

Robert Viscusi (1941-2020)

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 19, 2020)



From the Dean Desk of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute. The death of our dear friend Robert Viscusi, Professor Emeritus of Brooklyn College.

It is with profound sadness that I write to inform you of the death of our dear friend Robert Viscusi, Professor Emeritus of Brooklyn College. He died this morning at Lennox Hill Hospital after a valiant battle with cancer. He is survived by his beloved wife, Nancy, and two children, Victoria and Robert.

For those of us who knew Bob well, we knew a kind man, someone who was always respectfully inquisitive and concerned about his friends and, at the same time, always a cheerleader in championing them and their accomplishments. He was, as well, a great advocate of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute; he made it known to many, and we remain ever the more grateful.

I first met Bob at the 1987 annual conference of the American Italian Historical Association, and we struck up a friendship that has lasted ever since. At first, it was based on our work. My own professional preparation moved me to come to Italian/American studies through the back door of methodology and theory. Indeed, Bob's work guided me greatly in those first few years. His ideas



and the rhetorical craft through which he articulated them served as a significant model for me; it continues as much today.

Bob was fundamental to the development of Bordighera Incorporated and its journal VIA and book series VIA Folios. In the later years Bordighera Press published his collection of sonnets and/or epic poem, *Ellis Island*, which earned an excellent pre-publication Star Review from Publishers Weekly, that closed as follows: “[T]he sonnets are far from uniform, at times manifesting as short stories, at other times as short bursts of philosophical inquiry or bursts of pure song. This is a new delicacy for aficionados of creative poetry and an anthem of sorts for those who—however far removed from immigration—occasionally feel displaced from home.”

Bob wore numerous hats throughout his career: highly esteemed professor, cultural theorist, literary critic, novelist, and poet are some of the monikers we can ascribe to him. He was also a cultural broker: Bob co-founded the Italian American Writers Association in 1991, for which he formulated its three rules: (1) Read one another; (2) Write or be written; (3) Buy each others’ books. It is a triad of exhortations that he articulated throughout the years, whenever he had the opportunity to do so.

Among Bob’s many books, we shall surely remember his award-winning novel, *Astoria* (2003), and his critical magnum opus, *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing* (2006), considered by some to be “the best book written on any ethnic group in America or anywhere else.... This is an astonishing, gorgeous work” (Matthew Frye Jacobson). But some of already knew that, didn’t we?

I close this brief encomium with an example of the big, generous heart that Bob possessed. At the beginning of the last decade, Bob took on a major translation project: to render into English Francesco Durante’s ground-breaking anthology, *Italoamericana II*, a 900-plus-page tome originally published in Italy in 2005. What stood out were two things: (1) Bob’s incredible knowledge of and intellectual ability to articulate ever so masterfully the Italian immigrant phenomenon, and (2) his dedication to this project, his desire to render it as best possible in English. This was no small task in making popular someone else’s work; generosity does not begin to describe Bob’s largesse and beneficence involved in such work.

Bob’s scholarly and creative works will live on precisely because they are so outstanding and hence greatly beneficial to all. They will serve yet future generations of scholars as they engage in their own professional development of cultural and literary studies of the Italian diaspora. But Bob the person — he who could turn a phrase and make you smile, or formulate a theoretical notion and make you go Hmmm — shall be dearly missed. In the meantime, fortunately, through technology we shall have the opportunity to revisit with Bob, as we have a few recordings of him in the Italics TV archive. I will leave you with two at this time.

Bob on Italics:

Lecture: “The Orphanage: Encounters in Transnational Space” (Sept 29, 2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOxXWQAAV5U&t=414s> [2]

Symposium: “L’oro di Napoli: All that glitters is gold!” i (at 1:03:10) Bob reading from his *Ellis Island*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stQLI9k6mlc> [3]

Robert Viscusi in “An Oration Upon The Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVdOt7pbKRg&t=2s> [4]

*Anthony Julian Tamburri

Dean & Distinguished Professor

Source URL: <http://ftp.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/robert-viscusi-1941-2020>

Links



- [1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/robertviscusipng-0>
- [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQxXWQAAV5U&t=414s>
- [3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stQLI9k6mlc>
- [4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVdOt7pbKRg&t=2s>