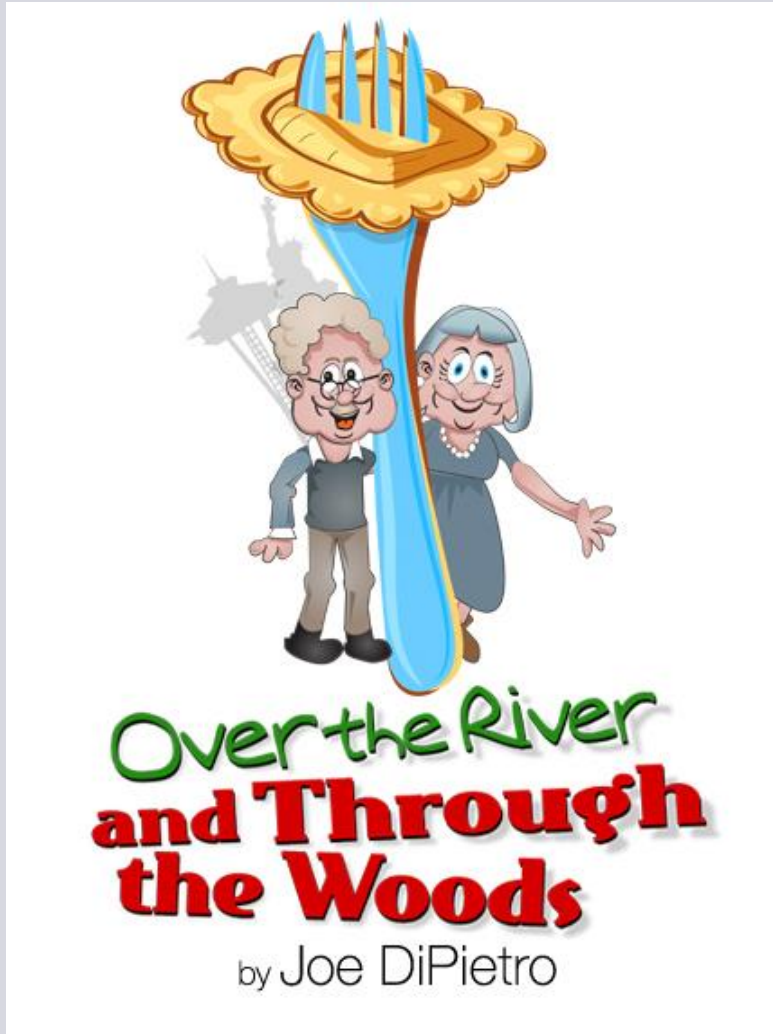


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Shaun Carroll

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturge
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People want to hear about their lives.

- Joe DiPietro

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARACTERS

Nick Cristano (Wallace Bruce)

Frank Gianelli (Rolf Saxon) Nick's maternal grandfather

Aida Gianelli (Anne Buelteman) Nick's maternal grandmother

Nunzio Cristano (Marcus Cato) Nick's paternal grandfather

Emma Cristano (Monica Cappuccini) Nick's paternal grandmother

Caitlin O'Hare (Sarah K. Michael) niece of Emma's canasta partner

SETTING

The Gianelli home in Hoboken, New Jersey.

TIME

Per the playwright, "Most of the action of the play takes place several years ago". The play, which consists of character monologues addressed to the audience as well as flashbacks from Nick's memory, opens with Nick speaking to the audience in 1994.

*I want audiences to have a great time. I inherently like comedic pieces.
I like humor blended in with the serious.*

- Joe DiPietro

SYNOPSIS

Warning: *Though deliberately kept obscure so as not to reveal a surprise that occurs early in the play, the following synopsis still contains spoilers. Please do not read if you don't want to learn what happens in the play.*

Nick Cristiano is a single man in his thirties who sees both sets of his Italian American grandparents for dinner every Sunday at the home of his mother's parents, Frank and Aida Gianelli, in Hoboken, New Jersey. Nick is the only member of his family who has remained nearby; his parents have moved to Fort Lauderdale and his sister lives in San Diego. The Cristanos and Gianellis have been close for decades, united by their shared devotion to family, "tengo famiglia", and their common belief in faith, food, and family. They adore their grandson, and Nick loves them, but they also drive him somewhat crazy.

