



LABYRINTH 2

*Plays by Don Nigro:
2001-2011*

Jim McGhee

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Preface

My first account of Don Nigro's work—*Labyrinth: the Plays of Don Nigro*—dealt with plays published by January, 2002, as well as scripts that had not been published by that date. This second book describes monologues, short(er) plays, and full-length plays written since then, and Samuel French, Inc. now lists all of Nigro's work on its website: www.samuelfrench.com. I have followed the traditional alphabetical order for plays of varying length.

Since I first learned of Nigro's plays, I and my students at York College of Pennsylvania have produced over 20 of his scripts. Most recently, we presented *Chronicles* in December, 2009, *Paganini* in March, 2010, *Cinderella Waltz* in October, 2010, and *Lurker, Things That Go Bump in the Night, Bible, and The Sin-Eater* in November, 2011. Audience response has been enthusiastic and players who have graduated write that many of their fondest memories are connected with their experiences doing his plays.

We are all familiar with the stereotype of the struggling artist whose work, relatively unknown and unappreciated during his lifetime, becomes canonical for later generations. And although Nigro's plays are being produced in high schools, colleges, and universities, as well as in professional venues here, in Canada, and in Europe, I believe his work should be much better known. Information about plays written after January, 2012, may be found at goose.ycp.edu/~jmcghee/dnigro.

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Chapter One

Full Length Plays

Animal Tales is a collection of eleven short plays that may be done as a full-length show, in small groups, or individually. Nigro writes that he very strongly discourages the use of animal costumes, actors getting down on all fours, and expressions of overt animal physicality. In *Three Turkeys Waiting for Corncobs*, two men and a woman portray three wild turkeys—Bob, George, and Penny—who are waiting in someone’s back yard for corncobs to be thrown out. Penny asks the two males if they think there is more to life than corncobs and bugs. She says that she has always wanted to play the saxophone and that, someday, even though she doesn’t have fingers or lips, she will be a world-famous saxophone player. She says she is going to search for a saxophone tree. George tells her that if she leaves them she will become flockless and have nobody to gobble with. She will walk alone forever and go mad. But she leaves and the males wonder if they should have been more supportive. Bob asks George what a saxophone is and George says that the corncobs are coming as he looks back to where Penny has gone; Bob looks towards the corncobs and the light fades out.

In *Dialogue with Lemmings*, two lemmings “in a bleak landscape” walk slowly at first and then with increasing speed. Their names are Lem and Em and they speak tersely as Em tries to find out what is bothering Lem, who feels an itching in his head. Em thinks that he, too, may be experiencing the same feeling. Lem says he has to go, but Em thinks there is a cliff “over there.” Lem doesn’t know why but he says he has to go. Em tells him that if they don’t stop they are going to go over the cliff. He summarizes their situation: they don’t know where they are going, nor why, but millions of them are going to fall off the cliff onto the sharp ocean rocks below. Lem says it’s something in the head, and Em repeats the phrase as they walk now rapidly. “Here we go,” Lem says, and the lights black out.

One character on a bare stage in *Platypus* is trying to discover who and what he is, trapped in a strange party costume he can't take off. He thinks his grandpa was a duck and his grandma a beaver, but he doesn't know and wonders what he is supposed to be. He says he doesn't fit in anywhere and that being odd is a terrible curse. He hates his claws and wishes he had fingers. He fears that one day he will be extinct, be nothing. He wishes he could find somebody like him and thinks he was cobbled together from leftover pieces of somebody else. He asks the audience if he can sit with them just for company but, realizing the futility of his request, apologizes as the lights go out.

Another lone actor, a mouse in *The Trap*, explains to the audience that he ought to know better but he finds the cheese in what he knows is a mouse trap compelling. He says that he has seen many others crushed horribly by the great metal prong snapping down, crushing their heads and spines, and he wonders what kind of hideously depraved creature could have created such a monstrous thing. But the cheese smells are so wonderful that he thinks, perhaps, if he is quick enough, he can get the cheese before the trap springs. He argues that nobody ever accomplished anything new if they presumed that the failures of the past would happen to them, too. He says he doesn't need the cheese, that he can live off the crumbs from the kitchen table or inside the stove. He says he can run rings around the cat and is a very careful mouse. He knows the trap is a trick devised to kill him, but he dreams about the cheese, wondering who is more evil, the person who invented the trap, or the one who invented cheese, because without cheese the trap wouldn't work. He thinks he might be able to just sniff the cheese, saying that desire is a trap, yet desire is all there is. He resolves to walk away, but then he reaches out his "little" arm. Blackout and the sound of a giant trap snapping shut.

