

Spring 2018

Signor Mio Carissimo: A Theatrical Analysis and Translation of Michelangelo's Love Letters to Tommaso dei Cavalieri

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Miles Edmonds Messinger
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Signor Mio Carissimo: A Theatrical Analysis and Translation
of Michelangelo's Love Letters to Tommaso dei Cavalieri

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts and
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Miles Edmonds Messinger

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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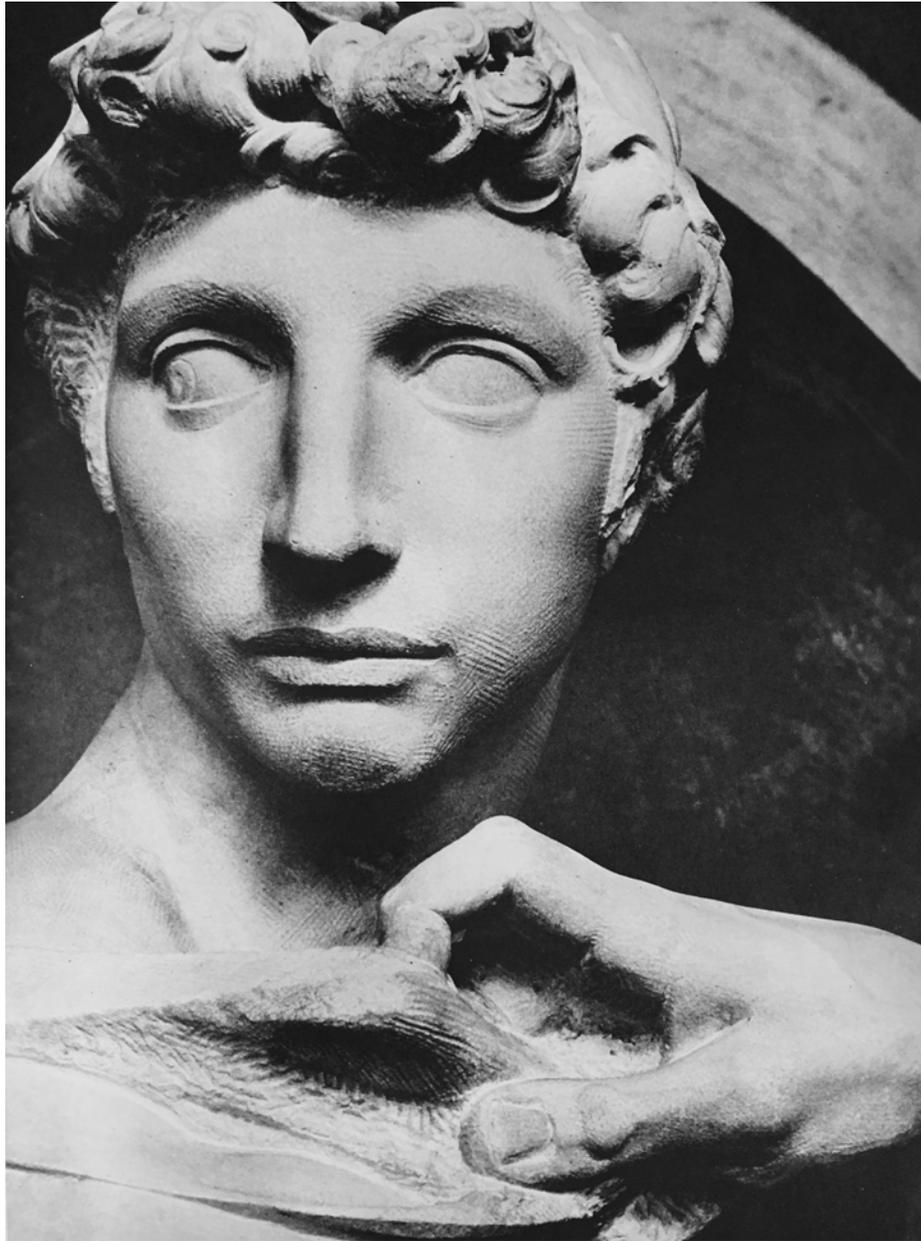
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Buonarroti, Michelangelo. THE FACE OF VICTORY. 1532-1534.
Salone dei Cinquecento, Florence.

Goldscheider, Ludwig. *Michelangelo: Paintings, Sculpture, Architecture*.
London, Phaidon Press LTD, 1964.

Signor Mio Carissimo: A Theatrical Analysis and Translation of Michelangelo's Love Letters to Tommaso dei Cavalieri

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Introduction

Michelangelo Buonarroti was the personification of artistic genius who left an enduring mark on Christian art and modern culture. He outclassed his contemporaries in the Italian Renaissance by setting a new standard for sculpture and painting. His most notable achievements include his marble sculpture of the biblical hero David, his monumental frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and his contribution to the development of mannerism. Although countless studies have been written on his most popular works, there has been a surprising lack of research into the most significant parts of his personal life.

