

Loyola helped 'Father Guido' come alive for Novello

By Monica M. Walk

Like many a young Catholic, he found his vocation in Rome. But Don Novello didn't enter the priesthood; instead, as a young comedic writer, he developed his priestly persona of Father Guido Sarducci.

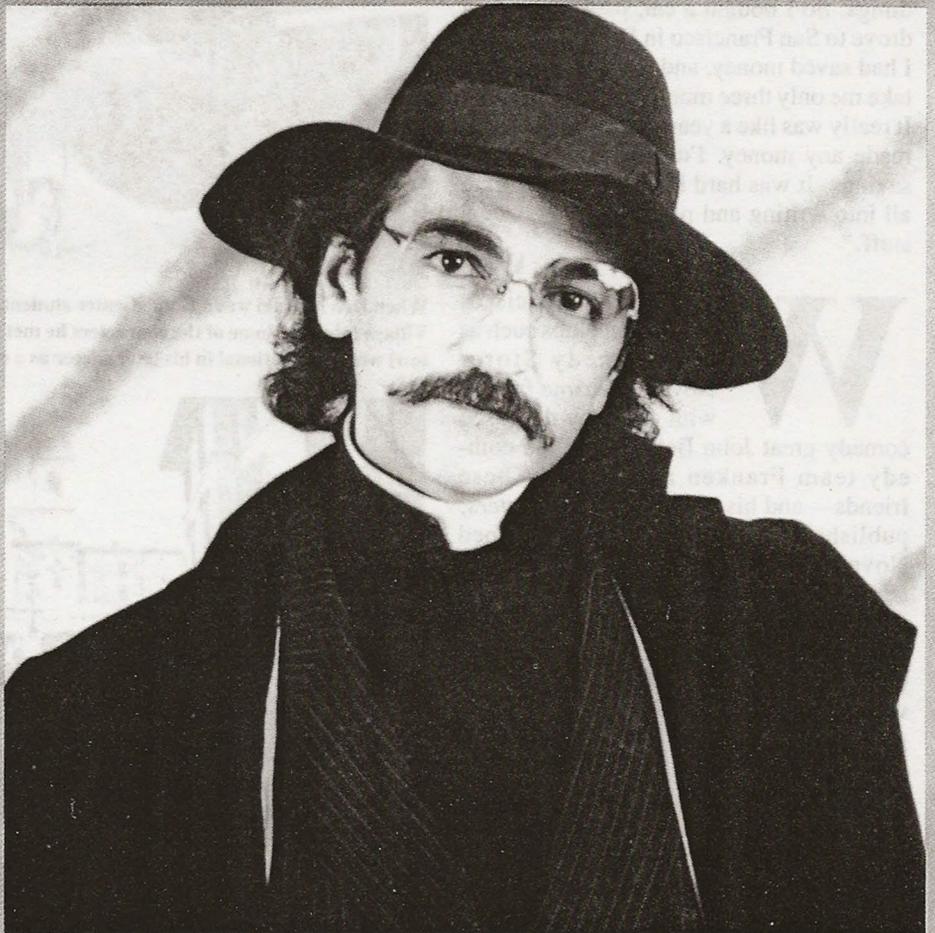
Novello credits the year he spent as a college student at Loyola University's Rome Center in 1962 with the germination of his Sarducci character.

"That year in Rome definitely changed my life," Novello said, looking relaxed and casual in jeans and a dark sports coat during an interview at a Chicago restaurant. He was in the city for a two-week stint as Father Guido Sarducci at the Fairmont Hotel's Moulin Rouge Room. "I saw the background of the Vatican during my time at Loyola. I wouldn't have done the character if I hadn't seen that. The ecumenical council also was going on at the time, and we had some famous priests come teach classes at Loyola. I really saw the Vatican scene.

"I saw some wheeler-dealer, cool-guy priests, too," Novello continued, adding that Father Guido Sarducci is not modeled on any one individual he met while in Rome. "They were new to me; I hadn't seen anything like them back in Lorain, Ohio. I grew up around people with Italian accents—my grandparents and great-aunts and uncles—but Father Guido's accent is a modern European accent that I picked up in Rome."

And as for Father Guido's occupation as a gossip columnist, Novello said, "I also became aware that there are real media priests. . . priests who write and broadcast news. In fact, the Vatican radio was begun by Marconi. It's the oldest station and it broadcasts in 50 languages. So priests really have a background in the news media.