A lone actor in *The Great Chipmunk Labyrinth* speaks to us "from inside his labyrinth of tunnels." He tells us that chipmunks, thought cheerful, are really torn by constant doubts and regrets. He wonders why the great Chipmunk God, who created snakes to kill inferior creatures like mice, allows the snakes to swallow the chipmunk babies. He loves the labyrinth of tunnels he and his forbears have created to confuse the snakes, tunnels given them, the chosen of God, by the Great Chipmunk to celebrate his mysterious handiwork. He says he can't stop thinking about the hawk that swooped down and took his mother, pregnant with brothers and sisters, to a nest in the trees to be torn apart. He urges himself not to think of the hawk and wonders if the tunnels he digs are perhaps the inside of the brain of the Chipmunk God, who is the hollow space inside the labyrinth inside his brain inside the labyrinth. He wants to think only of digging tunnels, his "lonely work in the dark." Lights fade out.

In *Groundhog at the Window* the actor tells us that something in his head makes him slow but thoughtful. He says he will eat anything but he tries to

stay away from humans although he keeps returning to the basement window of a house near his den. One window-well in particular attracts him, not just because it is a good place to hunt toads after it rains but because he sees another groundhog looking back at him through the glass of the window. This groundhog imitates everything he does and he wonders what the other groundhog's life is like. Sometimes the human hears him scratching at the glass to let the other groundhog out and comes out to chase him away. He is troubled that the groundhog behind the glass imitates everything he does. He has a sense that something is following him across the grass, but all he can see is his shadow and he wonders if that shadow is the dark disguise of the groundhog in the window. He screams at the creature in the window well and it screams back at him. He says there is an itching in his head that makes him dizzy and thirsty. There is froth at his mouth and he thinks the dark thing that follows him across the grass has gotten into his head and is eating his soul.

In *Parrots* two actors move back and forth sideways as if on their perch in a cage created by shadows of bars. Pickles repeats everything Pecky says and Pecky tells us that the question is not why 'this jackass' keeps repeating everything he says but why he himself feels compelled to keep saying stupid things like, "Polly want a cracker?" since neither of the birds is named Polly and Pecky would rather have a cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate shake. Pecky thinks he is going mad, that there is another person inside him who keeps saying inane phrases that he must repeat. And he is trapped in a cage with a moron. Pecky asks Pickles to say, just once, something that Pecky hasn't said first. "I love you," Pickles says. Pecky replies that Pickles is a tape recorder with feathers and cannot say anything intelligent. "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," Pickles responds and continues to utter random sentences from physics, police car radios, and aliens, and then starts singing songs. Pecky shouts at him to shut up, saying that he hates him and wishes he were ground up into cat food. Pecky expresses satisfaction with peace and quiet, but then asks Pickles, who is silent, if he is pouting. Pecky repeats some of the phrases he said at the beginning of the play, but gets no response. He asks if Pickles is dead and tells him that he loves him. But he gets no response to "Polly want a cracker?" and the lights fade out.

Two cats, Maggie and Tabby, on a rug in front of a fireplace in *String Theory*, talk about the meaning of life. Maggie says that life is dark and she sometimes thinks she is going crazy. Tabby suggests that if they run away all the stuff that seems to matter will just vanish. But Maggie wonders what it all means, although she doesn't want it to be over. She has no faith that there is anything on the other side of the fence. Tabby says there was another yard there yesterday and Maggie asks if she knows it is still there today and whether it is the same yard and what is over the fence of that yard. Tabby says she guesses it is all yards forever, like a big house where you can go through more and more rooms. Maggie says she is sick of her life and wants

something else. When Tabby asks what, Maggie tells her that when she was chasing a string she wondered why she was doing it. Tabby says they are cats and cats chase things. Maggie says they chase mice and birds so they can eat them but why do they chase string? She says that when she saw the hand of the child that was moving the string, she stopped chasing the string because she didn't want to be manipulated. Tabby tells her that they are cats and she can play or not, that it's her choice. Maggie says life is meaningless and that what gives them pleasure is either illusory or an obscenity. She says that they are victims of a process they don't understand, controlled by other victims who don't understand. Tabby asks her if she enjoys chasing the string, and when she says she does, Tabby tells her to "chase the damned string."

