

Scalia's Doppelganger on Prepping for 'The Originalist' and Hanging Out With Uncle Nino



Actor Edward Gero, who portrays the late Justice Antonin Scalia in the theater play *The Originalist*, outside the U.S. Supreme Court on June 13, 2017. (Photo: Diego M. Radzinski/ALM)

By Tony Mauro

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Meeting Edward Gero inevitably and instantly brings back memories of Antonin Scalia, the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.

Gero [played Scalia in the 2015 play](#) “*The Originalist*,” and as they got to know each other before the play opened, Scalia greeted Gero as “my doppelganger.”

The resemblance of the two is uncanny. Some of it may be the result of parallel backgrounds—both had roots in Italy and New Jersey. But other similarities are the product of Gero’s intense study of Scalia’s speech, gestures, mannerisms—even the waddling way he walked—to prepare for the play.

The likeness was so strong that when Scalia died in February 2016, some media outlets mistakenly used [photos of Gero](#) to illustrate their stories about the justice.

Gero, 62, returns to the Scalia role for the upcoming reprise of the play “The Originalist” at Washington’s [Arena Stage from July 7 to July 30](#). The play was a success in 2015 at Arena, where its run was extended twice, and was performed in Florida and California as well. A powerful exploration of Scalia’s larger-than-life personality, the play focuses on his interaction with his so-called “counter clerk”—a liberal African-American woman. Another clerk, a white conservative man, is also in the mix.

With Scalia gone, and the election of a controversial president who invoked Scalia’s name often, Gero says the play may feel subtly different—both in the script itself and in the way the audience reacts to it. Some excerpts from a recent conversation with Gero:

Where were you when you heard that Scalia died?

I was doing some errands in my car, listening to WTOP. The good news was, I was parked, because it threw me back in my chair. I was looking forward to more years of stories. But I’m grateful for the ones I have. I felt like I lost a family member.

How often did you meet with Scalia before the play debuted in 2015?

We probably met eight to 10 times in various settings. Probably half a dozen at the court, three or four lunches. We went out to dinner with his writing partner, Bryan Garner. I saw him speak in front of the National War College at the court. And then, the last time I saw him was at his annual skeet shooting excursion with his clerks. He invited me. I really connected with him, in a way, because of our heritage, because of our background. I recognized him as someone that would be in my family. You know, the tough exterior and the very warm heart and soul inside. He even had a spiritual side. His deep commitment to democracy is what came away and he was a great civil servant, really quite extraordinary.

It sounds like you liked him more than you thought you would.

More than I hoped I would. I expected him to be a great, powerful man and he just came across as very avuncular, really. It’s like hanging out with Uncle Nino after a while. You know, I’m not an attorney. I’m not a politician. And I’m sure we both, I know I did, had an interest in cultivating the friendship. I certainly didn’t want to antagonize. Certainly, he had a vested interest knowing I was going to portray him in public.

In addition to building your relationship, were you studying him?

Oh, absolutely. Particularly on the bench. And his speaking in public. He was a great performer. He knew the hard skills of delivering a line. His vocal energy would sustain it and there was a pattern to that. As an actor I tried to understand: what's underneath all that that keeps him buoyant and upbeat? It occurred to me that his hands go up, everything goes up, at the end. You get a sense of him saying, 'I've thought this out. This is my opinion and I'm right. It's obvious!'

Did Scalia see 'The Originalist?'

[At first] he said he would. And then a few days later he wrote back and said, 'You know, on further reflection it's not a good idea. I'm damned if I do, I'm damned if I don't. If I come to see it, people will ask me what I thought. If I say that I like it—I know that there are things in it that I will find unfair—they'll think I'm endorsing the whole project. If I say I didn't like it I'll be accused of being thin-skinned. So sorry to disappoint.' So I wrote back saying, 'I perfectly understand your reasoning. I just wish you had signed it, 'I dissent.'" But he sent me several notes when reports were coming back. Like a distant relative who was getting kudos vicariously. He was very warm about that.

The play was actually fair toward Scalia, wasn't it?

[Playwright] John Strand, to his credit, really worked hard at that ... I think what the audiences took from it in the first run was the humanization piece. They came with chips on their shoulder about Scalia, and I think we lean into that in the beginning of the play to sort of, give them what they want. Then, it's fun to sort of pull the rug out from under them. People come away saying, 'You know, it doesn't change my politics but, I'd have to reconsider who he is and how I think about that. Maybe we shouldn't rush to judgment.' I think that's certainly most important, still resonates. Probably more so, now.

Was that the theme of the play?

To show that he was not a monster? I mean, yeah. That's certainly the dialectic in the play. He says at the beginning, 'Which am I? Some people say, half the country says, I'm a monster and half the country say I'm a hero. Which am I?' So, it really puts the question back on the audience. I think that's the drama ... It's become more so, I think now, with his passing. With the election."

How is the play different from the one you performed in before Scalia died?

The world has changed. My experience has changed. With his passing there's more of a sense of representing a certain grace. I think I felt a little more pressure to get it right the first time around. Now that has been answered. The more significant part is how the audience is hearing the play, after his passing and after the election cycle. There's a consensus out there that both [sides] are tone-deaf. They're totally deaf. So, here's a play now that goes beyond a legacy of Scalia, where these two characters that represent the far-reaches of those bases are actually listening to each other."

What was it like performing in this play in Washington, where probably half the audience was lawyers?

Oh, it was red meat. They would 'get' more things. When I quoted the Second Amendment and stopped [after 'A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state,] they'd say 'Comma.' There is this argument about that, whether it made the first phrase inoperative, whether that predicate doesn't mean anything. The comma didn't get a laugh in California. Only in Washington."

What do you think Scalia would have thought of President Donald Trump?

That's hard to answer. I don't know. I think he would probably have problems with how he communicates, certainly. And, how he mangles things with 140 characters. You don't need to address this world with a tweet ... This sort of upheaval, if he'd lived longer, might have killed him.

Did Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg come to the play?

"Several times. Justice [Sonia] Sotomayor came, Justice [Stephen] Breyer came. I think she [Ginsburg] is going to be coming to this version. A couple times I saw her in chambers she said, 'You've got to get better lines for that [liberal] clerk.' I said, 'Why don't you write them?'

Did she write any?

She sent me a lovely note. She said we captured the spirit of her dear colleague perfectly. Very sweet.