

A GHOST ON BROADWAY

Fame is the public demolition of a being in the process of becoming. – Rilke

Fame is the mirror that confirms self-esteem. – Peter Gay

Eighty percent of success is showing up. – Woody Allen

I wanted to write about Guido Nadzo for thirty years though I knew next to nothing about him. Or rather, I wanted to write about him even though I knew only one curious, crucial thing about him: that, long after Guido Nadzo vanished or gave up or died, he lived on in the world in a small way as a man who had been ruined by, of all things, a joke. The fact that Guido Nadzo lived on was itself part of the joke.

I first came upon the name Guido Nadzo in the 1970's, in a biography of the playwright George S. Kaufman. I had just moved to New York to start out as a playwright myself, and Kaufman had long been a hero of mine. I admired him for his smooth style and smart jokes, for his quick, acerbic repartee and celebrated epigrams. ("Satire," most famously, "is what closes on Saturday night.") Maybe above all, I envied George S. Kaufman his career.

Born in 1889 and drama editor at the New York Times while still in his twenties, Kaufman gained celebrity as "the gloomy dean of American theatre," writing and directing hits for four decades and collecting two Pulitzer Prizes along the way. He was one of the resident wags of the Algonquin Round Table with Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker, and wrote the earliest, and best, of the Marx Brothers vehicles. On almost all his shows he worked with a collaborator, most famously with Moss Hart, who immortalized the brilliant and neurotic Kaufman in his classic memoir *Act One*. George S. Kaufman was, in effect, the Woody Allen of

his day – and for more than just his writing. In private life, despite an acute phobia about being touched, Kaufman managed to become a well-known “stage door Johnny,” sparking a notorious scandal in the 1930’s when his affair with the actress Mary Astor resulted in her husband suing for divorce; Astor’s personal diaries, detailing Kaufman’s sexual prowess, were read out at her child-custody trial, with torrid excerpts widely published. Kaufman wrote and directed nearly to the end and in his last decade made appearances on television, still a celebrated wit and raconteur. He died in 1961, generating at least three full biographies and countless anecdotes.

Guido Nadzo generated only one. What had stuck in my mind about Guido Nadzo was quite simple: that sometime in the 1920’s George S. Kaufman reviewed a show in which an Italian actor named Guido Nadzo had a small part. Kaufman’s notice included, almost as an aside, an inspired quip: “Guido Nadzo is nadzo guidio.” The wisecrack got around and finished Guido Nadzo’s career.

That was all, but that was enough. Kaufman’s line stuck with me the same way the barb apparently stuck to Guido Nadzo and did him in. Though I had an indelible mental image of Kaufman from his many photographs (the pouchy face, the large nose and flapping ears, the melancholy surgeon’s eyes) I had none whatsoever of Guido Nadzo. Somehow I imagined him as a hearty Italian type, swarthy and moustachioed and solid, a paisan. In any case, I could not shake off the feeling that a terrible, exemplary injustice had been done and I hated the idea that this man’s ghost was out there somewhere, still fuming about his theatrical fate. Guido Nadzo’s sad, brief tale seemed to me to symbolize the theatre’s endless potential for arbitrariness and cruelty, for it was not simply Guido Nadzo’s talent but Guido Nadzo’s name that did him in. And how does a Guido Nadzo say to all New York that a major reviewer, that a George S. Kaufman has been wrong or unjust?

Guido Nadzo is nadzo guido. Half the beauty of the line is that it's palindromic, a mirror-phrase reading the same backwards and forwards. Read with the right emphasis, it suggests that the private man was the same as the official person, John Smith is Smith, John. In caps with an exclamation point ("GUIDO NADZO IS NADZO GUIDO!") it becomes an ad line for a very curious show. The formulation also recalls a tautological catchphrase on the lips of many theatrical literary managers these days: It is what it is, they will comment of some play, meaning that the play has flaws that are part of its very nature and can never be fixed, flaws that may even be part of what makes the play interesting.

As Guido Nadzo continued to haunt me, I began to think he would make the basis for a rich comic novel. I would call the book Guido Nadzo Is Nadzo Guido, or: The Golden Calf. Every chapter would have as its mantra-like epigraph the words:

Guido Nadzo is nadzo guido.
-George S. Kaufman

We would follow Guido blithely auditioning for the fatal show, learning his lines, rehearsing, getting fitted for costumes, riding the emotional ups and downs of theatrical production, maybe falling in love with a fellow cast member. Guido Nadzo would be an innocent, a holy fool, a Chaplin, a Prince Myshkin. All the while, his sentence would already await him in the form of a five-word dismissal from a reigning theatrical potentate. Kaufman would head for Nadzo chapter by chapter like Hitler's tanks rolling toward Poland. I even had an opening line:

Guido Nadzo awakened full of hope.

The more I thought about this the more I liked it. It was innocence vs. experience, immigrant vs. America, poor vs. rich, unknown vs. establishment, a classic American success and failure fable set in the Gatsby era. It was a terrifying, almost Greek parable showing the way

your fate may be sealed by the single random act of someone with no personal connection to you. It would be an inquiry into the value of individual effort. A metaphysical meditation on free will and predestination. A debate about the nature of goodness and The Good. The idea was original, it was Kafkaesque, so Kafkaesque that I toyed with naming my hero, tongue in cheek, “Guido N.” The novel would be gloriously ironic in the postmodern fashion and, I modestly figured, would undoubtedly be one of the greatest novels of the century.

Guido Nadzo awakened full of hope. He opened his eyes and for a moment thought he was still in his old bed in the house in the Via Tesbia. Guido Nadzo had been home only a moment ago, for he had had the most wonderful dream...

In the dream, Guido was on a hillside in a grove of olive trees. He was kneeling on the ground amidst the trees as if he were a suitor proposing marriage. The light in the grove was so thick and golden that the ripening olives hung in the branches like a million perfect pendant earrings. Before Guido, seated on a rock, was Speranza Questafalcone, the girl with the finest ankles in Tuscany, la madonna delle gambe. Speranza was smiling to Guido and slowly raising her red skirts and revealing those divine anklebones, her fingers gathering the skirts the way a red velvet theatre curtain rises at the opening of a play.