One character in *Bat* hangs upside down in dim, gloomy light, telling us that the piece will be short because of the blood rushing to his head. He tells us of a war between the birds and the beasts and when the birds wanted the bat to join them he said he was a beast, but when the beasts wanted him to join them he said he could fly like the birds. When a treaty was made neither the birds nor the beasts wanted the bat. Hanging upside down in a cave he heard a rustling and realized that there were millions and millions of others just like him, but each one was alone. He doesn't know what it means. Even if he slept right side up the world would still seem upside down to him. "Not bird. Not beast. Not anything." He asks us what kind of animal we are and closes with "Suck you later. Maybe we can hang out together."

Ed, a baboon, in *The Baboon God*, speaks to us about the absurd, insulting, and blasphemous attempt to teach evolutionary thought in their baboon schools. He says it is obvious that they are made in the image of the blue ass and floppy red nose of the Great Baboon God and he urges immediate execution of those secular baboons "who would fill our children's heads with monstrous fairy tales about the humans being some form of cousin to us." He says such ignorance is insulting and appalling and urges those listening to "exterminate the vermin who spread these unholy lies," in the name of "the Most Holy Lord and Creator, the Great Blue-Assed Baboon God. Amen."

In *Waiting*, three cows—Bessie, Opal, and Eloise—are standing in line, wondering why they are there and what is going on. Opal says she has no idea what "they" do or why "they" do it, but Eloise is sure that everything will be fine, that "they" feed them and take good care of them. But, Bessie says, "they" have never loaded them in trucks and taken them to another place before. She says the place doesn't smell like a barn, that the hundreds of other cows, especially those at the head of the line, look worried. Eloise thinks that most unhappiness in cows is caused by worrying. She says the trick is to relax and be thankful for what they have. Bessie says they don't know if they're ever going home again, that they don't know where they're going or why they are here. Eloise tells her to be calm, put herself in the hands of Providence, and have faith that everything will be all right. Bessie

says she smells fear and thinks something terrible is going on. Eloise says she believes that they were put on earth for a purpose, even though they may not know what that purpose is. They need to trust the powers that have always looked after them and everything will be all right. Opal says the line is moving again and as the light fades Bessie repeats, uneasily, Eloise's assurance, "The line is moving and everything is fine."



In *City of Dreadful Night*, four characters—Gus, in his thirties; his brother, Tony, in his thirties; Philly, in his twenties; and Anna, in her late twenties—enact the discovery of an unsuspected murder. The scene is New York City in the late 1940s and a unit set represents all locations simultaneously: a park bench DR, a coffee shop with curved counter and stools DL, a bedroom with bed and chair on a platform UC, and the street played across the downstage area. We hear the sound of pigeons in the dark and lights come up on Gus and Tony on the park bench as Anna, in the upstage shadows, sits before her mirror, and Philly leans on the counter of the coffee shop reading a newspaper. From the laconic conversation of Gus and Tony we learn that Gus wants Tony to spy on Anna. Gus thinks Anna is seeing someone and he wants Tony to find out who the man is. Tony suggests that perhaps Gus should forget about Anna but agrees to follow her. As Tony moves downstage, Anna asks him if he is following her. She thinks she recognizes him and suggests that he would like a piece of warm cherry pie. Tony says he might have liked one before the war but he isn't sure now. She says that perhaps he can have some pie when he gets done following her.