"When I was developing the character, I was working with some friends in San Francisco on the Chicken Little Comedy Show in 1973, the only English-speaking show on a Spanish network. They were



Don Novello as "Father Guido Sarducci."

doing a segment on comedy news, so that's how I thought of the idea of a gossip columnist priest. I did three reports on Jackie Kennedy. The name 'Father Guido Sarducci' just came to me in a motel room in L.A. After the show, I continued doing the character in stand-up routines. I always knew I wanted to do a character—I didn't want to be another guy standing around talking about his friends."

Insisting that he never intended to become a performer, Novello recounts the path that led him to performance. Armed with a degree in economics from the University of Dayton and a taste for travel after his year in Rome, Novello enrolled in a graduate program at the American Institute for Foreign Trade in Phoenix. He wanted to

live in Europe and planned to pursue a career in advertising there. While working in advertising in Chicago, he found himself drawn to the creative side of the business, copywriting. From copywriting, he moved into humorous writing.

Novello says he began performing comedy as a way to get attention for his writing. "It was out of desperation that I began to perform," he says with a laugh. "I was 30 years old and I had no acting experience—just a college speech course that I had gotten an 'A' in, and the experience of making advertising presentations. But I didn't want to go back to advertising."

He never performed on any of Chicago's legendary comedy stages while he lived in the city, although Novello recalled one performance—a medley of cigarette commercials on a kazoo—at Kingston

Mines shortly before he relocated to California. He was working on a rock opera for about six months before he quit advertising and made the break west.

"I really enjoyed advertising," Novello said. "But I knew I wanted to write other things. So I bought a car, packed up, and drove to San Francisco in February of '72. I had saved money, and I thought it would take me only three months to sell a project. It really was like a year-and-a-half before I made any money. I'd just run out of my savings. It was hard because groups were all into writing and performing their own stuff."

While in San Francisco, working at clubs such as The Comedy Store, Novello became friends with the now-deceased comedy great John Belushi and the comedy team Franken and Davis. These friends—and his book *The Lazlo Letters*, published in 1977—eventually helped Novello land a job writing for the hit television show *Saturday Night Live*.

During his second week with the show, Novello wrote the now-classic Greek restaurant skit, and had Americans everywhere saying "Cheesburgah, cheeseburgah. Pepsi, no Coke." He drew on his memories of eating at the Billy Goat Tavern during his days as a Chicago ad copywriter.

"Yeah, Billy was still around when we ate there. He used to yell at us, 'Get a haircut, get a haircut,'" Novello remembered. "John (Belushi, the lead actor in the skit) knew that restaurant, too, from his time in Chicago. And he liked restaurants—his father owned a restaurant, so we called the restaurant in the skit 'The Olympia', after his father's place. It went over big. It was an ambitious skit—the biggest skit they did on the show then—mostly because of the stove and the cooking we did. I was always in the skit, in the back."

Since leaving *Saturday Night Live*, Novello has done several writing and performing projects, including a special for Cinemax, a high school yearbook of sheep called *The Blade*, several comedy albums, and two songs on 45s, *MacArthur Park* in Italian and *I Won't be Twisting this Christmas*. Most of these projects required about four months to complete. He currently is working on a sequel to *The Lazlo Letters*, and also manages his dog, Sport, whom he has placed on a number of shows, such as *Late Night with David Letterman*.



When Don Novello was a Rome Center student, Loyola's campus was still located in the old Olympic Village (above). Some of the characters he met in his travels around the interesting sites of Rome (below) were inspirational in his later career as a comedy writer and actor.



Novello also has been pursuing serious acting jobs. He most recently played the poignant role of the butler in "Life with Zoe," Francis Ford Coppola's contribution to the trilogy, *New York Stories*. He also had a small part in Coppola's film, *Tucker*.

When questioned about the longevity of Father Guido, Novello says he attributes the character's ten-plus-years as a comedy favorite to his writing. "I'd say his staying power is because of the writing more than anything else," Novello said. "Other religious characters stick to Gregorian chants and gags about nuns. I do religious stuff, but I also do political stuff. This is a character that can talk about anything. I do Sarducci like he is a real person."

Novello, who also attended two sum-

mer semesters at Loyola's Chicago campuses and now resides in San Anselmo, Calif., with his wife, says he often reminisces about his time at Loyola's Rome Center.

"The things you remember, that's education," he said. "I look back on that year often. I was at a reunion of Loyola Rome Center people in San Francisco recently, and I think everyone felt the time in Rome changed their lives. That time in Rome was really important to them—it was a special year. I know I learned a lot about how America was viewed by other countries. It was great to be with all these students from other countries, living together in the C.I.V.I.S. complex, the old Olympic Village. I enjoyed that year. It really changed my life." ■