Speranza Questafalcone’s smile grew wider the higher she raised the hem. Guido saw the white net of her petticoats underneath the skirts as her famous calves swelled into view, fleshy and ripe in their gleaming stockings. Guido felt his legs go numb and he began to shiver in the dream, as he always did when aroused by a woman. Speranza lifted the skirts to the shapely hollow below her knees, God’s thumbprint, then over the heavenly knees themselves to the darker tops of her stockings and an inch of creamy olive-hued thigh.

With pounding heart Guido looked upon the glinting keyhole-shaped garter clips. This was too much. Guido's shivering grew worse. He could not contain himself. With open arms he fell upon those glorious knees and embraced Speranza's calves. That was when Guido awakened with a moan and pressed his arms together, but Speranza's calves were gone.

*Guido Nadzo sighed and stretched and heard a horsecart on the cobblestones outside, then a motorcar's raucous klaxon and knew that he was not 16 years old in his old bed in the Via Tesbia but was 23, lying on a cot in a boarding house in Mulberry Street. Then all at once Guido remembered that he had an audition this morning for a Broadway play: *The Golden Calf*.*

Guido Nadzo slid from the sheets and fell to his knees beside the bed, pressed his knuckles to his forehead and thanked God for his approaching good fortune. For Guido Nadzo knew without the faintest doubt that he was destined to get this part. Today would mark the beginning of his rise to celebrity. This play and this role would make Guido Nadzo world famous -- more famous, even, than Caruso. He would return to Italy in triumph as a great star of the stage. His name would live forever.

"Amen," said Guido, and rose and washed himself at the tiny sink beside his cot.

I let the idea for the novel sit for years. Then one day I idly searched the internet for anything on Guido Nadzo and the following popped up as part of someone's miscellany of "good quotes":

"Guido Nazzo: nazzo goodo." The sole review for the only New York performance of a successful Italian tenor, Guido Nazzo. His career was finished.

That was the entire posting and it bothered me, as it made me wonder which name was correct, "Nadzo" or "Nazzo" and which quote was right, "goodo" or "guido." Had Guido been a

tenor or an actor? Maybe I had been wrong. The posting did not even mention Kaufman, as if the celebrated jokester had become irrelevant to his own gag.

I searched the Web further and the Internet Broadway Database gave me a list of shows in which Guido Nadzo appeared:

<u>SHOW</u>	<u>OPENING DATE</u>
Spring Thaw	Mar 21, 1938
Curtain Call	Apr 22, 1937
Allure	Oct 29, 1934
Divided Honors	Sep 30, 1929
A Most Immoral Lady	Nov 26, 1928
The Merchant of Venice	Jan 16, 1928
Skin Deep	Oct 17, 1927
What Never Dies	Dec 28, 1926
A Lady's Virtue	Nov 23, 1925

A Lady's Virtue, Nadzo's first recorded appearance on the New York stage, lasted 136 performances. Spring Thaw, his final show, lasted eight. Thereafter, he vanished. But where?

I called Anne Kaufman Schneider, George S. Kaufman's adopted daughter, whom I had gotten to know when I adapted the George S. Kaufman/George and Ira Gershwin musical Strike Up The Band for City Center's Encores! series. Anne is now in her late 70's: diminutive, tart, always delightful, always ready with a big openmouthed laugh, and always in a hat. She would have fit into an Edith Wharton novel as an aunt from an Olde New York family, outwardly crusty but inwardly sweet, and very wise to the ways of the world.

"Anne," I said, "what can you tell me about Guido Nadzo?"

"He was an actor in the 20's," was her prompt reply. "My sainted father reviewed him once. 'Guido Nadzo is nadzo guidio.' Ended Nadzo's career. But," she was quick to add, "George was so appalled about what happened he kept trying to get Nadzo jobs. Didn't work. Didn't matter. Nadzo knew he wasn't any good. Why are you interested?"

“I’m writing something,” I said vaguely, “about theatrical success and failure.”

“Well, make sure you say that Daddy regretted what happened. He was appalled.”

I assured her that I would say as much.

“Don’t you have a show on?” she asked.

I allowed as I had a Broadway musical in previews.

“I hear it’s in trouble,” she said, typically blunt.

I admitted that too and added, fishingly, “I can only imagine what your father would have said about it.”

“Daddy always said what he thought. Jerry Chodorov and Joe Fields wrote a show after they worked with him on *My Sister Eileen*. They sent George the new script. He sent them back a note. ‘Toss it in the can, boys!’ That’s all the note said. And they did toss it in the can! They knew Daddy was right!”

In the town, at church and at school they called him Il Buono, “Guido The Good.” On Sundays he learned that all good people, of whom he was one, would go to heaven and enjoy God. Everything that Guido did proved Guido’s goodness, and he did some things only to prove that he was proving his goodness. He volunteered to serve at the Masses before dawn, and stayed afterwards to help the nuns clean the sacristy. This, he knew, was why he had been put on earth: to show bad people what it meant to be good. But Guido also loved to kneel farther up in church than other people, up front in the sanctuary on the very steps of the altar, while the priest raised the Host and intoned the words that changed the very substance of the wafer into the Body and Blood of Christ, though no one could see with his eyes how it had changed.

Then one day, at his best friend Emilio's house, Guido overheard Emilio's mother whisper to Emilio's aunt:

That boy there, Guido Nadzo. I don't trust him.

This woman who saw him every day, how could she not see that he was good? What had he done to lose her trust? Young Guido searched his heart, but could find no reason for his best friend's mother to find fault with him. Had he done something bad and been unaware of it?

Then came the incident of Bianca Testare. How could Guido ever make that good if he lived to be a hundred?

In Guido's town, when a girl turned thirteen she was allowed to wear high-heeled shoes and silk stockings to church on Sundays. Guido was three years younger than Bianca, but when Bianca floated down the steep street that Sunday morning after she had turned thirteen, it was like the moment when Dante first saw Beatrice and fell in love for all eternity. Guido knew Dante's verses to Beatrice and they came to his lips as Bianca passed and cast a look at him out of the side of her eyes and smiled.

Every Sunday thereafter for weeks Guido stood at the same place on the hill to watch Bianca Testare pass with her family on the way to church. He knew that her family laughed at him for this, as he was too young for this to be love, and Bianca Testare was already assigned a suitor: Romeo Quinfelice, who would inherit his father's carting business.

