

BASTIANO,
Or
THE TRANSFIGURATION OF RAFFI

A New Play by

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CHARACTERS:

The play is written for eight actors who perform ten roles. It's also possible for the play to be done with five actors if the contemporary leads double with the three Renaissance artists (Raffi/Raphael, Michael/Michelangelo, Sam/Sebastiano), although this would require a different kind of staging and would not permit simultaneity of past and present.

RAFFI Raffi (Rafaella) is Italian-American (on her father's side) performance artist from New York who is highly articulate and speaks good Italian. Mid- to late-20's. Precocious, rebellious, complicated, wrestling with the strains of having a manic-depressive mother

MICHAEL Michael is a biracial sculptor/artist in his late-twenties, from the South Side of Chicago. Steeped in history, hungry to learn, always on the lookout for something new, used to being noticed

SAM Sam is a 20-something video artist from Wyoming. He resists being the center of attention, is quite religious, gay

RAPHAEL The 16th century painter and architect, from Urbino. He is urbane and well-dressed, immensely charming and talented, a favorite of Pope Leo X and a lady's man (doubles with: THE YOUNG MONK, DANILO, servant to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, whose expertise is dressing the Cardinal. He is officious and highly efficient)

MICHELANGELO The 16th century sculptor, painter, poet, architect—a brooding, explosive talent with a quick temper. Gay but secretive about it. Religious. Competitive. Unkempt and usually unwashed. From Florence. He comes from a minor family (the Buonarottis) with major pretensions and very little money.

SEBASTIANO DEL PIOMBO—an effusive Venetian colorist with a passion for mythology and good food, brought by Julius II to Rome. An early friend of Michelangelo's with whom he collaborated on many paintings. At the moment of the play, he is about to become a father and is always scrounging for money.

CARDINAL GIULIO DE' MEDICI/GUILIA GIULIANO

Cardinal—the powerful, arrogant second-in-command to Pope Leo X and later Pope himself (Clement VII). A self-satisfied, quixotic but brilliant man who relishes power and loves art. It is he who is responsible for many of the most important Papal commissions of the period, including Sebastiano and Michelangelo's "The Raising of Lazarus" and Raphael's "The Transfiguration."

Giulia Giuliano—The Director of an Italian arts foundation that sponsors American artists to study and make art in Rome, and offers a cash prize for the winner of an annual competition.

KEENAN/AGOSTINO CHIGI (can be cast as a man or a woman)

- Keenan is an art history professor, a tough intellectual, arrogant and self-assured.
- Agostino Chigi—the fabulously wealthy Renaissance banker and art patron who first pitted Raphael and Sebastiano against each other by commissioning them each to paint adjacent murals in his elegant Villa Farnesina in Rome. The banker of Pope Leo X and close friend of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, he is a charming if inscrutable man who longs to have a child with his beautiful new wife, Francesca. Chigi is the inventor of “indulgences” by which the Catholic Church paid for the building of St. Peter’s.

TIME AND PLACE:

The play takes place between 1516-1520 in Renaissance Rome, and also in the present, at a study abroad center for young American artists in Rome. In the Renaissance sections of the play, the locations include the studio of Sebastiano, an anteroom of Raphael’s elegant house on the Borgo, and the Cardinal’s dressing room. In the present, we are in the large seminar room where class meets and projects are worked on.

SETTING:

A large room of classical proportions and style that can serve as the setting for both time periods. There are large windows with Italian shutters, and an open wall that can serve as a projection surface. There is probably a seminar table, and an easel or two where Michelangelo and Bastiano can review their work. All the furnishings and props exist across time periods. There is a video shown in Act Two of the play that will have to be purpose-made for the production.

NOTES ON THE PLAY:

BASTIANO OR THE TRANSFIGURATION OF RAFFI was written during a Writer’s Residency at the Bogliasco Foundation on the Ligurian coast of Italy (for which I am eternally grateful!). It was initially inspired by an exhibition at the National Gallery in London called “Michelangelo and Sebastiano” that chronicled the strange friendship and collaboration between two artists who were radically different but eventually joined forces against a common enemy, Raphael. In 1516, Sebastiano and Raphael were each commissioned to create a painting for the altar of the Narbonne Cathedral in France. Sebastiano was assigned “The Raising of Lazarus”, Raphael “the

Transfiguration.” The competition was fierce and intense. Sebastiano recruited his friend Michelangelo to create and paint the figure of Lazarus in his painting; Raphael waited until he had secretly seen their work before he completed his own painting. Both are extraordinary paintings containing many mysteries.