There is great value in examining Michelangelo's platonic, familial, and romantic relationships, including his mysterious rapports with young nobleman Tommaso de Cavalieri and renowned Roman poet Vittoria Colonna. Michelangelo drafted ornate allegorical drawings for the two aristocrats, which are some of the few that can be considered finished. They range from provocative references of lust and sensuality to evocative exhibitions of religious devotion, displaying the contrasting significance that Cavalieri and Colonna held in Michelangelo's heart. In addition, Michelangelo wrote scores of poetry for these two muses, resulting in a similar contrast of tone and content. He maintained a close friendship with the pious Colonna, yet wrote passionately to Cavalieri, whom he referred to as the paragon of human beauty.

Michelangelo's inspiration was derived from his own life; he utilized his art as a way of working through and expressing his internal conflicts. Examining the work he produced for public and private commissions will therefore reveal a multitude of his most personal thoughts and desires. The same logic can be applied to Michelangelo's writing, which is not as well documented as his visual art. His commanding use of language demonstrates a similar attention

to detail as one can find in his painting. As his sculptures contain visual representations of his thoughts and emotions, his writing reveals personal secrets which were never intended for the public eye. His correspondences with Cavalieri prove to be the most revealing, granting a clear window into Michelangelo's soul.

Michelangelo is known best for his unrivaled expression of anatomy. The majority of discernible meaning in his art lies in his treatment of musculature. He often portrayed power allegorically through over-developed anatomy. Additionally, every figure Michelangelo composed was ambidextrous; each hand articulated meaning and helped express the specific purpose of each body. He treated each figure differently, able to convey autonomy, intelligence, fatigue, and a litany of other qualities by shaping their muscles and movement until they were able to speak for themselves. He was known to perform countless dissections, closely studying the shape and position of every ligament in the body. His heavy focus on anatomy is apparent, yet an abundance of male nudity calls into question the distinctly homoerotic quality of Michelangelo's art. Close examination of his art would soon reveal the sensuality that he so casually laced into his sculptures and painting. Take for example, Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, which is the enormous fresco on the alter wall of the Sistine Chapel, painted in 1541. It depicts masses of nude men scrambling to reach salvation at the end of the world. Hovering at the center is a brawny and scantily clad Jesus, who simultaneously condemns the sinners to hell and lifts the righteous to heaven. His body bristles with power, demonstrating his godly ability to shift the sky and the Earth. Michelangelo was gifted at weaving his own perceptions of beauty into his art. He seldom received complaints about his homoerotic imagery-why would anyone question the vision of a master?

Flawed interpretations of Michelangelo's homosexuality, such as Aurelio Gotti's analysis of the letters to Cavalieri, are often coupled with blatant disregard for the focus of the artist's writing.¹ If one were to examine his poems in their original Italian, they would find a number written about or to male correspondents concerning people he admired. In early publications of Michelangelo's poems, such as the edition produced by the artist's grand nephew, Michelangelo the Younger, the masculine pronouns were changed to feminine ones to conceal the homoerotic nature of the work. John Addington Simonds, a British writer and biographer of Michelangelo during the early 20th century, made a point of switching the pronouns back to their original masculine forms, so as to more accurately portray the artist. This type of determined scholarship is essential to understanding Michelangelo. His sexual preferences, human flaws, and artistic triumphs should be studied equally if we are to craft an honest depiction of this incredibly complex man. Many biographies of Michelangelo have been romanticized or sensationalized, further contributing to the alluring mystery and frustrating uncertainty surrounding his life. Unfortunately, the only two biographies that can be considered primary sources are perhaps the most subjective.

Asciano Condivi's biography of Michelangelo is largely considered an autobiography by scholars, believed to have been dictated directly by the artist to his assistant. While it may provide a great deal of insight into the lesser known parts of Michelangelo's life, it frames him in an extremely positive light, detailing a skewed account and his idealized self-perception. Giorgio Vasari on the other hand, who is often considered the father of modern art-historical writing, attempted to detail Michelangelo's life and rise to prominence honestly in the "Life of

¹ Aurelio Gotti was an Italian writer who lived from 1833-1904.