As Anna sits on the bench with Gus, Tony sits on a stool in the coffee shop and asks Philly if he recognizes the picture of Anna that Gus gave him. Philly warns Tony to watch out for her, that she is trouble. He says he has seen her with a man he thinks is a killer. Tony writes a phone number on a napkin and tells Philly to call him if the girl comes in again. Tony goes to Anna who is sitting on the bench feeding the pigeons. She says she saw him looking up at her window the previous night and thinks Gus is paying him to follow her. Tony denies being paid anything, and as Gus moves into Anna's room and sits in front of the mirror, she remembers seeing a photograph of Gus and Tony and a pretty girl taken at Coney Island before the war. Tony says that when he sees Anna moving from window to window in her red slip she reminds him of a girl he used to know. Anna asks Tony who got the girl in the photograph but he says he can't remember. Anna asks him to come up to her room, and when Tony says he's busy she says she'll leave her door unlocked if he wants to come up later.

She goes to her room where Gus has been waiting. He asks her where she has been and gets upset with her evasive answers. She asks him where he

goes at night and tells him that if what he does is none of her business then what she does is none of his. Gus leaves and joins Tony on the bench, asking him if he has found out if Anna is seeing somebody. Tony tells him that sometimes Anna walks to see the monkeys in the zoo and sometimes goes to Coney Island.

We hear the sound of seagulls and lapping water as Tony joins Anna looking out at the water on Coney Island. Anna says there's somebody else inside Tony, someone a lot more complicated. She thinks Tony wants her and wonders what Gus would do if he caught them naked in bed together. She says the gulls and the smell of the water remind her of Cape Cod and doing everything with her sister until the war came and her father left and her mother went insane and her sister went away.

She walks into the upstage shadows and Tony moves to the coffee shop. Philly says the woman Tony was asking about came into the coffee shop with some guy, a guy that looked like Tony, a few nights earlier. Tony gives Philly a dime so that he can call him the next time the woman comes in. Tony leaves the coffee shop and paces back and forth across from Anna's place, talking disjointedly to himself, seeming to be almost remembering something. As he looks up at Anna's window, the light fades on him, ending the first act.

Act Two begins as the lights come up on the bedroom with Anna just opening the door for Tony. Philly is behind the counter in the coffee shop and Gus sits on a stool drinking coffee. Tony tells Anna that he needs to talk to her and she asks him to come in. She is trying to remember a nightmare about her mother and sister, but Tony says that Gus will kill her if she is cheating on him. She taunts Tony until he slaps her and she falls backward across the bed. She asks Tony if he wants her and wonders if he hit the girl in the picture at Coney Island. When Tony says that he is trying to save her, Anna asks what Gus has on him. Tony says that his head got hurt in the war and that Gus looks out for him by helping him remember things. Anna says that Gus doesn't want him to remember and asks about the girl in the picture. When Tony says he thinks she died, Anna asks if he killed her, if Gus helped him get rid of the body. Tony says that she loved Gus and when Anna says that Tony killed her, he grabs her around the throat and says loudly that he didn't kill her. When he lets her go, he sits on the bed, and Anna asks him who she looks like. He says she looks like Ida Lupino and like the girl in the picture. In a long speech, Anna explains that the girl in the photograph was her sister who ran off to live in the city, leaving Anna to take care of their sick, drunk, half-crazy mother. The sister wrote letters every week but then the letters stopped. The mother fell down the stairs and died and Anna came to the city to look for her sister who had disappeared. From the photographs her sister had sent, Anna was able to locate the coffee shop and, one day,

Gus. Then Tony started following her and now she wants to know which one of them killed her sister.

Lights come up on the coffee shop where Philly is telling Gus about Tony following Anna. Gus says he told Tony to follow her but is surprised when Philly tells him that Tony has been in Anna's room. Gus leaves the coffee shop and lights come up on Tony and Anna in her room. She wants to know who took the pictures of Gus, Tony, and her sister. Tony seems about to remember when Gus comes in, asking what's going on. Anna tells Gus that he knew her sister and shows him the Coney Island photo. Gus thinks she has taken it from his room but she insists her sister gave her a copy of the picture. Tony remembers that the name of the girl in the picture is Faith. Gus notices the mark on Anna's face where Tony hit her and says he will kill him if he touches her again. He accuses Anna of being with him just to find out what happened to her sister. Gus says he hasn't seen the girl since before the war and when Anna asks about the picture in his room Gus says it is a picture of his brother Tony. He is bothered that Anna pretended to like him even though she thought he might have killed her sister. When Anna tries to leave, Gus throws her on the bed, saying she is not going anywhere, that he needs to think. Tony asks Gus who took the pictures of the three of them and the lights fade on the bedroom and come up on the coffee shop where Philly is reading the paper.

