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Three humanitarians honored at Lotos Club



Playwright John Guare. Photos by Letizia Mariotti

By Nino Pantano
Special to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle

On the afternoon of Tuesday, March 24, the Lotos Club at 5 East 66th St., Manhattan, honored three humanitarians with the 28th annual Erwin Piscator Award.

The Lotos Club was formed in 1870 as a literary and cultural club. At a state dinner in 1906, St. Clair McKelway, editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, tried to capture the essence of the club when he said, "The Lotos, as I remember, was formed by men in the professions or in the arts for finer purposes than conventional clubs could easily subserve. The

Lotos Club drew those who ranked sentiment above solidity, achievement above assumption and learning above wealth."

This year's honorees were the famed Author John Guare, Dr. Robert J. Campbell and Cesare L. Santeramo. This ceremony was hosted by the organization Elysium-Between Two Continents. According to a proclamation by Mayor Bill de Blasio, "The rich culture of the five boroughs has been defined by the waves of the new arrivals who brought their traditions and customs to our shores and reshaped the city's artistic landscape. Since 1983, Elysium has helped to further diversify the New York's arts scene by showcasing outstanding European theatre here in our city and promoting an exchange of ideas between the two continents." The mayor went on to congratulate the three honorees.



Cesare Santaramo and Dr. Robert Campbell.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proclamation hailed Elysium for preserving music, drama and literature produced by European artists, including many who suffered during WW II. "This afternoon, you celebrate the creative spirit of theatrical pioneer Erwin Piscator, honoring the accomplished playwright John Guare with the Piscator Award, and Dr. Robert J. Campbell and Cesare L. Santeramo with the honorary award for their support of art, culture and aspiring young vocalists. I join in congratulating all of these gentlemen for their significant contributions to the world.

Michael Lahr, program and associate artistic director for the group, was the master of ceremonies. He introduced the extraordinarily gifted Japanese baritone Takaoki Onishi accompanied by his wife Miki Hazui at the piano. She recently played at a sold-out recital in Tokyo for her Imperial Highness, the Princess Akishino. Onishi then sang "Core 'ngrato" ("Catari, Catari"), a Neapolitan love song (music by Salvatore Cardillo, lyrics by Alessandro Sica) with heartfelt passion and deep commitment, earning tumultuous applause. Ken Benson, Brooklyn-born radio host and opera agent, has been managing the career of this mellifluous baritone, who is rapidly rising to great heights in the opera world.

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The great tenor Enrico Caruso was also honored by the Lotos Club in 1916. A photo of that event with Caruso's signature and 18 other autographs of the literati and glitterati who attended, including Metropolitan Opera General Manager Gatti-Cazazza and famed composer Victor Herbert, was up for sale recently.

Louise Kerz Hirshfeld welcomed those in attendance, including many dignitaries, diplomats and various artists from the music and theatre world, and restated the organization's purpose of the arts assisting humanity, as it did during World War II and its aftermath.



Bariton Takaoki Onishi, right, and his wife, pianist Miki Hazui.

It was nice to chat with former Metropolitan Opera legend dramatic soprano Elinor Ross, whose regal roles, such as "Turandot," "Norma" and "Aida," gave us our fair share of royal attendance.

Anne Cattaneo, who is the dramaturg of Lincoln Center Theater and teaches at Julliard, spoke of the importance of theater in our lives especially theater that sends a message of enlightenment freedom and hope for the oppressed and enslaved.

Gregorij H. von Leitis, the artistic director of Elysium-Between Two Continents, has

been working for over 40 years at various theatres in Europe and in the U.S. He spoke eloquently of author John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation" and his prodigious body of work and presented him with the Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) 2015 award "for his invaluable contributions to the American theater as a truly original and innovative playwright who keeps pushing the boundaries of the theatre, disrupting the so-called 'realistic theatre' to better reflect the chaotic state of the world."

