

NICK MANCUSO

Feeding Caviar to the Masses

B Y H A R V E Y F . C H A R T R A N D

Nick Mancuso admits to being “dead bored with acting” in a string of straight-to-video features, so he is stretching himself creatively by writing and performing in one-man shows he calls “psychologues.” Between steady film and TV appearances, Mancuso is rehearsing for *OS*, a multimedia presentation of his epic poems *In the Domain of the Ordinary*. “I hope to do a one- to three-week, out-of-town tryout in Toronto before taking it to New York City,” Mancuso says. “I’m trying to raise money to go in October 2002, depending on whether my current TV series, *Call of the Wild*, gets picked up next April.

“These ‘psychologues’ are in the bardic tradition of the ode. They’re poems, written in verse in the first person, elegiac in format. I gave eight performances of my first psychologue, *Hotel Praha*, at Theatre Passe Muraille back in 1999. People who saw it dug it, which was great, because I expected them not to. They really got into it, but of course it got shitty reviews, because you always get shitty reviews in Canada, unless you do something completely middle-of-the-road or you do it in New York and London and the critics liked it there first.” Mancuso calls his psychologues “a kind of Bromo-Seltzer for the soul”; projects that keep him fresh creatively, to counteract the steady stream of formula pictures he has to make to pay the bills.

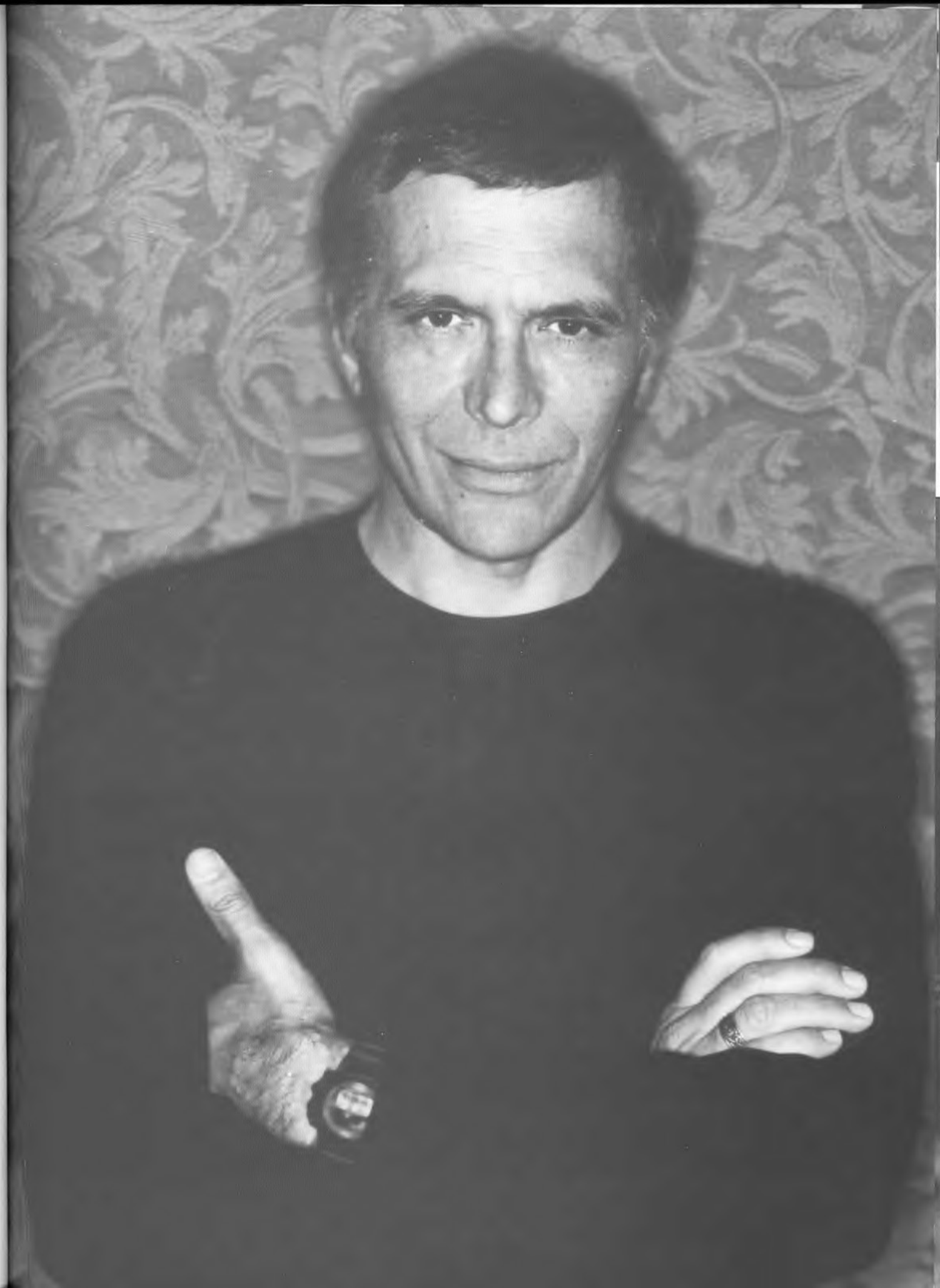
Fellow Toronto actor Saul Rubinek, Mancuso’s close friend for 30 years, says that, “Nick is a very intense and interesting person, who is always searching and exploring, and that intensity has got him into as much trouble as it hasn’t. It’s his blessing and his curse. But I would also say that Nick is an unsung national treasure.” Legendary Hollywood producer Roger Corman, who produced *Dark Prince* in 1996 with Mancuso playing the lead as the notorious Marquis de Sade, says, “Nick is a very versatile actor on whom I feel I can depend on throughout the production. He knows the character, he understands the film, and he delivers. In other words, he’s smart, talented and professional.”