Eh, Guido, Bianca's father called to him one Sunday, Guido Nadzo! Come have lunch with us, you are a good boy, sei buono, Guido, a good boy.

At the Testare house they set him at the table next to Bianca. Bianca said not one word to Guido during the meal, just smiled out of the side of her mouth, and Guido felt blessed that his

sleeve could brush hers. Bianca's father spoke of how the Nadzos and the Testares had been friends for over three centuries. Guido paid no attention.

After the meal, when the mother had cleared the dishes and Signor Testare was smoking his pipe in the street, Guido and Bianca remained at the table. Guido could not stop looking at the profile of Bianca Testare.

I am thirteen now, said Bianca Testare, still without looking at him.

Guido impulsively dropped from the chair and fell to his knees beside her. Bianca towered over him. It was like that moment on the steps of the altar when the priest was lifting the Host.

Bianca Testare swiveled in her chair toward Guido and resettled her skirt, but the fabric had gotten hooked on a nail so that the skirt hung open at the bottom like the curtain of a stage. Young Guido's head swam as he saw Bianca Testare's tiny feet in their shining new shoes with the high heels, set very closely side by side, and he saw how the arch of her foot glistened in her silk stockings. His legs went numb and he began to shiver.

Guido Nadzo solemnly reached out a hand and with his fingertips touched the anklebone of Bianca's leg, so lightly that he barely grazed the sparkling silken surface of her stocking. His shivering grew worse. Then Bianca Testare silently reached her hands below her knees and began to gather up the blue fabric of her skirt with her fingers. The curtain of frilled skirt rose higher and Guido saw Bianca's gleaming shins and her unimaginable calves, as golden as the purest olive oil.

Still that curtain rose and the boy thought he would faint as her knees came to view and then the tops of her stockings and he was granted a glimpse of a great secret, something that few

men had ever seen: the steel clips that hold up the stockings of women and keep them from falling.

Guido ran the tips of his fingers up the curving outline of Bianca Testare's calf as far as the knee and then back down over her ankle, and Bianca Testare let him do so. Now with both hands he cupped her fleshy calves in his hands and he ran his hand up and down and felt with the palps of his fingers the hard, dark seam of the stocking running up the tender hollow at the backs of her knees.

"Tu bestia!"

Suddenly Guido was lying sideways on the floor and his head was on fire, and Signor Testare was beating his head and his body and his legs with the handle of a whip, beating him like a dog and calling him terrible names.

Young Guido did not know what he had done to deserve this and though he called out that he was innocent and begged Bianca to defend him, the whip kept descending and like a dog he had to scurry as best he could across the stones, scuttling all the way out the door to the street. When he reached the street Guido saw a crowd of people staring at him the way people stare at actors in a theatre. His father pushed through the crowd and grabbed Guido's arm and kicked him all the way to the door of their house.

Guido Nadzo, ten years old, now had but one purpose in life: to redeem himself. There would come a day, he was certain, when he would not only be Il Buono once again, but Il Maggiore. The Greatest. His essence would be revealed. And that essence would be goodness. But the 300-year friendship of the Nadzo and Testare families had come to an end.

I consulted Peter Hay's big book of Broadway anecdotes, a treasurehouse of popular theatre lore. Hay reprises many Kaufman stories; unfortunately, this is his version of Guido Nadzo:

Brooks Atkinson was the most mild-mannered of critics, at least until he encountered a handsome Valentino look-alike. "Guido Nadzo," Atkinson pronounced on his performance, "was Nadzo Guido."

Needless to say, I was distressed. So it was Atkinson, Kaufman's colleague at the Times, and not Kaufman himself who originated the line? Laura Ward, in *Bad Press: The Worst Critical Reviews Ever*, also attributes the line only conditionally to Kaufman. Maybe I had been wrong. I returned to the source of my original memory, Scott Meredith's massive *George S. Kaufman And His Friends*, and on page 3 I found the following:

It was...Kaufman who took care of an actor with the unfortunate name of Guido Nadzo by commenting, "Guido Nadzo is nadzo guidio."

Kaufman's comments were aimed with deadly accuracy, but he wanted them to make their point and nothing more, and he became upset and contrite if damage resulted and seemed to be growing permanent. When, for example, his line about Nadzo achieved such widespread currency that the actor began to find it difficult to get work, Kaufman went from friend to friend until he found a job for him, and he continued to get him jobs until Nadzo himself decided that Kaufman had been right in the first place and left the stage.

This account makes Kaufman a prince, and it is Nadzo who takes on the brunt of the joke by acknowledging that Kaufman was right about him all along. The actress Ruth Gordon, who knew Kaufman personally, tells the tale closer up -- if with some doubtful-sounding remembered dialogue -- in *Myself Among Others*:

When George was second-string critic on The New York Times, he reviewed a play that wasn't very good. Neither was the acting. "Guido Nadzo," wrote George, "is nadzo guidio."

It made everybody laugh and when you didn't like something, you said, "It's natso guidio."

George called up Guido Nadzo. "Do you think it has hurt you?" he asked.

"Well, I haven't been in a play since."

"Oh dear," said Kaufman. "Let's have lunch and see what can be done."

They did and George said he'd try to get him something. He tried, but when he spoke to Sam Harris or Arthur Hopkins or George Tyler about this actor he'd like to place, they asked, "Who is he?"

"Guido Nadzo."

"Oh, natso guido," said Sam and George and Arthur, and sometime after that Guido Nadzo left the stage.

Was it George's fault? Some of us thought it was tempting fate to go on the stage with Guido Nadzo for a name.

Very civilized of Ruth Gordon to forgive her friend while blaming a man for having the wrong name. The problem was that, hard as I looked, I could not find the smoking-gun review by Kaufman with the infamous line. Then I chanced upon an account by Jed Harris, the flamboyant producer-director, who claimed in *Watchman, What Of The Night?* that the line did not come from a review at all:

I thought of the time when George Kaufman and I were trying to find a handsome young juvenile actor for a part in *The Royal Family*.... I went off to one theatre...and Kaufman went off to another theatre to see an actor called Guido Nadso [sic]. When I arrived home after the theatre I found a telegram from Kaufman. All it said was "Nadso Guido."