Nick has an important announcement that can't wait for Sunday dinner, so he asks the Cristanos to meet him on a Thursday at the Gianelli's home. There, he reveals a plan that could potentially wreak havoc on all of their lives. The grandparents conspire to thwart his plans, leading to outcomes that are as unexpected as they are hilarious. At one point, they arrange a blind date for Nick with the young and lovely Caitlin O'Hare, "the unmarried niece" of Emma Cristiano's canasta partner. Though their scheme doesn't play out as hoped, Caitlin helps awaken Nick to a new understanding of the ties that bind, as well as an appreciation of time-honored traditions and the value of taking the time to enjoy the simple pleasures of shared food and loving company. He begins to see his grandparents as people for the first time. In turn, the grandparents see Nick, his hopes, and his dreams, with new eyes. They acknowledge that the opportunities they worked hard to provide brought their descendants not only an easier and more prosperous life, but new vistas, new values, and more choices – none of which matched their own. Ultimately, all parties come to realize how true love can sometimes mean letting go.

I am a believer and creature of the theatre in all of its forms. I have a big heart for both people and shows. I am fortunate enough to be able to work and be produced in this format I love.

~ Joe DiPietro

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Playwright Joe DiPietro has won two Tony Awards, a Drama Desk Award and three Outer Critics Circle Awards. His produced plays – mostly musicals for which he has written the book and lyrics – number more than 20, with at least another dozen he is developing. He is currently hard at work writing the book and lyrics for *Sinatra The Musical*, which will make its world premiere at Birmingham Rep in Birmingham, England.



It seems a bit incongruous that a musical about Ol' Blue Eyes, who is Hoboken, New Jersey's famous son – Hoboken also being the setting for *Over The River* – will have its world premiere in the UK, and not even on the West End. Joe DiPietro debuted his musical *What's New, Pussycat?* at the Birmingham Rep last year, which was a huge success. The Rep's new Artistic Director, Sean Foley, pictured below, took over in 2021, and has already made his mark with smash hits of world premieres of comedies



and musicals. Of *Sinatra: The Musical*, Foley said, “We welcome back Joe Pietro to The Rep, where his Tom Jones musical, *What's New Pussycat?* so thrilled audiences last year.”



What's New Pussycat?, a scene from which is pictured above, was inspired by Henry Fielding's novel *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. Described as a romantic musical comedy, it reimagines Fielding's classic tale in London's swinging sixties and sets the story to the hit music of Tom Jones, who's the lead character.

Over the River was Joe DiPietro's first play to be produced, and the second of his plays to be produced Off-Broadway. The first, *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*



Original Playbill, 1996

opened in 1996. It is a musical comedy with book and lyrics by Joe and music by Jimmy Roberts. The two would not collaborate again until they opened *The Thing About Men* in August 2003. Both shows are about men, women, and relationships. *The Thing About Men* enjoyed a long run, closing in February 2004 after 200



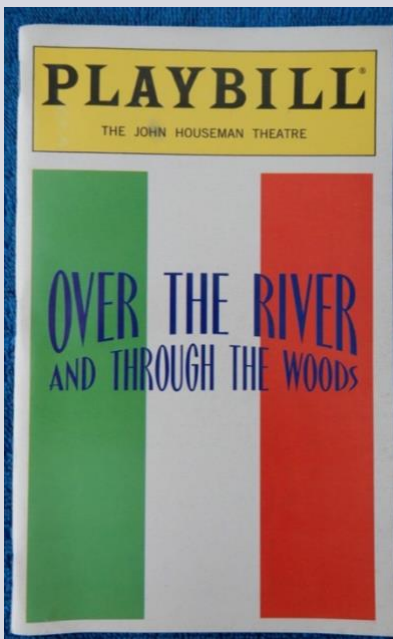
Jimmy Roberts (left) and Joe DiPietro at the opening of *The Thing About Men*, 2003

performances. *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* ran for 12 years and 5,003 performances, making it the second-longest running Off-Broadway musical and the longest-running musical revue in Off-Broadway history. It continues to this day to be performed all over the world. So does *The Thing About Men*, but nothing yet in Joe's career has matched the success of *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. His second most-produced play? *Over the River*.



