

NICK DEGRUCCIO'S PROGRESS TO PILGRIM

BY TOM PROVENZANO PHOTOS: CHRIS KANE

AS A FLEDGLING CRITIC FOR THE *LA WEEKLY* some 20 years ago I first became aware of Nick DeGruccio as a puckish, smiling young actor delighting in his roles at the Colony Studio Theatre. Two decades later his demeanor remains the same although he hasn't seriously pursued acting in several years.

Instead he transformed an accidental turn staging a benefit for the Colony into a solid and still rising career as a successful director throughout Southern California. He recalls, "I was dragged into directing. Nobody would direct the benefit and it

kind of landed in my lap. It was a huge success. Then the Colony hired me to do *City of Angels* because I had [acted in] the national tour. That was a big success so all of these directing doors started to open."

In the 10 years since *City of Angels*, DeGruccio has amassed more than 30 professional theatre directing credits and has been able to support himself solely on that career for several years. His newest phase focuses on developing new material. Most recently he joined the production team as director of the rock-opera *Pilgrim* by John Stothers, which marks its world premiere at the Ricardo Montalban Theatre (the old Doolittle) on March 25.

DeGruccio's first contact with the play was about 10 years ago as an actor in a first reading before he had even begun his directing life. "They said they had been watching my career and seen my work. They knew I was passionate about the project," he explains, then with a laugh, "When they called I said, 'John you have to know I have been singing two of your songs in the shower for 10 years!'"

Pilgrim is described as a mystical adventure about a rebellious young prisoner whose shocking dreams change the destiny of his crumbling walled city, his beautiful young wife and their only hope of freedom forever.

Though DeGruccio is well known for his expertise in traditional musical comedy styling, he is thrilled to be working in a very contemporary milieu. "It is so amazing to work on

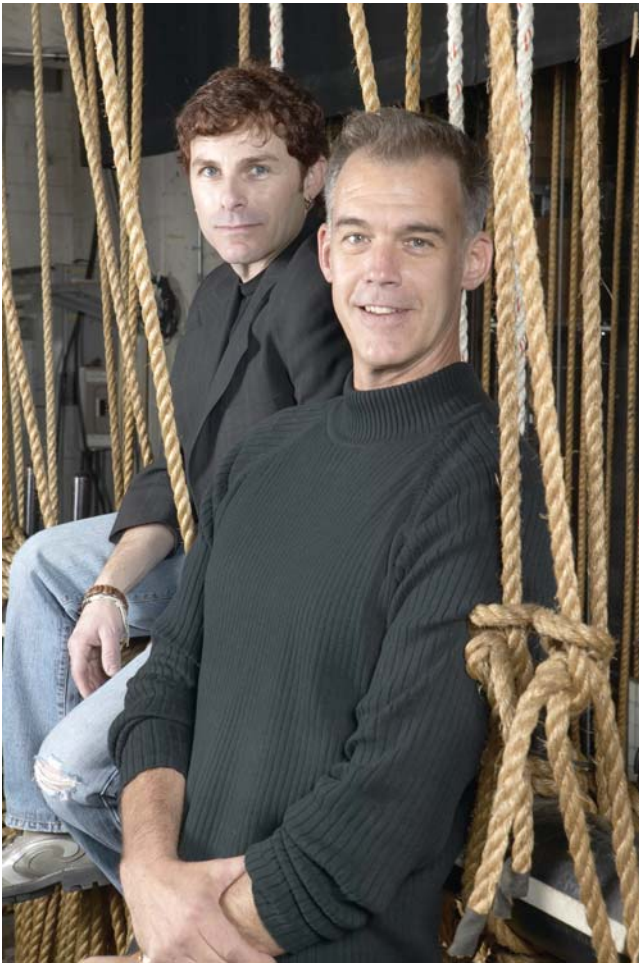
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something brand new. It is a rock opera; the music is rock pop based. There is some hard edge rock and beautiful pop ballads. It is definitely a contemporary score. That is where John lives."

It was DeGruccio's on-the-job training as a resident director for the Colony that brought him to the attention of Andrew Barnacle, Artistic Director of the Laguna Playhouse. Barnacle hired him to direct the musical *Spitfire Grill* and to restage his Colony production of *The Laramie Project*. Word spread about his success there and he became a hot property, working in theatres from Riverside to Ventura County.

No one is more surprised than DeGruccio about the turn of his career. But, simply put, he is a director who loves to work with actors. He shyly explains, "I respect and love actors because that's where I come from. I understand the way they work, how they build characters. I like good sane people without unnecessary drama. I don't mind an opinionated actor. I actually like those who come in and have ideas. What I don't like are egotis-





NICK DEGRUCCIO AND WRITER JOHN STOTHERS

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“As a director I want to see someone make choices. I will remember people a year later even if they weren’t right for the original project. Also, when a director gives you an adjustment, it doesn’t mean to throw away everything you have been doing. A big clue for a director is how someone adjusts. Actors tend to give away their power because they think an adjustment means, ‘Oh, I did it all wrong.’ Also, remember: we are not pulling babies out of rubble. It’s entertainment—get over it!”

While DeGruccio loves working on standards in musical theatre and has garnered major awards and nominations, including two directing Ovation Awards for *1776* and *The Laramie Project*, his ambition now is to do more work from the ground up. “I am definitely branching out and moving into new project development. After *Pilgrim* I am developing a brand new play for the Rubicon with a great new playwright named Mark Stein. I have a version of Shakespeare I want to do as a musical and am meeting with a producer on that.” But he capably refuses to jinx it by naming the classic play. “I am trying hard to get in at the bottom floor and work with the writers and composers.”

Then there is film. DeGruccio is fascinated by film and is looking for the right way to move in that direction. “I really would like to work on a film. I am a very visual director. I have a visual sense in my head; it’s the way I create.”

DeGruccio is becoming so well known as a director, one wonders whether a position as a regional theatre artistic director is in his future. “That would be fantastic. I’d love to be able to do it. Right now nothing has really led me down that path. The thing about being an artistic director is that it is an incredibly difficult job and it takes all your time. But I am always open to new doors.”

One thing DeGruccio has done superbly in his career is choose which open doors to walk through. Perhaps that is why the plot of *Pilgrim*, which is all about following dreams, is such a strong metaphor for his constantly growing and changing artistic life.

PILGRIM

Opens March 25; plays Thurs.-Fri., 8 pm;
Sat., 2 and 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; ends April 16
Tickets: \$39-\$59 (previews: March 16-24, \$29-\$49)
Ricardo Montalban Theatre
1615 N. Vine St., Hollywood
800.595.4849 or www.whatispilgrim.com

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tical actors, those who can’t or won’t understand the big picture. There are certain people you meet who live their lives in a room full of mirrors. The biggest thing I try to keep out of my work is drama and cruelty. There is none of that ever!”

One of DeGruccio’s most appealing traits is gratitude. “This is a dream come true. I always wanted to be creative. I thought I’d be on some one-hour TV show and have some success as an actor. That’s what I wanted for years. But dreams shift and you realize there is a far greater love. I don’t miss auditioning. I love what I do every day.”

Though he may not miss it, he does think he could make a million dollars teaching people how to audition now that he has spent so many years on the hiring end. “Actors shouldn’t take anything personally. They have a tendency to give away their power. One thing I have learned is to go in with my power and take the room. The big thing is to never go in there thinking, ‘What do they want?’ You take the material, make your choices, come in and present it.