This version misspells the fatal name, sounds plausible without the Kaufman review, and places the line in 1927 when *The Royal Family* was produced. It didn't help much. Malcolm Goldstein, in his well-documented *George S. Kaufman: His Life, His Theater*, at least provided some useful specifics:

One of Kaufman's late night jokes at the Times, typical of the puns he and his friends loved, circulated around Broadway for years and eventually came back to embarrass him. A fumbling performance by a young, Italian-born actor named Guido Nadzo inspired him to report to Atkinson and other colleagues in the department that "Guido Nadzo was nadzo guido." This was too good not to be repeated, and many years later, on March 22, 1938, when the actor made an appearance in Clare Kummer's *Spring Thaw*, both Atkinson of the Times and Richard Watts, Jr., of the Herald Tribune remembered it and used it in their reviews. On March 30, *Variety* reported that the actor had never heard the pun before and was "burned up" about it. Kaufman, though not really to blame for this double assault on poor Nadzo, sent him a note of apology. Whether the note assuaged the actor's sore feelings was not divulged, but never again did he act on Broadway, though during the previous thirteen years he had appeared in fourteen plays – by no means a humble record.

The exact dates for the Times and Variety columns give this authenticity, but the story has changed fundamentally: Guido Nadzo's tale may have extended over a decade and Kaufman may have never written the words at all, simply spoken (or wired them) to memorable purpose. Guido Nadzo, my swarthy and solid Italian, became more solid, more of a guido, more of a guy in this version, hotheaded and blustering and "sore." He also became more painfully innocent – like a man unaware that he's walking around town with the word "ASSHOLE" chalked on his back.

Following Goldstein's tracks, I dug up the original Times and Herald Tribune reviews of Spring Thaw. Here is Atkinson:

As the lover, Guido Nadzo is, as the acidulous George Kaufman once remarked, nadzo guido.

And Watts:

As for Mr. Nadzo in the part of the futile seducer, I fear I must once more bring out that old pun of George Kaufman's to the effect that Guido nadzo is nadzo guido.

And here is the column from Variety that Goldstein says destroyed Guido Nadzo's innocence, reported in that paper's curious telegraphic style:

GEO. KAUFMAN'S
PUN ON GUIDO
COMES HOME

Two critics with long memories last week embarrassed George S. Kaufman in their notices of 'Spring Thaw,' by reviving an old pun credited to the satirist. Actor in the play burned up at the gag, which referred to him. He had never before heard it.

About 10 years ago, when Kaufman was dramatic editor of the N.Y. Times, he read a copy of a review in which the name of Guido nadzo appeared, and he remarked that the actor was 'nadzo guido.' Associate who heard it laughed and repeated the crack to others.

Both Brooks Atkinson (Times) and Richard Watts, Jr. (Herald Tribune), used the pun in their reviews of 'Thaw.' Both credited Kaufman, but he said he didn't remember the crack. Also explained he did not wish to offend the actor; that he did not mean it seriously, and never imagined it would creep into print.

'Thaw' was severely panned and taken off after a week.

So Kaufman was apparently innocent of having ruined Guido Nadzo's career. But had he been justified in making the crack about Guido Nadzo's acting in the first place? Had Guido Nadzo actually been nadzo guido, or was he merely the victim of a slur made for the sake of a joke?

The Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, typically miraculous in such matters, had a clippings folder as well as three photo files on Guido Nadzo. One of the photo envelopes, I noted painfully, was marked in error: "GUIDO NADYO."

As it turned out, I had been totally wrong about Guido Nadzo's appearance. The earliest, and smallest photos showed a cleanshaven young man of about 21, not swarthy or solid or at all paisano. He was certainly in the Valentino mold, but much more delicate than the silent-movie idol, with a narrow, powdered face and slicked-back hair, wearing much too much, and much too vivid, lipstick. In another photo Nadzo looked about 25 and seemed to be in 18th century costume, wearing a foppish silk neckband. He could have been Rosalind in the drag scenes of *As You Like It*. An 8x10 headshot showed Guido Nadzo as more of a leading man, more filled out and hearty, even corporate in a suit and spotted necktie, about 35.

One publicity photo was absolute gold. It showed Guido in profile, perhaps 26 or 27, leaning forward at a breast-high food counter, wearing a homburg, gloves, and a long coat and carrying a smart cane. In the foreground, a line of napkins and utensils lead your eye up the counter straight to Guido. He would look dashing cosmopolitan were he not staring with absurd intensity at an oyster shell held by a man in white standing behind the counter. A typed caption was taped to this photo's bottom edge:

PEARL HUNTING IN NEW YORK

Guido Nadzo, young Italian actor now on Broadway at his fad of pearl hunting. Many oysters contain pearls – not necessarily of great value – but in demand by the pearl collector or faddist. Nadzo is shown at the Oyster Bar of Grand Central – where he often goes to watch the oyster opening – in hopes of securing a pearl – and he is often rewarded as our foto shows. In foto oysterman Emile Eisen.

The actor as would-be pearl fisher. The metaphor was, for the purposes of my novel, almost too good.

The clippings file contained a tantalizing typed resumé that seemed to date from the end of Guido Nadzo's known career in 1938. It told me nothing of what happened thereafter, but it did fill in some of the middle of the tale.

GUIDO NADZO

Born in Montecatini in Tuscany, Italy. Perfectly familiar with Italian as well as English; not as familiar with French, but familiar enough with it to work directly from a French script. Quite familiar with European customs and society as well as American. Also North Africa, especially Tunisia – lived there for a year.

From a fragile Playbill I learned that “in his leisure moments Mr. Nadzo likes to travel to hot countries and write plays.” The resumé mentioned three of them: These Gay Romans (“sold to films for Constance Bennett”), Gaily I Sin, and Gala. It seemed from this that Guido Nadzo had a special affection for the word gay. Was I to gather anything from that?