If you wanted to do theatre in Canada in the early 1960s, it helped if you had a British accent. For an Italian kid who grew up in Toronto after his family emigrated to Canada in 1956 – he was born Nicodemo Antonio Massimo Mancuso in Calabria – it was tough getting noticed in the clubby, Anglo world of Canadian theatre. Mancuso was told that he was a diamond in the rough, that he could never do Shakespeare or Shaw. “What they meant by that was I could never do Shaw like these third-rate alcoholic Brits we’d bring over to put on the boards,” says Mancuso.

By the late 1960s, Mancuso had joined a group of luminaries such as actors Rubinek, R. H. Thomson, Maury Chaykin, Jackie Burroughs, and producer/directors such as Ken Gass, Paul Thompson, Martin Kinch and Bill Glassco. They ushered in Toronto’s underground theatre movement, leaving in their wake Theatre Passe Muraille, Tarragon, Toronto Free Theatre and Factory Theatre Lab, showcasing contemporary Canadian plays in which actors forsook the grand manner to give nuanced and realistic performances. Out of this counter-cultural ferment came such playwrights as Jim Garrard, George Walker, Carol Bolt, Michael Hollingsworth and Michael Ondaatje, who wrote *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in which Mancuso appeared as Billy in the original Toronto version in 1973 directed by Kinch. “It was a Canadian explosion, an extraordinary group of amazingly talented people, all of whom went on to international prominence of one kind or another,” Mancuso reflects.

In 1975, Mancuso moved on to Stratford, where his performance as Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* opposite Maggie Smith drew excellent notices from Walter Kerr, the legendary drama critic of *The New York Times*. “Kerr said I managed to lay to rest the curse that had been put on this role for over 250 years, that I had cracked the code of a monologue that was said to be incomprehensible.” Because of Kerr’s review, Eleanor Kilgallen, then head of casting at Universal, flew up to Stratford to meet Mancuso. “The Americans just opened the

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With Kim Basinger in *Mother Lode*.



doors and said 'come on in.' The next thing I know, ABC is offering me \$10,000 not to sign with NBC or CBS. I had become, without my being aware of it, a hot commodity, in Hollywood parlance. Come pilot season, they'd fly me to L.A. to meet some producers at ABC."