Not long after the photo above was taken in 1996, when Joe DiPietro was 35 years old, he was already at the top of his game due to the success *Of I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. In April 1997, he was awarded the New Voices in American Theatre Award, given by the William Inge Theatre Festival. *I Love You* had been nominated for an Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical and was about to open in Toronto, the first of what would become dozens of international engagements. His comedy *The Kiss at City Hall* had been optioned and was slated to workshop in July 1997, and he had just begun writing the book for *The Thing About Men*.

Over the River and Through the Woods, which in 1994 had played at the Belmont



Original Playbill, *Over the River and Through the Woods*, 1996

Italian American Playhouse in the Bronx and the Eugene O'Neill Theater in Connecticut; in 1996 at the American Stage Company; and in 1997 at the Berkshire Summer Festival and the Helen Hayes Theatre in Nyack, NY; would go on to open at the John Houseman Theater Off-Broadway on October 5, 1998, and run for 800 performances over a two-year period.

Joe grew up in Oradell, New Jersey, a suburb of Manhattan. His parents would take him, his older sister, and his younger sister to see Broadway shows, the first of which was the original production of the musical *1776*.



Original playbill, *1776*, ca 1969

Based on the events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it ran from March 16, 1969, through February 13, 1972. DiPietro would have been anywhere from eight to 11 years old when he saw it. He says, “I still remember where I was sitting in the mezzanine, the lights came up, you saw the Continental Congress and I was hooked. Put a fork in me, I was done. I had no idea how to get into theatre, I just said, ‘I somehow want to be involved in this,’ and I was a young kid. I think when you’re a writer no one gives you permission to write, you just sort of write, and I always enjoyed writing dialogue. I was interested in plays from an early age, and after *1776*, my folks would take us to see a big play a year – this was in the '70s – like *Annie* or *Shenandoah*, one of the big good-for-kids plays. Theatre was never alien to me, it was never this other thing, it was always, for me, like going to the movies, I would see two or three shows a year. So, when I started writing, I just thought ‘Oh, maybe I can start writing plays’”.

In high school, he took a creative writing class where a requirement was to write a one act play. The students also had to submit a piece of writing to the Scholastic Writing Awards, a national high school student contest sponsored by Scholastic

Magazine. He submitted his one act play *The Dream Stealer* in the dramatic category, and it won. He said in a 2016 interview, “So I put in the very back of my head ‘Maybe I can do this sometime, maybe I can do this,’ which is a great thing for a kid. I didn’t know how to do it; I didn’t know what it meant. I was an English major in college. After I got out, I got a job in advertising. I worked in advertising for about twelve years and I was writing very casually at night, no real formal education in theatre or anything, I just liked it, and whatever makes a writer stay up in the middle of the night when they should be going to sleep because they have to go to work the next day, I was doing that and pounding away and not quite knowing what I was doing”.

He got involved in a writers’ group whose political sketches for the 1988 presidential election played at the West Bank Café’s Downstairs Theatre Bar in Hell’s Kitchen, near Times Square and Broadway. The venue called itself “a cabaret dedicated to theatre artists” and described its nightly offerings as “a range of political and cultural satire, original one act plays, musical and comedy revues, and exciting solo acts”.