In 1935 Guido Nadzo did a three-day run of Noel Coward's *The Vortex* in Millbrook, New York (a production which included an actress with a name to rival Nadzo's, “Dazma Minty”) and his bizarre Playbill bio, almost certainly written by himself, was still more gold:

GUIDO NADZO made a film in Africa two seasons ago. On one of the days off from work he went for a ride on a mother camel led by a Bedouin woman. Alongside the mother camel went its baby suckling all the time. A storm came up and terrific complications resulted. Mr. Nadzo was tied to the camel and could not get off. Guido Nadzo has played in Italy, America, England, and made one film in North Africa. In addition to being one of the best known young actors in [sic] Broadway he is a

playwright. And in addition to all this he has had time to marry. He is married and the father of a nine month old baby, Tonia.

Once again we see the holy fool of the novel I had planned: Guido Nadzo riding over a vast desert, unable to dismount a maddened camel. (The mad camel of theatre, perhaps?) A playbill from West Falmouth, Massachusetts, told me that the film Guido made in Africa was *L'Atlantide*, which had to be G.W. Pabst's 1932 film also known as *Die Herrin von Atlantis* and *Mistress of Atlantis*, shot in North Africa with Brigitte Helm of *Metropolis* fame. My heart leapt up at the thought of a film record of Guido Nadzo's acting. Unfortunately, Pabst shot *L'Atlantide* simultaneously in three different versions, English, French and German, and Guido Nadzo does not appear in any of the published cast lists. I have watched the English version but did not spot Nadzo, though it's not surprising: ninety-five percent of the cast wears scarves around their heads, hiding everything except their eyes.

Then I found an eye-popping clipping stamped WHITE PLAINS PRESS SEPT. 21 1929.

Young Italian Actor at New
Rochelle Varied in Career

In "Divided Honors," the new comedy by Winnie Baldwin, which will be first presented at the New Rochelle Theatre, on September 23, prior to its New York opening, Guido Nadzo plays the role of the man for whose love three women compete, fight, yearn, desire and even kill. Appropriately enough, Guido Nadzo was reared and educated in an Italian monastery.

This young Italo-American actor who attracted the attention of even the most severe of New York critics when he appeared opposite Alice Brady in "A Most Immoral Lady," last season, has had quite an adventurous life. He is the scion of an old and prominent Italian family and when he was a child, the family hoped that he would gain fame as a statesman or a diplomat or, if worse came to worst, a university professor. But young Guido was anything but interested in politics or the sciences. So, at the age of 16, at the end of a term, he ran away from the University of Bologna, where he pursued his studies after having left the monastery, and embarked upon the career of actor. Or rather, upon a career of actor-writer.

The family was not pleased with Guido's disappearance and therefore Guido was forced to take on a stage-name. The name that he chose for himself and which has subsequently become a name not to be slighted with was Nadzo.

Guido Nadzo's first appearance on any stage was at Genoa. Later he toured Italy with Nina di Carrara and Vera Vergana. Then he decided to come to America, to play on the American stage. Unlike most foreign actors, the English language has placed no obstacles in his way.

Reared and educated in a monastery? Scion of an old and prominent Italian family? Is this fantasy? Could it by any stretch of the imagination be reality? Yet we do learn one horrifying detail: Guido Nadzo himself chose the name that determined his fate. It was too sad, and almost too ironic, to be believed.

Guido Nadzo stepped out into Times Square and walked down Broadway bathed in the glow of good fortune. The crowds parted before him like a river before a mighty rock.

He had gotten the part. He had known all along that he would, but foreknowledge was nothing to this weightless feeling of triumph. The director had heartily congratulated him. The playwright had beamed as he welcomed Guido to the cast. The stage manager had handed him a copy of the play and now Guido Nadzo carried it rolled in his fist like the baton of a marathon runner sprinting for the goal. He headed along 42nd Street toward his agent's office to trumpet the news.

There were days when Guido Nadzo could not believe his good fortune in having been born into the world, and this was one of them. The figures in the streets seemed transfigured. The newsboy on the corner wolfing down the frankfurter looked radiant. The woman in white with the chow practically atomized into a lustrous cloud of aromatic molecules. Guido Nadzo breathed in that aroma, the aroma of the great world, the hard and actual world and thought to himself: yes, it is good to be alive. Then, as always glancing down for a look as the woman passed, Guido saw that she had the city's most beautiful legs.

Tugging the chain of her barking chow, the woman turned a corner and, without thinking, Guido Nadzo turned the corner with her. He followed a dozen feet behind her, his eyes fixed on where her fringed skirt brushed the backs of her fabulous knees, trailing her as if he were on a leash, bumping into other pedestrians, shouldering his way through streetcorners and, once, almost getting run over by a bus. The woman was unaware of him, but her chow had scented his interest and strained backwards on his chain, yapping and trying to fend off Guido while every two steps his mistress tugged him back. Guido had gone several blocks in the woman's (and the dog's) trail before he realized that he had lost his path. Still he could not stop himself, pulled on like a puppet by the calves of this woman utterly unaware of the admirer in her wake. The dog, meanwhile, was leaping into the air in an attempt to bite Guido's face.

Exasperated, the woman stopped and tugged the dog back, then looked right at Guido, and she and Guido both froze in their tracks. Guido's face caught fire, and burned.

"Guido!" the woman called. "Eh, Guido Nadzo! Come va?"

She teetered on her high heels and toward him with wide-open arms as if in a continual forward fall. The dog rushed him too with open jaws, aimed right at Guido's ankles. The moment the woman's lips touched his cheek, Guido Nadzo realized that this fashionable flapper with the awful dog was none other than Bianca Testare.

"You don't recognize me?" she said in Italian, with laughing eyes, her great crimson mouth twisting into a coy pout. Bianca Testare had grown up gorgeous, and her breasts filled her dress as mozzarella fills a sling of soft cheesecloth.

"Si, si, Bianca," Guido protested, adding somewhat lamely, "I would have known those legs anywhere..."

Too busy garotting her dog, Bianca did not hear Guido, for all this while the chow had been orbiting Guido's trousercuffs, barking and threatening mayhem. She tugged the dog upwards till its claws were entirely off the ground and its button eyes bulged out of its furry head.

"Down, Benito, down!" Bianca barked.

"Va bene, va bene," Guido said. "I am used to this. The critics, you know..."

"Ah, yes, you are star now, eh?" She used the English word. "A big Broadway star?"