Mancuso worked with producer Stephen J. Cannell on *Dr. Scorpion* (1976), a failed series pilot recycled as a movie-of-the-week. Mancuso played a master-of-disguise private eye, a forerunner of his *Stingray* character a decade later. *Nightwing* (1979) was Mancuso's first big Hollywood picture, produced by Martin Ransohoff, directed by fellow Canadian Arthur Hiller, with a script by Steve Shagan, still

hot from *Save the Tiger*, and adapted from the Martin Cruz Smith novel. *Nightwing* co-starred David Warner, Kathryn Harrold and Strother Martin. Music was by Henry Mancini. Because he thought the script "sucked" and feared being miscast, Mancuso only reluctantly accepted the lead role of an Indian sheriff in this horror tale of killer bats in New Mexico. "*Nightwing* was supposed to have been a blockbuster hit - *Jaws* on wings, Marty called it before it opened. What it was instead was a giant straw pancake, running about a week-and-a-half before they pulled it. Guess who got the blame? It wasn't Henry *Moon River* Mancini!" *Nightwing* opened to dismal reviews. "I saw it in a Canadian screening room," Mancuso remembers. "After the movie was over, somebody from the back of the cinema shouted: 'When's the movie start?'"

In the summer of 1980, Mancuso returned to Canada to give one of his finest performances in Ralph L. Thomas's *Ticket to Heaven*, the story of an insecure young man brainwashed by a religious cult, then kidnapped and deprogrammed. "I played a guy who became like a concentration camp inmate. Saul Rubinek was cast as my best friend, Kim Cattrall, as the cult's chief recruiter, and R. H. Thomson, as the deprogrammer. Nobody knew what to make of *Ticket*, and it's now a cult movie classic, which I guess makes it a cult-cult film. But it died a horrible box-office death, in spite of making the Ten Best List in the *Los Angeles Times*."

Ticket to Heaven garnered great reviews, which seems to have taken its Canadian producers by surprise. "They didn't know how to capitalize on it. I remember watching the president of the Golden Globes coming out after a screening of the picture. I thought he hated it. Instead, he shook his head in dismay. 'We would have nominated you for a Golden Globe,' he told me, 'but the Canadians waited too long and too late to screen it. All the submissions are already in and the jury has left.' So I missed a Golden Globe nomination because somebody forgot to put stamps on the letter." Although, Mancuso did win a Best Actor Genie Award for his acting tour-de-force performance in 1982.

Ticket to Heaven had a strange impact on Mancuso's career. "A wealthy Texan woman said to me at the USA Film Festival [the original Sundance]: 'What are you doing a film like this for? You've got a face that belongs on a Roman coin.' On the outside, I guess I looked like a brooding 'Heathcliff', as Pauline Kael said about me in *The New Yorker*, but inside, I felt like Woody Allen. *Ticket* was a turning point till the *Stingray* years. It marked me as an eccentric actor and more or less permanently dampened my leading-man possibilities. The emotions I portrayed were too strong. America doesn't like spice or garlic on its movie-going plate."

Mancuso went on to portray François Paradis, the intrepid "man of the woods" in Gilles Carle's Quebec classic, *Maria Chapdelaine* (1983), starring Carol Laure in the title role. *Maria Chapdelaine* made the National Board of Review's Ten Best List, and Mancuso was nominated again for a Best Actor Genie Award, but this time he lost out to newcomer Eric Fryer who played Fox in *The Terry Fox Story*. "Magic realism is what Gilles was shooting for," Mancuso says. "*Maria Chapdelaine* was very original, because it came from the Québécois ethos. It was part of a wave of world-class, original Quebec cinema." The film was shot at Lac Baskatong, 644 kilometres north of Montreal. Mancuso shot the summer scenes first, travelled to Israel to film *Tell Me That You Love Me*, then returned to Quebec to shoot the winter scenes.

In *Heartbreakers* (1984), Mancuso plays a confused businessman competing with artist Peter Coyote for Carol Laure's affections. Overlooked and underrated at the time of its release, Bobby Roth's relationship drama is now considered a breakthrough film of the 1980s, ushering in a new era of indie productions. "*Heartbreakers* had some great truthful moments," Mancuso observes. "But, it's like feeding caviar to the masses. You can't. They want hamburgers and hot dogs, not caviar. These moments in films are caviar. Sean Penn once came up to me and talked about the last scene in *Heartbreakers* [where Mancuso confronts Coyote as he's going to pieces in a diner]. Sean said I really nailed it. And I felt it while I was doing it, that some truth had just been spoken."