Rome under Pope Leo X was a complicated and dangerous place, in which great artists competed for lucrative commissions for the Papal palace, the tombs and villas of the wealthy, and church altarpieces. This was a period of immense change, as the winds of the Protestant Reformation were beginning to blow and the Vatican was under constant threat from French kings to the north and other Italian city states to the east. As Matthias Wivel notes in his catalogue for the exhibition, the tale takes place “in a period of war, schism and revolution, but also of philosophical renewal, radical theology and great artistic innovation.”

In exploring these artistic rivals, I was interested in how the aggressive and unavoidable competition for money and access has continued to shape art and artists from the Renaissance to our own time.

PROLOGUE

A large room in a Villa in Rome.

In the past (1516 Rome), Michelangelo and Sebastiano are sitting at the table or facing an easel, staring at a new red-pencil drawing Michelangelo has prepared for their shared painting of Lazarus. It's an early draft—(the red pencil drawing is now in the Casa Buonarrotti in Florence; in the drawing, Lazarus is vertical, leaning on his left buttock, with his right arm languorously stretched out towards Christ, like a vertical version of Michelangelo's Adam in the Sistine Ceiling. Two attendants support him on the left).

In the Present, Raffi has climbed up a ladder in front of a huge blown up slide of Raphael's "The Transfiguration". She has set up a fan beside her to blow on her hair and costume at key moments.



In the painting, a crowd of figures (the Apostles) is in the left foreground looking astonished and pointing at the sky. There is a possessed boy on the lower right side of the painting, also pointing up, with his eyes rolled back in his head. In the center of the painting is a beautiful woman in pink, her body twisted towards the Apostles in a serpentine pose. In the top third of the painting, Christ miraculously levitates, his white robes and long red curls blowing in the wind against bright white clouds. RAFFI, wearing a long curly wig, is shrouded in a white sheet that echoes the garb of Christ.

RAFFI

Look! Look up, bitches! Dance, angels! Sing out, Voice of the Father! Fall to the ground, apostles, and cover your eyes! Do you know me? (*she opens her arms wide*) I am God! I am finally God! It has *happened!* Do you see? I'm air! I'm divine! I'm floating! (*she triggers a ceiling fan, and her garments and hair begin to blow*) For this single moment, I am everywhere! Trans-world! Transcontinental! Transitory! Transcendent! Transmuted! Transplanted! Transnational! Transgender! Transfigured! Transcendental! (*she looks down at the "crowd" pointing up at her*) Why do you point but refuse to look? Don't you *believe?* You should've held on to me! You should've listened! You should've drawn a horizon line to keep me in your frame! You have ignored me all these years, but now I'm coming! I'm becoming! Open your eyes! (*she stops. Thinks. Turns the fan off. Sits on the step of the ladder and sighs*) This is terrible.

We segue to 1516; Sebastiano and Michelangelo are in Bastiano's rooms, looking at Michelangelo's red pencil drawing of Lazarus.

SEBASTIANO

It's perfect.

RAFFI

Maybe Jesus should speak Aramaic?

MICHELANGELO

(*restless, angry at himself*) How can you say that? The body is *lifeless*.

RAFFI

Or maybe he shouldn't speak at all. It's too human. (*she pulls out her notebook, starts to doodle*)

SEBASTIANO

He's so *human!* That's why I needed your help—no one does suffering like you!

MICHELANGELO

(*dryly*) Thanks.

SEBASTIANO

My version was too pretty—but *yours* – yours actually reveals the terrible moment when a body comes back to life!

MICHELANGELO

Have you ever seen a body come back to life, Bastiano?

SEBASTIANO

No.

MICHELANGELO

Then stop talking.

RAFFI

I have no idea what I want to say.

MICHELANGELO

(*agonizing*) I've made his head too small.

SEBASTIANO

That's okay. He's *veiled*. It will make us look at Christ's face instead!

MICHELANGELO

(*insistently*) But it's *weak*. Don't you think there's something *weak* about this Lazarus?

SEBASTIANO

Of course he's weak—the moment before this, he was *dead*!

MICHELANGELO

(*exasperated*) No-- the *intention* is weak. *My* intention. I should have sculpted it. I hate painting.

RAFFI

I hate this painting! It makes no sense to me!

SEBASTIANO

Don't worry! Christ will *glow* next to Lazarus! I've made the light bounce off his forehead!