Guido Nadzo shrugged modestly. "Not a star..."

Bianca's eyes roved over his face, taking him in as if nibbling him.

"You are here on a visit?" he asked.

"No, I live here. In the 61st Street. Una 'single woman' in New York, eh?" she smiled.

"Maybe I will come see a play sometime."

"Yes," Guido said, exhibiting the fresh script, "I have a new show..."

"Maybe you can come visit me some night. When was the last time you had a nice long Italian dinner...?"

Bianca Testare smiled, no, she did not just smile, she winked at him, those long soft black lashes descending for a moment like a curtain. Benito, meanwhile, was sniffing the tips of Guido's shoes as if wondering which of them to pee on.

"What are you doing," Bianca asked softly amid the din of the city, "tonight, for example...?"

Oh yes, yes, it was good to be alive!

"Bianca," Guido Nadzo stammered, "it's so strange to see you here. You of all people! Here in the street in New York City!"

“Me of all people?” she smiled. “Why?”

“After all years,” he said, “since that Sunday afternoon.”

“Sì, sì, that Sunday afternoon...”

“You changed my life, Bianca! That Sunday lunch!”

Guido Nadzo could not stop himself. He had to pour it out, had to thank her. Those delectable calves had been the starting point on his long journey to this streetcorner in New York. Yet Bianca Testare’s eyes clouded slightly.

“Sunday lunch,” she said, “what Sunday lunch...?”

“You and I,” he said, “that Sunday afternoon at your house. The beginning of the whole commedia.”

“Commedia...” she repeated. She shook her head and angled her shoulder into a shrug.

“Che commedia?”

“You!” he cried. “I at your feet! You, thirteen years old, with your new silk stockings and your high heels.”

Bianca Testare just looked at him now.

“You,” he gabbled, “you, in your new Sunday dress!”

“No capisco, no...”

“I kneeling at your feet, and you, letting me touch...”

Guido Nadzo’s entire head snapped back as Bianca Testare clubbed his cheek with her open hand. Two passersby witnessed the slap, and glared at him accusingly. Guido’s head tolled heavily and righted itself as Benito urinated on his left trousercuff.

Bianca Testare’s eyes were aflame.

“Bestia!” she hissed. “Bestia!”

And Bianca Testare swiveled and walked away, tugging the chow so hard that the animal smeared across the sidewalk in her wake, still peeing. Guido Nadzo watched the shapely calves of Bianca Testare disappear among the legs of a million pedestrians.

I called Kitty Carlisle Hart, now 92 and the widow of Moss Hart, but she said she had never seen Guido Nadzo onstage. She had to be reminded who he was. (“Guido Nadzo...? Oh yes, George Kaufman. You must ask Anne. Anne will know.”) I called Al Hirshfeld, then about to turn 100 and the chronicler of American theatre through his caricatures for 70 years, but even he could not remember seeing Guido Nadzo. I tried Barnard Hughes, now 87, a wonderful actor whose still lively memory might graze the distant shore of 1938.

“Barnard,” I said, “I’ve got a strange question for you: Guido Nadzo.”

“Guido Nadzo!” he immediately cried; “of whom the memory is still green! Was it Woolcott or Benchley who said it? Guido Nadzo is nadzo guidio.”

“It was Kaufman, actually. Apparently not in a review, though.”

“Sad story. There are a two or three unfortunates among us like Guido Nadzo. Keir Dullea, gone tomorrow, and so forth.”

“Did you ever see Nadzo onstage?”

“Guido Nadzo was a generation before me. I don’t know why, but I have the impression he wasn’t such a bad actor. He soldiered on for a while, I think.”

“Well, he totally fell off the map in 1938. I’m trying to find anybody who might’ve seen him onstage before that, or who might know what happened to him afterwards.”

“What was the show that did him in?”

“Spring Thaw, by Clare Kummer.”

“Oh, yes, Clare Kummer. Quite a playwright at the time. Any idea who was in it? I might recognize somebody.”

I read Hughes the cast list, and heard, like a bell tolling from the other end of the line, the murmur, “Nope. Dead... Nope. Dead... Didn’t know him... Nope. Dead...”

“...Maurice Wells,” I said.

“Old Maurice,” Hughes said warmly. “Took out an ad in Variety week after week after week to announce that he was available for work. Please Keep In Mind Maurice Wells...”

I had nothing but the clipped reviews in the library to help me glean Nadzo’s abilities. A Times review for Divided Honors in 1929 says that “Guido Nadzo manages fairly successfully to conceal the accent that usually goes with his name.” A year later, though, Nadzo appeared in an Italian-language production of *The Jest* (a title almost made for my purposes) and an unsigned notice from the Times made me wonder whether Nadzo was a good actor trapped in the wrong language:

...nor were there any of his mannerisms with which his audiences of the English speaking stage are familiar. He was gleeful in his demoniacism and always commanding in the subtle ingenuities of the role.

Here is Burns Mantle, reviewing a *Romeo and Juliet* in the Daily News on February 2, 1933:

A good-looking young actor named Guido Nadzo learned the role of Romeo in six days and played it at the Shakespeare Theatre Wednesday night.

Mr. Nadzo’s Romeo...was rather overwhelming... Nervous about his lines, he had not given much thought to his actions and he rather swarmed upon his Juliet. His reading was hesitant and choppy and disconcerting. His voice faded whenever he was in doubt. He lost his sword and was uncertain on his feet. But he has looks, and if he has sense as well he should be a competent Romeo in time. Perhaps before his present engagement ends.

“He lost his sword and was uncertain on his feet...” This was the angelic fool of my novel. But “L.B.” of the Herald Tribune wrote this about the same show:

The performances of the principals of the piece were literate, articulate and convincing. If, in his Romeo, Mr. Nadzo inclined overmuch toward facility of gesture, pliant posturing and affected stance...his sensibility to the quality of his individual speeches, as well as to the wider implications of the role, was altogether competent and commendable. To a role already torn to tatters by generations of cloak and dagger valiants of dubious antiquity he brought an attractive and apparently authentic youthfulness.

