

theater ♦ preview

A mentor and a *paesan*

By LISA INTRABARTOLA
On the Go Writer

Growing up a first-generation American can be confusing.

"They are young people who are the holder of the Old World and the New World, sort of carrying the torch, and in many ways acting as parents to their parents," says Frank Ingrasciotta, the son of Sicilian immigrants.

The West Chester, N.Y., actor and comedian wrestles with this culture clash on stage in his one-man show, "Blood Type: Ragu." During his autobiographical, two-part piece, Ingrasciotta plays more than 30 characters — from his parents to his teachers — all of whom helped to shape his persona, he says.

"We push where we come from away" he says, "only to

THE DIVA FESTIVAL

Featuring Frank Ingrasciotta
....
8 p.m. Thursday and May 10
....
George Street Playhouse, 9
Livingston Ave., New Brunswick
....
\$30 for four; individual tickets
available from box office
....
(732) 246-7717

figure out when you're older you have to embrace that in order to move on and become your true self."

Ingrasciotta's performance will be one of several used to introduce urban youth to the arts during George Street Playhouse's fourth annual Divas and Gentle Men Festival. The two-week project, created and co-directed by George Street Ed-

ucation Consultant, Ted Sod, enlists eight professional writers and performers to serve as teaching artists in the New Brunswick Public School System.

Starting Wednesday, Ingrasciotta and his peers will work along side young people, encouraging them to develop creative projects of their own, culminating with a set of public performances dubbed the Divas Gentle Men Project. One will showcase the talents of the professional artists while the other gives the spotlight to the students.

Though Italians no longer make up the bulk of new immigrants in this country, Ingrasciotta says "Blood Type: Ragu" is still relevant to the New Brunswick students he will be mentoring, many of which represent the first generation of American-born Latinos, Asian-

Indians or Eastern Europeans in this area.

"The issues I deal with are still prevalent to what's going on in our society today, especially since we're becoming such a multicultural world," he explains. "I have great compassion for kids who are in the same situation that I was growing up."

Ingrasciotta, who also teaches poetry, play-writing and theater arts in New York and New Jersey schools, says these mentoring initiatives are invaluable experiences for both adults and youth because they create an environment that fosters emotional release.

"It's a tremendously rewarding experience, especially for boys, who need a lot of mentoring in the in the area self expression," he says. "A lot of times what's coming out of them isn't what they're truly

feeling."

While girls will share their emotions much more freely with their peers, boys run the risk of being called a "wimp" or worse for doing the same, Ingrasciotta says. Those hurling the insults are just "uncomfortable with their own vulnerability," he adds.

Ingrasciotta will perform the first act of his piece to kick off the project with his group and follow it up with community building work through ice-breaking theater games. Once the group loosens up, Ingrasciotta will challenge them with writing exercises that will later become the backbone of the students' performance.

"I have the vehicle to give them the structure to produce that in the end," he says. "The voices are the kids' voices, I am the conduit."

WEDNESDAY and MAY 10:
Mississippi Charles Bevel and
Liza Colon-Zayas, 8 p.m.

THURSDAY and MAY 11: Frank
Ingrasciotta, 8 p.m.

MAY 15 and 17: Carmelita Tro-
picana, 8 p.m.

MAY 16 and 18: Suzanne Doug-
las, 8 p.m.

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