MICHELANGELO

(*discouraged*) Lazarus will never compete.

RAFFI

I'll never compete...

SEBASTIANO

Why do you do this? Why do you always tear down what you've made?

MICHELANGELO

Because it's not *enough*! The drawing is dead! The body doesn't *communicate*! It's flat—like a piece of *decoration*.

SEBASTIANO

What's wrong with decoration?

MICHELANGELO

It's for *cakes*! There should be a magical bond between the two figures. A spark of life!

SEBASTIANO

Color will make it magical. The divine light. Besides, his hand reaching out will be very affecting.

MICHELANGELO

His hand *can't* reach out because you've left me no *room*! Why did I ever agree to this project? I have to start over!

RAFFI

I have to start over. I'm better than this. (*RAFFI climbs down the ladder, still wearing her costume and wig*)

SEBASTIANO

No! We're out of time—the competition said *six months*!

MICHELANGELO

For god's sake, Bastiano, we're trying to express the *divine*!

BASTIANO

Actually, I'm trying to pay my *rent*, Michele! I have three other commissions to finish. It's good enough!

MICHELANGELO

Tell *that* to the Vatican. "Your Excellency, we hope you will find our Lazarus *good enough* to win!" (*raging*) Raphael is going to triumph and it will be my fault!

Raffi's phone rings. She tries to fish it out from within her robes.

RAFFI

Shit. Hold on!

SEBASTIANO

He hasn't even begun! We're nearly there! The whole painting has been waiting for this figure!

RAFFI

(answering the phone) Mamma? *(beat. She gathers up her stuff as she talks)* No, no, it's okay. I'm happy to hear your voice! *(clicking off the slide; the "Transfiguration" disappears)* I don't know—it's—*(she looks at her watch)*-- it's ten in the morning. *(She starts to exit)* That's—wait a sec—three a.m. for you? Is that right? Is it yesterday? *(beat. Anxious)* What's going on? Are you okay? *(beat, listening)* What are you doing up so late? *(beat)* Mamma? Your voice sounds bad. Are you—? *(beat)* Hello? Are you there? Shit, I lost you! Mamma, talk to me! *(she's gone)*

MICHELANGELO

I shouldn't have drawn it out of context—I needed to see the rest of the composition first.

SEBASTIANO

You should've come home when I asked you!

MICHELANGELO

I was in hiding from Leo.

SEBASTIANO

Still.

MICHELANGELO

What do you mean, *still*? He was threatening to *abduct* me.

SEBASTIANO

Because you wouldn't come of your own free will. You promised! He'd already paid you for the work.

MICHELANGELO

I'm not a spigot they can turn on at will!

SEBASTIANO

He's the *Pope*!

MICHELANGELO

And I'm *Michelangelo*.

SEBASTIANO

So what? To the Vatican, we're just *painters*. Doing a job! So stay put and do it!

MICHELANGELO

I can't stand being in Rome... it's a viper's nest.

SEBASTIANO

It's exciting! Everyone who's *anyone* is here! And they all admire you -- Bramante, Raffaello—

MICHELANGELO

They *steal* from me! They're worse than common *robbers*. That devil Bramante gave Raphael the keys to the Sistine the *one week* I was away—he climbed up on the scaffolding, looked at my work by candlelight, copied the Creation of Man and put it in his pocket—and when I returned, I found wax all over the planks! What kind of person does such a thing?

SEBASTIANO

A *fan*! An admirer!

MICHELANGELO

An admirer? He mocks me in the guise of flattery and then steals everything I've got. Whatever Raphael knows about art, he learnt from me. I'm not even sure he's a *believer*! And *still* the Pope showers him with commissions!

SEBASTIANO

He's a charming man. People like him.

MICHELANGELO

And me? And I not a charming man?

SEBASTIANO

"*Terribile*". That's the word they use to describe you.

MICHELANGELO

Then let me be terrible. But I'm warning you—underneath those fancy clothes and charming smile, Raphael is out for *blood*. All that talk of *sprezzatura*? It's a *lie*! There's nothing remotely nonchalant about that man—he's a killer!

SEBASTIANO

He's very rich and his clothes are incredible.

MICHELANGELO

(*ignoring that*) Let me find a model and do a new drawing. I'll work fast.

SEBASTIANO

You just want more time with naked boys.

MICHELANGELO

Speaking of which, in your drawings, Jesus was nude! Why have you now put him in a *pink robe*?