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Gay City
NEWS

Sleeping with a Celebrity

Frank Merlo, Tennessee Williams' partner, gets his story told



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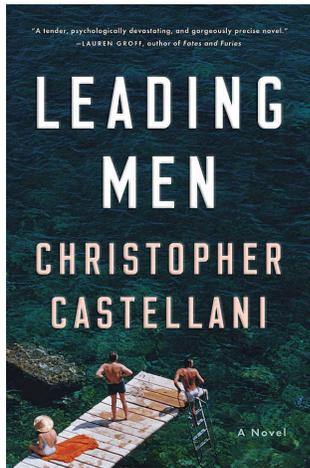
Christopher Castellani talks about “Leading Men” at Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan earlier this month.

BY GEORGE DE STEFANO

“Leading Men,” the acclaimed new novel by Christopher Castellani, is the author’s fourth. But, as he told an audience at his March 7 reading at the Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan, he considers it his first, or rather, “the first that was fully imagined.” His previous books (“A Kiss from Maddalena,” “The Saint of Lost Things,” and “All this Talk of Love”) formed a trilogy inspired by the gay author’s Italian immigrant parents and their travels to their home village in south-central Italy.

Castellani’s latest is a speculative fiction about the intertwined lives of playwright Tennessee Williams, his partner Frank Merlo, and a young Swedish woman, Anja Blomgren, whom Williams and Merlo befriend while on holiday in the Italian resort town of Portofino. Of the book’s major characters, Anja is the only fictional creation; other real-life figures who play significant supporting roles include Truman Capote and his partner Jack Dunphy; the American

author John Horne Burns; and two titans of Italian cinema, actress Anna Magnani and director Luchino Visconti.



The narrative alternates between 1953, when Williams and Merlo are on holiday in Italy; 1963, as Merlo is dying from lung cancer in New York City; and the present, when an elderly Anja, who, as Anja Bloom, enjoyed a successful career as a film actress, agrees to direct a production in Provincetown of “Call it Joy,” Williams’ unproduced final play. The playwright bequeathed it to Anja shortly before he died, and she has not shown it to anyone in more than 30 years. The play is entirely Castellani’s invention, and it is meant to be bad, a failed “act of penance” by Williams to atone for his sins of neglect and cruelty toward the working-class, Sicilian-American truckdriver from New Jersey with whom he shared his life for 15 years.

“Leading Men” gestated for 20 years, Castellani told me during an interview before his Calandra Institute appearance. In 1999, he wrote a short story about Williams and Merlo while working on his master of fine arts degree. “It was the best short story I wrote in my MFA program, which isn’t saying much because I wrote mostly terrible stories. I thought it worked well enough, but there was so much more about their relationship that I wanted to dive into. And I thought the only way that I could really tell that story was through a novel.”

Even before he wrote the short story, Castellani was fascinated by the Williams-Merlo partnership and particularly drawn to Merlo. In a bookstore in his hometown, Wilmington, Delaware, Castellani came across “Tennessee: Cry of the Heart,” Dotson Rader’s 1985 memoir about his friendship with the playwright. Reading the book, Castellani “fell in love” with Merlo.

“I really saw myself in him. I’m a working-class Italian American gay guy from Delaware, and he was a working-class Italian American gay guy from Jersey. And I just really identified with his being in a world where he had to try to find his place. And I felt that way my whole life in academia. I always felt like the working-class dago, like I was this close to being called out for not being smart enough and not being elite enough to be there.

“I wondered if Merlo felt the same way in that different world of famous actors and playwrights. How did he navigate his way through that world? And so, I fell in love with him in that way, in the sense that I identified with him, but I also fell in love with the kind of devotion that he had to

Williams. And I do believe that he loved him. And I do believe in the alchemy that they had, and it thrilled me that it gave rise to so much great work.”

Merlo inspired the character of Alvaro Mangiacavallo, the passionate Sicilian truckdriver who romances the widow Serafina Delle Rose in Williams’ 1951 play (and its 1955 film adaptation), “The Rose Tattoo.” (Mangiacavallo means “eat a horse,” and Williams’ nickname for his short and physically robust lover was Little Horse.) But other than that, he wasn’t Williams’ muse. Besides being the playwright’s partner, he was his secretary and general factotum, a salaried employee. (He also received a percentage of the royalties from “The Rose Tattoo” until his death.) “Frank was the one who ironed the shirts and Frank was the one who booked the tickets on their trips and Frank was the one who made sure they had a hotel room,” Castellani said.

“Frank was the rock, the emotionally stable one, who would talk Williams down when he got a bad review, when he was on some hypochondriacal freak out, which was almost daily. When he didn’t have his pills, when he was drinking too much. As Williams described him, he ‘tied me down to earth.’ Of course, when Frank was gone, he floated away.”

Williams, Castellani noted, wrote all his best plays while with Merlo; he never had another hit after Merlo’s death.

There is a famous, factual anecdote about Merlo and his relationship with Williams that Castellani has included in “Leading Men.” When movie mogul Jack Warner asked Merlo what he did, he replied, “I sleep with Mr. Williams.” But Merlo aspired to something more than being the lover of a celebrated playwright. Before he met Williams, he had played small parts in B-movies.