For 14 years, until the end of the eighties, West Bank was run by the comedian Lewis Black, pictured at the far right of the photo above. Black was also the playwright-in-residence at the time. He helmed the theater for 14 years and oversaw the development of more than 1,000 plays, including works by *West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin, *American Beauty* writer Alan Ball, as well as his own original works. Lewis emceed every show and took notice of Joe DiPietro’s political sketches. He offered him a slot for his playwriting. Joe describes what happened next: “I just wound up writing this little sketch show about me and my friends dating and got four friends together and got a really good young director to do it and it became these sketches about relationships. The first day that it was done in front of an audience, which was probably my friends – when you work in those places you basically have to invite your friends, they have to buy drinks, and then they invite you back – that’s how you start, at least how I started – and the response to these sketches about dating and just real life was bigger than any political thing I had ever written. This cartoon lightbulb went off in my head, saying ‘Oh, people want to hear about their lives!’ It was like the best masterclass in writing I ever had. Since then, I think I write a lot of

different things, but the theme of my work is pretty much the human comedy in a – hopefully – universal and relatable way. Those sketches, which played here and there, were popular in this little underground basement theater thing [the West Bank Café's Downstairs Theatre Bar]. I was putting money that I was earning in the day in advertising towards trying to mail out postcards and props for the show and other expenses. So, long story short, a producer came to see it and said, 'This is a musical revue, put music in it'. At the time the only musical revue I had seen was *Ain't Misbehavin* and I'm thinking 'This is nothing like *Ain't Misbehavin!*, which I loved. This is about trying to get laid, essentially, these little sketches. Then someone introduced me to a composer named Jimmy Roberts who was a talented guy but had never quite finished anything. I really liked his music and he told me, 'Oh, I really like these sketches. They're really good – they don't need music, they're so good,' and I'm like 'You're my guy! You're my guy, because you're questioning me already and I *know* I don't know what I'm doing.' So I worked for two years with Jimmy and I had no idea how to write musicals and I had no idea how to write lyrics and Jimmy said 'Oh, read Sondheim'. He gave me the classics to look at, and we came up with *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. That's the show those sketches became. This was when off-Broadway was in its heyday and you could actually make a living off-Broadway, a show could run off-Broadway, but that show, which was the first thing I ever wrote for theatre, came at a time when comedy had disappeared from musicals. It was all heavy, British, chandeliers falling, and *Phantom* and all of that, and we suddenly had this little comedy that made people laugh and feel good. It sort of built very slowly but then it took off and *that* was my very long story of how I got started”.

Until *I Love You* made it to Off-Broadway and started to become successful, Joe worked in advertising. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Rutgers with a degree in English Lit, he planned to get a law degree from UCLA. However, shortly before he left for California, he was offered an admin job with the sports division of CBS in New York. He remained there for 10 years, rising to the position of advertising copywriter while pursuing his theatre writing. He never took a formal writing course but credits his career as an advertiser and marketer for grooming him as a playwright. “A big thing,” he explains, “was writing on deadline. I'm a really good rewriter under pressure in previews and things, and part of that is because, in advertising, you come in, there's your assignment, this person wants you to sell this product and you have to write ten different versions from them and they're probably going to pick the version that you like the least, the safest version, so you have to be sure to write that one. So writing on deadline without it driving you crazy – a big, big help from advertising – and also this slickness of advertising copy. Especially with musicals, you would have ten seconds to make your point, where with plays you can just bask in language and atmosphere for a while. With musicals, both in lyrics and in scenes, you need to get to the point and move on, so in that sense advertising was a great lesson”. It also provided Nick Cristano, the grandson who is telling his story in *Over The River*, a marketing and advertising career.



In the photo above from our production, Wallace Bruce (on the far right) plays Nick. Seated on the sofa, from left are Marcus Cato, who plays Nunzio Cristiano, Nick's paternal grandfather; Anne Buelteman, who plays Aida Gianelli, Nick's maternal grandmother; and Monica Cappuccini, who plays Nick's paternal grandmother, Emma Cristiano.

Joe's day job not only gave him applicable writing skills, it guided him in marketing his show: "I had no idea what I was doing, I was young and stupid, so I thought 'Oh, I can do this,' which, looking back, seems ridiculous, and this was the '90s, before the internet, so in order to get people there I had to actually spend money hiring a designer and making post cards which were expensive, and getting mailing lists which was hard to do, and then mailing them out, for these ten o'clock at night shows in this little basement theatre, trying to get people to come – so, yeah, it was a challenge".