In 1985 Mancuso starred in another film with Carol Laure, the little-seen *Night Magic*, a musical directed by Lewis Furey and scripted by Leonard Cohen. Mancuso sang with admirable élan, but Furey dubbed his own voice in later. Frank Augustyn of the National Ballet helped Mancuso with the dance steps. Then, in the last week of shooting, the money ran out. "It was a very low-budget musical, and we were short \$200,000. We all donated part of our salaries, so we could pay the crew and finish the film. Robert Lantos put in some more money, but no



attempt whatsoever was made by Alliance to promote *Night Magic*, because they were putting everything they had into pushing *Joshua Then and Now*. So *Night Magic* didn't get any publicity, even though it's a masterpiece of writing by Leonard Cohen that should live in the annals of Canadian culture. But Lantos made no attempt to promote the film, and they had an awful woman from the federal government representing it at Cannes. No wonder *Night Magic* was buried."

Mancuso achieved quasi-mythical status with his short-lived NBC series, *Stingray* (1986-7), about an atypical private eye who drives around the country in a black Corvette Stingray and insists on being paid with favours. Despite its brief run, *Stingray* is now remembered as a classic television show of the 1980s. "Stephen [Cannell] told me that the *Stingray* character could have a Tennessee accent in one scene and play an Armenian schoolteacher in the next. He knew I could do that. The day after the first episode aired, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* all wrote reviews saying, 'Stingray is television at its best. Why don't they do more TV like this?' When Stephen first came to see me in New York, I said, 'I don't want to do a television show. I don't want to do screeching tires and I don't want to hold a gun.' Stephen said, 'No gun, no screeching tires.' Within no time at all, I had a gun in my hand and the tires were screeching all over the damn place. We only did one season of 22 episodes, but the air dates were spread over two years. When I was here doing *Matrix* in 1993, they called me up and said they wanted to do *Stingray* for syndication. But I was working, so it never happened. Some things are meant to be, and *Stingray* definitely was not meant to be. It would have been nice to have done it for five or six years and comfortably retire."

In the years since *Stingray*, Mancuso has turned in consistently fine work, usually in low-budget, made-for-cable or straight-to-video productions. More often than not, he is the best thing in the picture. Among the highlights of his post-*Stingray* filmography are his amusing gangster in *Rapid Fire* (1992), a martial arts movie starring the late Brandon Lee; the outrageous pop artist Tully Woiwode in Oliver Stone's futuristic sci fi miniseries, *Wild Palms* (1993); and the bewildered travelling salesman who finds himself trapped in a strange hospital in the *Twilight Zone*-like *Twists of Terror* (1996).

However, Mancuso is probably best known for his role in *Under Siege* (1992), an action-adventure flick about the hijacking of an aircraft carrier by terrorists, in which he plays a CIA operative with the colourful name of Tom Breaker. "I played Breaker as a chain-smoking asshole," Mancuso quips. "At first, it was a small part, but then my scenes were expanded and became integral to the story. I wasn't in any of the aircraft carrier scenes with Steven Seagal, Tommy Lee Jones and Gary Busey. I was off in a room somewhere at the Pentagon. *Under Siege* was certainly the most successful film I ever did, because it made over \$100 million. So, after being in the business for 30 years and having starred in 75 movies, the general public recognizes me mostly from my work in *Under Siege* and *Stingray*." Mancuso repeated his Breaker character in the 1995 sequel, *Under Siege 2: Dark Territory*.

Mancuso travelled to Edmonton this past August to play Vlad the Impaler - heavily costumed and in makeup and a moustache - on *Mentors*, a show about kids who resurrect famous

historical figures on their home computers. (Vlad was the 13th-century Romanian tyrant who became the inspiration for Dracula.) Moving from the sinister to the saintly, Mancuso will soon start work on *The 13th Disciple*, a religious drama set in Biblical times, in which he will portray a convert to the teachings of Jesus. *The 13th Disciple* shoots not in the Middle East but just outside Toronto in a reconstructed quarry pit. Then it's back to L.A. to finish *A Time of Fear*, a neo-noir directed by Alan Sawyer. Mancuso has a challenging role as a father whose only daughter is raped and murdered by a serial killer, who turns out to be the parish priest. After that - maybe - on to Vancouver to shoot *Underground*, set in the London subway system during the Swinging Sixties. "It'll be directed by Bill Shatner, with him, me, Leonard Nimoy and Chris Plummer. It's not definite yet. The thing we learn in this business is that nothing is definite until the ink is dry and even then not necessarily, and that the sweetest wines usually come from the harshest soil." **TAKE ONE**

Mancuso with Kim Cattral in *Ticket to Heaven*.