Michelangelo Buonarroti.” That being said, Vasari idolized Michelangelo as a god among men. He often cites anecdotes in the third person detailing his own interactions with the artist, proudly alluding to their friendship and Michelangelo’s myriad of positive qualities. At the beginning of the biography he shares a quaint memory of the artist, suggesting that Michelangelo possessed a charming sentimentality. Vasari explains that he acquired one of Michelangelo’s early drawings, eventually returning it to the artist in 1550. “When he was in Rome, Giorgio Vasari showed it to Michelangelo who recognized it and was delighted to see it again. He said modestly that as a boy he had known how to draw better than he did now as an old man.”² The scene Vasari conjures is pleasant: an older, nostalgic Michelangelo reminiscing about the way he would draw in his youth. Perhaps he believed his childhood illustrations demonstrated more freedom of expression, unweighted by the manic depression and artistic pressure he felt in his later years. Although it is unlikely that Vasari would invent this conversation, it demonstrates the biographer’s desire to portray Michelangelo in a positive light, perhaps to boast about his connection to such a genius, or to gain Michelangelo’s approval.

With respect to Condivi and Vasari, whose words deserve praise despite their flaws, I aim to clarify my understanding of Michelangelo’s disposition by studying the biography written by John Addington Symonds and the letters penned by the artist to the object of his affection. Through the process of translating and analyzing said letters, I hope to reveal the true essence of his character. Michelangelo’s homosexuality is an intriguing and meaningful piece of his story, particularly considering his profound involvement in Christian art and his relationship with the

² Vasari, Giorgio. “Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti.” *Lives of the Artists*. Trans. by George Bull. Penguin Books, 1987. p. 328.

Catholic Church. Translating the letters from their rich and lyrical Florentine dialect has illuminated the subtleties and vulnerabilities of Michelangelo's personality, which often remain hidden beneath his proud façade. Using what I learned throughout this process, I wrote an original one-act play entitled *Signor Mio Carissimo*, dramatizing Michelangelo's first interactions with Cavalieri. It expands upon the idea that Tommaso made an enduring impact on Michelangelo, telling a very human story and fictionalizing his first flirtations with the love of his life. The play premiered in the Old Gym at Bard College on April 7th, 2018.

CHAPTER 1 - MICHELANGELO AND HIS MUSES

1.1 Michelangelo's Formative Years

According to Vasari, Michelangelo Buonarroti represents the pinnacle of artistic achievement during the Italian Renaissance, surpassing the sculptors of antiquity and even nature itself. Vasari claims that Michelangelo improves upon the work done by artists in his self-designated second period by achieving perfectly graceful composition, color, and naturalistic perspective. Michelangelo was the first artist to become a self-made millionaire, carefully selecting his commissions by patron and salary. In this case, his meticulous nature played to his advantage, as he only selected work which he deemed worthy of his time. By 1512 he had painted his famous frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and had achieved the Renaissance era equivalent of a celebrity. A vast majority of his time and energy was channelled into his work, and although he was cautious about accepting commissions, he often bit off more than he could chew. This led to an inevitable series of compromised projects which were either left unfinished or were simplified in favor of time, resulting in a steadily more frustrated and bitter Michelangelo.

The act of separating an artist from his or her work can lead to a derivative analysis of said art. When examining the work of Michelangelo, it is essential that we consider the role particular commissions or projects played in his life. The close examination of the life of the artist provides insight into and can speak volumes about his experience and personality, and how both heavily influenced his art. Like many great artists, Michelangelo was talented from an early age, though was not always encouraged and celebrated. His youth and environment was unquestionably formative and resulted in his distinctive and complex personality.

According to his father Lodovico Buonarroto Simoni's documentation, Michelangelo Buonarroto Simoni was born on March 6th, 1474 in Caprese, Italy.³ Lodovico was a descendent of the Florentine Simoni family, and at the time of his son's birth, held the position of Podestà of Caprese.⁴ Michelangelo began drawing at an early age, and showed a particular affinity for working in relief and sculpture. He later attributed his connection to stone to his wet nurse, for whom he developed a significant attachment. She was the daughter of stone masons in Carrara, where the most coveted white marble was mined, and Michelangelo reportedly believed that he inherited a bond to the marble from his surrogate mother. "Giorgio, if my brains are any good at all it's because I was born in the pure air of your Arezzo countryside, just as with my mother's milk I sucked in the hammer and chisels used for my statues."⁵ Such a statement clearly displays the importance of Michelangelo's wet nurse to his upbringing. His mother passed away in his early childhood, and his wet nurse essentially took up the role of mother and caregiver. Michelangelo was very proud of his ancestry, convinced that his family were descendants of the Counts of Canossa. According to John Addington Symonds, however, there is little proof that ties the Simoni family to these supposed ancestors. Michelangelo believed firmly in the nobility of his bloodline, however, and thought himself worthy of fraternizing with the Florentine aristocracy. This familial pride served to motivate him throughout his career.