Guare spoke about his commitment to writing, enlightenment and truth and praised his wife and inspiration Adele Chatfield-Taylor, proudly seated at their table. Guare has taught at Yale, Princeton, Harvard, New York University and Julliard.

Onishi then sang Franz Lehar's "Yours is My Heart Alone" in German, "Dein ist Mein Ganzes Herz," from "The Land of Smiles," using his powerful and ardent Verdi baritone to thrilling effect. He was once again superbly accompanied by his radiant bride Hazui.

Humanitarian and author Luna Kaufman, a Holocaust survivor whose mission is peace, love and compassion, spoke of the importance of these qualities and the need for peace through the heart and the arts. Her devotion to Dr. Robert Campbell and Chev. Cesare Santeramo was seconded by the ebullient and dedicated Grigorij H. von Leitis. The Honorary Erwin Piscator Award 2015 in memory of Maria Ley Piscator, wife of Erwin (1898-1999), was presented to this "dynamic duo" for their extraordinary lifelong commitment and for their tireless efforts to help young singers in establishing their careers."

Dr. Robert Campbell, who served as clinical professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Weill Medical College, served on President Jimmy Carter's Commission on Mental Health. He was in the Medical Corps and wrote the renowned Campbell's Psychiatric Dictionary. His devotion and patronage to the arts has included the Metropolitan Opera, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation, Opera Index and other organizations, and has been exceptional. Campbell and cherished friend Cesare Santeramo have served on the boards of many charitable organizations. He gave a brief witty speech about how the arts keep him going.

Santeramo, who was born and raised in Newark and has family members living in Brooklyn, worked for Western Electric. He also had a successful singing career as a lead tenor with the New Jersey Opera, singing Alfredo in "La Traviata" opposite soprano legend Licia Albanese and singing 15 lead roles while still working for the company, which is a branch of AT&T. Santeramo, ever elegant, is on the board of Opera Index and devotes his time and unflagging energy to assisting young singers attain their goals. Santeramo was affiliated with the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation for almost 20 years and was a devoted friend to the late soprano. Every Christmas he would bring her a panettone -- the last one when she was 104. Santeramo showed heartfelt humility on the honor bestowed him.

Chairperson Louise Kerz Hirshfeld thanked everyone. Her co-chairpersons were Jolana Blau and Sachi Liebergesell, who heads the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation.

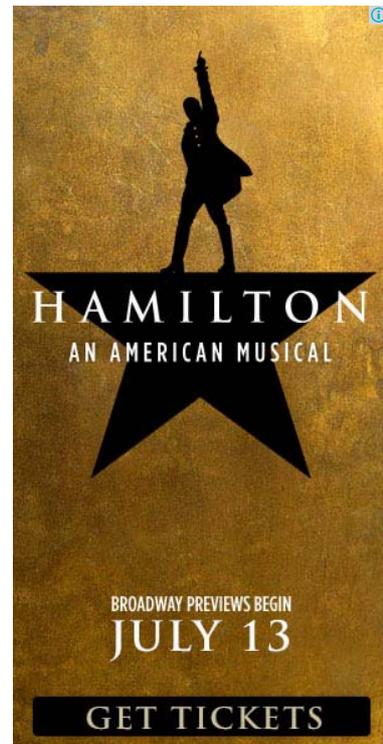
Actor Eli Wallach, who was born in Carroll Gardens, and passed away last year at age 98 was a recipient of the Erwin Piscator Award in 2001, along with his wife actress Anne Jackson. Wallach, who studied with Piscator, got a special memorial mention with others who passed away in the last year.

It was an extraordinary afternoon in the elegant Lotos Club with wines, salad, filet mignon (or salmon) and vanilla and raspberry cr me brul e, courtesy of Master Chef Raymond Holland. Congratulations to all the honorees, Elysium and all past and present writers and performers who make our lives richer for their pursuit of truth and beauty. Bertolt Brecht said of Erwin Piscator, "Erwin Piscator is the greatest theatre man of all time. He will leave a legacy which we should use." Bravo to all!

April 6, 2015 - 3:07pm

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