



Cris D'Annunzio Digs His Dad

by [Cynthia Citron](#) | February 14, 2010

***Digging up Dad*, continues Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; through March 20. Tickets: \$15-\$20. Ruskin Group Theatre, 3000 Airport Ave., Santa Monica; 310.397.3244 or ruskingrouptheatre.com**

When I first saw Cris D'Annunzio as the defense attorney in *Mutiny at Port Chicago* last summer at the Ruskin Group Theatre, I thought he looked just like Kevin Spacey. And so did Kevin Spacey. In fact, the two men not only look alike, they have the same birthday as well. (What are the odds!?) Which might have influenced Spacey when he chose D'Annunzio to play the lead in *Cobb*, Lee Blessing's 1989 play about the celebrated Detroit Tigers outfielder. That play ran some eight years ago at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank.

But football, rather than baseball, was D'Annunzio's forte. He played the game while getting his BA in History at Princeton and spent a year playing for the Buffalo Bills after he graduated. Fate, however, was to take him in a different direction. He got a summer job while he was in college as the stage manager at the Chautauqua Institute, near his home in upstate New York. It may have sounded important, he admits, "but stage manager was just a fancy name for someone who could carry a harp all by himself."



Cris D'Annunzio in *Digging up Dad*

While he was moving instruments around, however, he was "discovered" by a director at John Houseman's Acting Company and given a part in the 1930s gangster play they were producing. "I played a tough guy and got to wear a fedora and a brown pin-striped suit," he recalls. "I didn't have any lines, though. I just came out onstage and choked somebody."

After his year with the Bills ("I wasn't the biggest or fastest guy in the world," he says ruefully), D'Annunzio did a stint as a stockbroker for Shearson Lehman Brothers, a gig he characterizes as "fairly miserable."

Shortly after that he moved to California and began to hang out with a group of actors he met on the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica. He met Dean Cain and began working as an extra on his *Superman* TV series. He began doing commercials. His first one, for Levis, won a Clio, the advertising world's equivalent of an Oscar. He also began to study acting. He had no formal training until that time but, he says, "When I do something, I immerse myself in it entirely." So he spent two years working with Laura Henry in a Sanford Meisner-based program and then with Harry Master George and Eric Morris.

By the time he was called to audition for Kevin Spacey, he was confident enough to write his own monologue. Spacey apparently liked it because he called D'Annunzio back for an additional tryout. But Spacey saw right through him when D'Annunzio claimed the monologue was part of a one-man show he was writing. Even though it was a fib, Spacey encouraged him to continue with it. "And that gave me the impetus to go ahead and actually write it," D'Annunzio says. The finished script is called *Digging up Dad* and it is having its world premiere at Ruskin Group Theatre in Santa Monica, directed by Mike Myers (who helmed *Faithful* last season at Ruskin).

D'Annunzio's one-man show deals with his childhood and his relationship with his father, a small-time hood who died in bed at the age of 48, apparently murdered by his Mafia colleagues. This is only his suspicion, D'Annunzio says, because he really isn't sure there is a Mafia. He isn't sure, he says, because the men his father hung around with at the Italian-American Progressive Club were all "just a bunch of nice guys doing things they shouldn't have been doing." (Sort of like Tony Soprano...)

His father had no full-time job. He tended bar at the Club from time to time and was a small-time bookie who invested occasionally in the stock market but never more than a couple of hundred dollars at a time. So how did he accrue \$250,000 which is how much he had when he died?

An autopsy revealed his father had died of a drug overdose but D'Annunzio claims he didn't do drugs. He feels sure someone gave him a shot of an opiate sometime in the night. "I was not an innocent bystander, though," D'Annunzio says. "I was greedy and I took the money."



D'Annunzio

Taking the money left him open to extortion by two guys who met him in an LA garage and heisted him for some \$15,000 a week. "When I got down to my last 30 or 40 thousand dollars," D'Annunzio says, "I called somebody I knew and those guys never showed up again."

His mother, who is still alive and kicking at 67, was even more "connected" than his father, he claims. She was an executive with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and dealt with the construction of housing projects. She also had a sometime chauffeur named Gus who drove a big Cadillac and "takes care of things for me when I have a problem with people," she said. Unfortunately, Gus later got "rubbed out" as his mother so inelegantly put it. D'Annunzio, still in a state of heavy denial, didn't ask any questions. "Sometimes it's better to leave things alone," he says.

Despite his mixed emotions about his parents, however, D'Annunzio will carry on his family name when his wife of 11 years gives birth to a son any minute now. (His other three children are girls.)

Meanwhile, D'Annunzio will continue playing tough guys in movies and on TV and write such stories as *Chasing 3000*, his 2008 film which starred Ray Liotta and dealt with baseball star Roberto Clemente's triumphant pursuit of his 3,000th hit with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

But you'll hear about all this and much more when you see *Digging up Dad*.

Article and Feature image by Cynthia Citron. Story images by Agnes Magyari.

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