex and Henry's in Scarsdale, for the social combers among you — where waiters emerged from the kitchen swirling through the crowds holding plates aloft while the band played "Volare."

Ms. Lanzillotto, 50, drew deep on her experiences to play Grandma, basing the character on her grandmother, mother and "every tough woman I knew growing up in the Bronx," she said. Inside her beaded purse, Grandma carries a flip-out folder of old pictures, some of Ms. Lanzillotto's actual relatives, as well as condoms and a bag of butterscotch candies.

"Some people cry when they get the candy," she said. "It reminds them of childhood."

She goes even deeper to explain that kind of reaction. She sees the play as akin to *commedia dell'arte*, a form of Italian theater in which actors assume — or "inherit," she said — a role, are presented with a situation and then improvise. She is fond of talking about one famous figure in *commedia*, Pulcinella, a beak-nosed, black-masked character dressed in white.

“Pulcinella cries after eating pasta,” Ms. Lanzillotto said. “You don’t know why, but he does. I tried to do it as Grandma, and it’s difficult. I aspire to do that one day at the reception, when she’ll sit down and cry when the pasta evokes her dead husband or the gravy evokes the ancestors.”

That’s if she sits down. During the reception, she spends most of it going from table to table, talking with total strangers. She hauls people out of their chairs and onto the dance floor. Bathed in colored lights, they twirl, laugh and hug.

There have been quiet moments, too, when she sits alongside someone whose health or energy was sapped. “Having dealt with cancer for 33 years, I’m attuned to people at the reception who have scars, who have vulnerabilities,” Ms. Lanzillotto said. “I know suffering. I know vulnerability.”

Her encounters — on the dance floor or at a table — end the same way. With a smile, she walks off, shouting above the music, “I love you!”

**She’s not acting. She’s living.**

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