“Frank did have his own dreams, his own aspirations,” Castellani observed. “He did want to have an acting career. But he couldn’t quite make it happen. It’s hard to know whether his own career didn’t happen because Williams was being vampiric and taking so much of him away from himself or whether he simply just didn’t have the talent and the drive. My interpretation was that he did want to have his own career, he wanted to be a successful artist, but he didn’t want it enough. He didn’t have the passion, the true passion for art that Williams did.”

In one of the most inspired, and ultimately heartbreaking, of Castellani’s inventions, Williams tries to fulfill Merlo’s acting dreams — and demonstrate his love and gratitude—by getting him a small part in “Senso,” the 1954 Luchino Visconti film for which Williams actually wrote dialogue. Merlo performs well, but his scene is cut from the film. A crushed Merlo blames not Visconti but Williams, his anger and resentment further undermining their troubled relationship.

“Leading Men” is an audacious novel; it invents characters and incidents, as well as Tennessee Williams’ final play. Did its author ever feel some trepidation in doing so?

“Actually, no. That’s not to say I wasn’t intimidated by the figures that I was trying to bring to life, but I never felt like I had no right to do it. I have a mentor, the novelist Thomas Mallon. So many of his novels have famous people as characters, and he always says that in the phrase

‘historical fiction,’ the noun always trumps the adjective. So, I’m writing fiction; I’m writing a novel.

“Yes, they’re real people, but it’s my interpretation. So, I feel like I have as much of a right to interpret these characters as anyone else does. I’m not writing a biography. I hope that people will read the book and be inspired to read a biography of Williams to learn a more about the real Frank Merlo and Truman Capote and all these people.” (Besides Dotson Rader’s book, Castellani also drew on “Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh,” the excellent biography by John Lahr.) “I was intimidated by things like dialogue, to try to capture the incredible wit and intelligence and sharpness of these characters, especially Capote and Williams. So, I was like, am I up to that? I did the best I could with that, but that’s the kind of thing that intimidated me, not the validity of the process in general.”

Although “Leading Men” is fiction, Castellani said he “was very careful to make sure that everything in this book could have happened.” Williams and Merlo were in Portofino in 1953 and Capote did invite them to a party while he and Dunphy were staying in the coastal town. There is no record, however, in Williams’ diary or letters, that they actually accepted the invitation. Castellani places them at the party, where they meet two vacationing Swedish women, Bitte Blomgren and her daughter Anja. Both women are having sex with a rough-trade fisherman, which becomes hot gossip among the foreigners and the locals. (Castellani discovered this real-life scandal in Capote’s diaries.) Williams and Merlo befriend Anja, who travels with them to visit author Burns and his Italian lover, Sandro, in a coastal town north of Portofino. There they are attacked by a gang of feral youths in a powerfully rendered and terrifying scene that, in the novel’s fictive world, will provide the inspiration for the ritualistic — and cannibalistic—murder of Sebastian Venable in Williams’ “Suddenly Last Summer.”

Anja later joins Williams and Merlo in Rome, where she meets Magnani and, in one of the novel’s most memorable episodes, enjoys a night on the town with her friends at a restaurant owned by one of Magnani’s ex-lovers. That night she also meets Martin Hovland, the Swedish film director who will make her an international star.

Castellani said that he originally didn’t plan to make Anja, a straight woman, a central character.

“Before Anja was a character, the novel was just about four men” (Williams and Merlo; Burns and Sandro). “It was going to be told from Frank’s perspective in alternating chapters with Sandro’s perspective about his relationship [with Burns]. It was going to be like a compare and contrast. But that construction was just too neat and tidy and sort of claustrophobic. So, I needed something to shake it up, which is when Anja came into the picture.”

In the present, Anja Bloom, in her 70s and retired from acting, lives alone in New York; her longtime partner, a university professor, has recently died. Lonely and friendless, she aimlessly walks the city streets at night. Anja was inspired by Liv Ullman, and her professional and personal relationship with Hovland recalls Ullman’s with her director and partner Ingmar Bergman. The key to Castellani’s portrayal of the older Anja came in a chance encounter with Ullman at a party in Boston, where Castellani lives. He approached her and they began to talk

about writing. Ullman asked him what he was working on and he told her about “Leading Men.” She then “told me this great story about meeting Tennessee in the ‘70s.

“I asked her about her life, and she said, ‘I divide my time between Boston and Palm Beach.’ And then she said, ‘when I’m in Boston, I don’t have many friends. And I just end up wandering the streets at night in the snow.’”

In Italy, Merlo and the young Anja become intimate; there even is a frisson of sexual attraction in their relationship, although it is never acted on. Is Castellani saying something about relationships between gay men and straight women?

“Definitely. I wanted to get at just how important straight women have been to gay men, but not like, ‘my bestie.’ I wanted to get at the complicated dynamic they have. But more than that, I wanted Anja to achieve the fame that Frank longed so much. If Frank had become famous, what would it have been like for him? And, so she’s kind of a foil for him in that way.

“Because of that, I think she could see him the most clearly. She has her own story, but her sections of the book are really about Frank on some level and her wanting to bring him back into the light and wanting to resurrect or resuscitate him. Just to give him his due, I guess you could say.”

LEADING MEN | [By Christopher Castellani](#) | Viking | 368 pages