Lincoln Center offered a full file on Nadzo's second-last show, the ominously titled *Curtain Call*, a drama à clef about actress Eleanora Duse's affair with the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio which lasted a mere four performances in 1937. Brooks Atkinson, called "mild-mannered" by Peter Hay, starts his notice in the Times:

Using the Wagner bill as his model, Representative Sirovich should now frame a bill to protect the great ones of this world from the insipidities of their inferiors.

Watts, in the Herald Tribune:

"I've been through hell tonight," cries one of the characters in the new play at the hapless John Golden Theater, and there were those in the first audience who were inclined to echo his sentiments... I suspected Guido Nadzo of acting D'Annunzio with at least one eye on Hollywood, suggesting a potential loss to the theatre that I could bear up under gamely.

Burns Mantle in The Daily News:

I have the feeling that if we can keep the news of "Curtain Call" from the Italian colony, it will save trouble. And possibly bloodshed.... Guido Nadzo...is always about to prove his quality as an actor and never quite makes it...

"J.H." in the New York American:

Ara Gerald has the Duse role, a part for which she is not entirely fitted. Her chief supporters are Michele Burani, Selena Royle, Blaine Cordner and Guido Nadzo...or, as a lobby wag put it, Nadzo Guido.

I had to stop. It was like watching a public flogging. And needless to say, the person being flogged was still unable to protest.

Guido Nadzo entered in his final scene of The Golden Calf and knew that he was giving the performance of his life. He was flying tonight, he was aloft, he was sustained effortlessly on genius like an eagle rising on a thermal. The lines were speaking themselves. He was inspired.

In the light spilling from the stage into the house he glimpsed them: Atkinson of the Times in the fifth row and Watts of the Daily News right behind him. For once, the sight of those two did not intimidate Guido Nadzo. Instead, his chest swelled with the knowledge that he was giving a performance for the ages. He almost had to suppress a smile.

He swiveled upstage for his climactic scene with Natalia and gracefully splayed the fingertips of one hand on the sideboard as his other hand slid neatly into his jacket pocket. As scheduled, Natalia was just seating herself in the chair to left of center but...something was wrong...she was rising again...something seemed to be wrong with her skirt... The fabric had gotten snagged on a nail and for a moment Natalia had to rise to free the hem, but Guido Nadzo now saw something that the audience could not: the lace edge of a black slip and the dark top of a stocking on Natalia's upstage thigh. The keyhole-shaped garterclip was glinting in plain view, but only to Guido.

Guido Nadzo stood frozen for a moment. Natalia was staring at him desperately, folding and unfolding her hands not six inches from that bared thigh. Her eyes were begging him to speak, and he knew he had the next line but could not for the life of him remember it, he could only recall the smell of the Testare house, and his father kicking him down the street...

In that endless moment of silence, Guido Nadzo could have sworn he heard the distant hiss of pencil on paper from rows five and six, audience right: Atkinson and Watts, penning their verdicts.

The future stood up before Guido. A solid black wall.

In 1975, forty-odd years after his last appearance, Guido Nadzo wrote lengthy letters to Ruth Gordon's and Scott Meredith's publishers, fiercely protesting the accounts in Gordon's and Meredith's recently published books as "inaccurate and misleading." While not objecting to either author quoting the pun on his name ("which seems to be turning into a convenient bit of Kaufmaniana"), Nadzo denied that he had ever met Kaufman or had lunch with Kaufman or that Kaufman communicated with him in any form, denied that Kaufman ever placed him in acting jobs, and he absolutely denied that he left the stage because of the incident, appending a thick sheaf of fine notices from Woolcott and Winchell, among others, for his performances.

"Finally," Guido Nadzo wrote, "I have children, grandchildren and friends who are not familiar with the actual record...and who are discomfited and anguished by such published inaccuracies." He asks the publishers to remedy the inaccuracies "and the unwarranted negative impression they convey." In the end, Scott Meredith, though protesting among other things that "this line is one of the great theatrical jokes of the century," agreed to drop the paragraphs referring to Guido Nadzo in the next edition of his Kaufman biography.

One wonders whether critics realize the pain they inflict and the destruction they wreak morning after morning. Are they naval gunners, lobbing shells into the bush from aboardship, unaware of the bloodshed they're causing ashore? Or are they bloodthirsty field officers, high on carnage and wanting more?

Nasty notices are of course much harder on actors than on playwrights, since playwrights can duck out or not show up but actors must go on no matter what's been written about the show or how many people are out there in the seats. While actors must perforce be public and valiant, critics can be cowardly and anonymous, scribbling in the dark of the fifth row and publishing

their overnight pronouncements the way feudal lords used to nail irreversible edicts to church doors. (One sees the same tendency carried to pathological extremes in the poisonous postings of theatre “fans” on message boards these days.) Very few reviewers actually know anything about theatre, or how shows get rehearsed or produced or what directors actually do. Essentially glorified drudge workers, cut off from the people they critique, out of initial sympathy with many of the shows they’re required to review, critics at some point seem to start viewing actors as objects, as if performers were cardboard trees instead of beings with lives as real and specific as their own.

Had some theatre patron quipped, “Guido Nadzo is nadzo guido” in the lobby, three people would have laughed and that would have been it. But the words were reported in print, and that little difference made all the difference in the world. To have the advantage of publishing your opinions unopposed day after day is to have at least the impress of authority; but to have the chance to mock in public those who cannot respond is to wield an awful and profoundly antidemocratic power.

Actors, meanwhile, go on.

I began to grind to a halt with my Guido Nadzo novel, full of second thoughts. What right did I have to appropriate Guido Nadzo’s life for my own ironic purposes? Why should I torture this man further and perpetuate his reviewers’ cruelty? Wasn’t I being as smug, in my way, as Atkinson and Watts and their ilk? Why did I prefer to think that Guido Nadzo had given up in 1938 or had failed? Did I want to say that all theatrical effort, indeed all human effort, is doomed to ridicule and futility? What did I know of the man anyway?

Then Speranza Questafalcone, so to speak, lifted her skirts just a little higher. I got a call from Guido Nadzo’s grandson.

A search on Google had turned up a genealogy site with a “Guido Nadzo” in the Maine state records. It also turned up a painter named Nancy Nadzo, exhibiting on an internet site a painting called Guido’s Tree. Phone listings led me further, and Guido Nadzo’s grandson opened the door into the family and a dialogue with a – let’s say, a very close family member who prefers to remain anonymous.