It's easy to look back and say, with the back-to-back successes of *I Love You*, followed by *Over The River*, that Joe was an instant success. Joe addresses that, saying: "Every success looks inevitable when you look back. *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, or with any show I was doing, I would think 'If we went this way instead of this way, it would have just sort of disappeared.' ... I've always had tenacity – I'm a big believer in momentum of a show and I think the writer being the owner of the show and the initial creator of the show needs to be the one, ultimately, to keep it going – push, push, push. Be smart about it but really push it ahead and also know when to not push it ahead, when it's sort of done".

There was a chain of events early in his career that helped shape him as a writer. His director for *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* was Joel Bishoff, who happened to be the assistant director to James Hammerstein, Oscar Hammerstein's youngest son. Jamie, as he was known to those closest to him, was running the Rodgers and Hammerstein organization. He was renown as a director but wanted to get into



Joel Bishoff



James Hammerstein

producing because he was starting to go deaf, so he came to see the show that Joel was directing. Hammerstein loved it, and he told Joel and Joe that he wanted to produce it because his mother would have really loved it, too. DiPietro was blown away: “I was like ‘Oh my God!’ Here was Jamie Hammerstein,” he said, “and I was a kid working in advertising”. Joe felt they got along because Hammerstein loved the fact that he had no qualms about rewriting: “We were doing these sketches and sketches are a great way to learn how to write comedy or how to write musicals because you write ten sketches and if two don’t work you just take them out of the show and write new ones. You don’t have to go back and see how it affects the rest of the show, you just take it out. So, in that sense he was great. Jamie was the only one who said ‘I want to take this to New York’ – meaning the legit theater houses – and all his friends thought ‘Well, you’re crazy, this stupid little show with the long title that no one understands’. There were a million reasons, and Jamie’s answer was always, ‘I like it’. He had been around for a long time, had done everything, and it was simple: ‘When I like a show, I want to support it, and bring it in’. To him it was a fun thing. I think he liked working with us, which was also a big thing. So, after the show we would go out to a diner, like you often do after shows, and just rip it apart and put it back together the next day. With Jamie’s expertise, I learned so much”.

Also because of Jamie’s expert guidance and industry influence, *I Love You* premiered and ran at the Westside Theatre, which was acknowledged as the best off-Broadway house then, and still is now. When the Westside looked at the show, they decided to give it an August timeslot, figuring that it would open in August, run until September, and close quick. They had a backup show ready to go so they could still have something playing. Sure enough, it got middling reviews. *The New York Times* didn’t like it, but audiences did. Jamie, undaunted and unwavering, fought to keep it going. The ticket sales were in the midrange level, going up one week, down another, but

because James Hammerstein believed in it, it had a year run. Then suddenly in the second year the numbers took off, and it ran for twelve years.



Westside Theater

Jamie ended up producing *Over the River* as well. It, too, was another enormous success, and was followed by more comedies and musicals, which are Joe's forte.



Joe DiPietro's Broadway plays include *Diana*, which came out on Netflix in advance of its official Broadway opening; *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, starring Matthew Broderick and Kelli O'Hara, which garnered 10 Tony nominations, including Best Book and Best Musical; *Memphis: The Musical*, which won four Tony Awards, including Best Book, Best Score and Best Musical, and is in development as a feature film; *All Shook Up*, and *Living On Love*, starring Renee Fleming. His Off-Broadway shows include *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me*, which won the Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Musical; *Clever Little Lies*, which starred Marlo Thomas, *The Toxic Avenger*, winner of the OCC Award for Best off-Broadway Musical; *The Thing About Men*, which also won the OCC Award for Best off-Broadway Musical; *Over the River and Through the Woods* (of course), which is also in development as a feature-length film; and his first Off-Broadway show, *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. His many regional credits include *Conscience* at the George Street Playhouse; *The Second Mrs. Wilson* at the Long Wharf Theatre and at La Jolla Playhouse; and *The Last Romance* at The Old Globe. His musicals and plays have received thousands of productions across the country and around the world.

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