Tony enters from the darkness and Philly serves him black coffee, asking if he wants a piece of cherry pie. When Anna enters, Philly gives her coffee with extra sugar and lots and lots of cream. Gus comes in and says he has a job to do. He asks Philly where his camera is but Philly says he doesn't have a camera any more, adding that he spent the war in prison because he did some stupid things because of mental problems. Tony remembers that Philly was the kid that used to follow them around before the war, and Gus wants to know what happened to the girl. Under pressure from Gus, Philly admits that he took the girl to Coney Island and thinks that she may have gone to see her sister. Philly says that Anna can't be the girl's sister because the girl told him her sister had dangerous mental problems and might have killed her mother and that was why she was going back home to Cape Cod to talk to her. Tony says he remembers getting a letter from the girl just before he went overseas, verifying what Philly says. Gus asks Anna what she has been doing since the war started. Anna admits that she had a nervous breakdown after her mother died and that she was put in a place where they gave her drugs and shock treatments. She tells the men of a bad dream she keeps having about walking on the beach with her sister and being angry with her for suggesting that she pushed their mother down the stairs. Anna says that in the dream she picks up a rock and hits her sister in the head and her sister falls face down in the water. Anna runs away but when she comes back her sister is not there. Anna says the dream keeps playing in her head over and over but that it's just a

movie. She asks Philly for some pie. Gus wants to leave. Tony says he'll stay for a bit and tells Philly to give Anna some pie. Anna eats the pie, saying it's very good. Lights fade out.



The set for the 4-character (3m, 1w) *The Count of Monte Cristo in the Chateau D'If* is a two-level unit with a background of fog and crags. Two sets of curving stone steps lead up to a platform with Alexandre Dumas' desk and chair SR. Under the platform UC between the steps is a cave mouth. There is a door SR opening upstage and between it and the SR steps is a window. DR a table and chairs. A garden bench is downstage of the SL steps and further downstage, perpendicular to the edge of the stage, is a "stone" wall that characters must dig through. A small prop table is on the landing halfway up the SL stairs. Escape stairs lead off from halfway up both sets of stairs and from either side of the top of the platform. This unit set represents a dungeon cell in the Chateau d'If, a dark prison on an island in the Atlantic, the study of Dumas, an inn near the sea, the jagged island of Monte Cristo, and a garden. The action is fluid, without set changes or intermission.

A Chopin *Etude* and the conclusion of Rossini's *William Tell* Overture are heard as the house lights fade to darkness. A circle of light comes up on Edmund Dantes, sitting center stage on the floor of his cell. Dumas is barely visible at his desk, starting to ask ludicrous questions. Dantes responds with his own thoughts, concluding the scene by saying that his purpose is the conquest of time. As the lights go to black we hear the sound of a cell door creaking shut, then the sound of gulls and ocean and the voices of Mercedes and Dumas. Birdsong signals the light coming up on Mercedes on the bench in her garden. Auguste Maquet, a literary drudge, tells her that he loves her, and she says that she loves only Edmund Dantes. When Dumas says, "Oh, cries the rejected lover, running along like one demented and tearing his hair," Maquet looks up at him and asks if he thinks that's too much. Dumas repeats the line and Maquet follows directions, tearing his hair and running like one demented to the table DR. Dumas suggests to Maquet that perhaps something unfortunate should happen to Dantes. Maquet says that he cannot control Fate, but Dumas says that he, as author, can. He tells Maquet to denounce Dantes to the authorities as a traitor. Maquet will get not only money but Mercedes. Dumas tells the hesitant Maquet that he must decide if he wants to be a major or a minor character. We hear the cawing of ravens and Dumas says, "Good. The ravens are good. Let's keep that."

We hear the sound of a ticking clock as the lights come up on Mercedes. She complains about waiting (and burping) but then sees her lover Dantes, home from the sea. She rushes to greet him just as he opens the door, clunk, smashing her in the face. Dantes thinks she has been hiding and looks at the