I will now say something that few reviewers ever find it in themselves to say: I was wrong. Wrong about Kaufman, wrong about the effects of Kaufman, wrong about the end of Guido’s story, wrong in my imaginings of Guido, wrong about so many things in this now probably unravellable tale. Guido Nadzo’s future had not loomed up as a black wall in 1938 but rather, to judge by Guido’s Tree, as a palette of extravagant color. I had sought to lay a ghost, and found something much more substantial and irrepressible: a spirit.

Guido Nadzo was born Guido Mazzoncini on December 23, 1904 in Montecatini Alto, to a family that exported olive oil to the United States, and he arrived in America on the Rochambeau from LeHavre on April 17, 1914. The family emigrated to Seattle, whence Guido moved to New York on his own while still young. In 1929 Guido Nadzo became a U.S. citizen: address 8 E. 8th St., NY City, height, 6’0”, color of hair, “brown,” color of eyes, “gray blue,” visible/distinctive marks “none.” In 1932 he married Marian Sommers, daughter of Harry Sommers, who owned the Knickerbocker Theatre. The couple honeymooned in North Africa and ultimately the marriage produced three children, Tonia, Stefan and Nicholas.

“You have asked specifically about the line ‘Guido Nadzo is Nadzo Guido,’” my family source wrote me. “I do not know what play generated that review, or when it appeared. I have no reason to think that review marked the end of Guido’s acting career. I remember he had a couple of books of reviews, clippings, photographs, and so on from that period, and as I recall, some of

the reviews were very good. I suppose all actors, good and bad, get negative reviews from time to time, but this one stuck because of its clever construction.”

It was not the infamous line that changed Guido’s acting career: it was the War. By the late 1930’s Guido Nadzo was concentrating more on writing than on acting, and became a founding member of William Allen White’s Committee To Defend America. After Pearl Harbor he was conscripted into the Program of Training for International Administration at Columbia and became a Foreign Service Officer in 1943, ultimately working for the UNRRA and the Agency for International Development. According to Ellsworth Bunker, later ambassador to Italy, Guido Nadzo was “the first UNRRA official to reach Italy (in July 1944) nearly a year before the end of hostilities.” He administrated the development of housing, public works, the building of schools, hospitals, community centers, port facilities and water supply systems. He served in Italy until 1954, and from there went, mostly as a housing adviser, to Korea, Peru, Vietnam, and then to Washington until he retired in the 1970’s.

“He and Marian remained married throughout all of those years,” my source wrote me, “traveling together wherever his government career took him.”

Did Guido regret never having returned to the theatre?

“If so, I never heard him say so.”

Had Guido Nadzo ever spoken of George S. Kaufman?

“I do remember Guido’s mentioning George S. Kaufman, and while I do not remember any specifics, the memory I have is bright not dark. I remember one or more books by or about George S. Kaufman in a fairly prominent spot on their bookcase. All of that suggests that Guido and Kaufman did establish a good relationship of some kind, and that in any case there was no lingering hatred or resentment of Kaufman in Guido’s thinking. Guido and Marian related their

memories of their years associated with the theater with humor, affection, and joy. I do not recall their ever expressing anger, animosity, regret or the like.”

How would Guido feel about being written about?

“I know Guido would love being the centerpiece of even a single paragraph, and if he can play the injured party, so much the better. But I know too that he would not want any mention of him to be at the expense of George S. Kaufman. Guido would not want anyone to come away feeling either sorry for him or angry at others. There was none of that in him. Among Guido’s most endearing characteristics was an invincible generosity of spirit, and I know, whatever may have been the actual facts of this case, he would want your article about this moment in his life to reflect that.”

And what of Guido’s Tree?

Nancy Nadzo is married to Guido’s son Stefan. Guido’s Tree is her painting of a tree that grew in Guido and Marian’s front garden.

“As far back as I can remember,” my eloquent source tells me, “Guido was an impassioned gardener. His relationships with his flowers, particularly roses, was almost mystical! His and Marian’s flower garden was on the ‘must see’ list of the local garden club, which regularly brought groups around to admire. Guido loved having his garden admired...”

Guido Nadzo, eighty-three years old, lay stretched in his chair under the trees. The light in the garden was so thick and golden that the buds hung in the tree branches like a million perfect pendant earrings. Between his fragile fingers Guido Nadzo absentmindedly rolled a single perfect white pearl.

This was the pearl he had found at that old oyster bar down 42nd Street from Times Square, the day that man came to take his picture for the newspaper, in a vast city that seemed as distant now, and as unreal, as Atlantis...

Guido borrowed a homburg and gloves from the wardrobe mistress that day, and took a silver-tipped cane from the prop table backstage. The newspaper photographer posed Guido in that costume and lined up some napkins on the counter. Guido, following direction, stared at the lizardlike shell in the hand of good old Emile the counterman while the photographer snapped a few shots.

When the flashbulbs had stopped popping, Emile instinctively ran his oyster knife along the shell, wrestled it open, and let out a cry. For there lay cupped the great gleaming pearl, peeping out from amidst the folds of the mucoid oyster muscle. What a long way that thing had taken from the depths of the sea to get there. With a dramatic flourish Emile dug out the pearl and handed Guido his prize. It had been a great moment. A moment for the ages. But the photographer had left already, and did not capture it.

Guido Nadzo shivered in his chair as if he had just seen a beautiful woman. His legs felt cold and numb, and his hand moved to adjust the blanket over his calves, but his fingers never reached its hem.

Guido Nadzo did not feel the pearl drop from his fingers. He did not hear the pearl gaily bounce down the flagstone steps or see it roll away into the dirt, to be lost in the flowerbeds among the rosebushes, where it would lie forever, like a seed.

Guido Nadzo died on April 2, 1988, twelve days after his wife of 56 years. According to the obituary in his local newspaper:

His son Nicholas recalls that the one notice his father said he would always remember was a witty critic's assessment that: "the performance of Mr. Guido Nadzo was nad zo guido."

Reviewers, it seems, are insensitive but irrelevant. Actors, as I say, go on. R.I.P, Guido Nadzo, one of the valiant, and very guido indeed.

*