Lodovico and several other members of Michelangelo's family did not share his passion for the arts, believing that no one of their noble descent should ever dirty their hands working

³ Symonds, John Addington. *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroto*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, 4.

⁴ A Podestà is appointed by a central government and carries out similar duties required of a mayor.

⁵ Vasari. "Life of Michelangelo Buonarroto." *Lives of the Artists*. p. 326.

with stone. Michelangelo was often scolded and even beaten by his father and extended family in an attempt to ‘correct’ his behavior. Despite the initial condemnation of Michelangelo’s talents, he persevered and continued to practice drawing. After some time, and an impressive resilience on Michelangelo’s part, Lodovico accepted the inevitability of Michelangelo pursuing an artistic career. He enrolled Michelangelo in the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio in Florence, although this fact would later be disputed in Ascanio Condivi’s biography. Condivi insists that previous biographies have been mistaken in attributing Michelangelo’s artistic foundation to an apprenticeship in a master’s workshop. In the second edition of *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari contradicted the correction, citing a page found in the archives of Ghirlandaio’s family. This document was a confirmation of Michelangelo’s apprenticeship, stating he would study in the workshop for three years as agreed upon by Lodovico Buonarroti and Domenico Ghirlandaio.⁶ Michelangelo’s refusal to acknowledge his technical training shows just how proud and defensive he was of his own talents, denying that even he should require the guidance of a master in his youth.

Michelangelo was incentivized and felt pressured by his father, who had allowed him to pursue his passion, and was determined to do right by his family’s name. Both factors are significant catalysts when examining Michelangelo’s motivation and his anxiety. The abuse he faced at the hands of his family undoubtedly affected him permanently, while the drive to live up to his ancestry pushed him to achieve the unimaginable. As his father grew older and less capable, Michelangelo decided to adopt the responsibilities of patriarch to the Buonarroti Simoni family. Ordinarily this would have been the duty of the eldest brother, but as John Addington

⁶ Vasari. “Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti.” *Lives of the Artists*. p. 327-328.

Symonds mentions, Lionardo Buonarroto had already pledged himself to the Dominican Order in 1491.⁷ Whether or not Michelangelo was reluctant in undertaking this financial responsibility, he clearly valued his family's stability and legacy. Indeed, much of his pride was reliant on his ability to support himself and his family independently.

1.2: Cavalieri and Colonna

The letters and prose written by Michelangelo to his many correspondents showcase a powerful intellect. His stylistic and poetic messages illuminate the day-to-day thoughts of a man who produced several of the most historically and artistically significant sculptures and frescoes in recorded history. The letters written to Michelangelo's close friends and associates provide even more immediate information, however, constructing a seemingly voyeuristic window into his mind and person. Upon examination of these close acquaintances, one in particular stands out: the inspiration for Michelangelo's most emotionally revealing prose.

Signore Tommaso dei Cavalieri was a roman noblemen who became the greatest object of Michelangelo's affection after they met in 1532. His associations with Michelangelo aside, there is not a significant amount known about Cavalieri. He received four letters from Michelangelo, all within a year or so of their introduction. The first is a declaration of Michelangelo's love for Cavalieri, insisting that he is the "light of our century unique in the world."⁸ Michelangelo poured his deepest feelings into the first letter, describing the emotion he

⁷ Symonds. *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroto*. p 5.

⁸ The original line reads "Vostra Signioria, luce del secol nostro unica al mondo.." Buonarroto, Michelangelo. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. Torino, Italy, UTET, Aug. 2015. p. 468.

encountered while writing by crafting an elaborate metaphor for his trepidation and determination to be honest. Considering that Tommaso appears to be the greatest love in Michelangelo's life, it is reasonable to assume that close readings and analysis of these letters could prove them to be among the most revealing documents concerning the artist's emotions. His infatuation with Cavalieri peaked in the year following their introduction in 1532, in which Michelangelo wrote several letters and produced at least four finished drawings inspired by his desire and admiration of Cavalieri's ideal beauty.

In these four letters and four drawings, one can glean the incredible mark the young nobleman made on Michelangelo. Although Cavalieri admired Michelangelo for his otherworldly talent and valued his friendship, he was heterosexual, and did not reciprocate the same emotional attachment. Whether or not Michelangelo's infatuation with Cavalieri persisted after he wrote his last of the four known letters is unclear. Cavalieri remained a close friend of Michelangelo until the end, rising to manage Michelangelo's will after his death, thirty-two years after their initial meeting. If Michelangelo's affection for Cavalieri was as significant as his letters claim, then it is doubtful that his feelings would have faded so quickly. Perhaps his unrequited love haunted the artist indefinitely. Modern scholar James Saslow writes that after some time, Michelangelo abandoned any hopes of earthly satisfaction by embracing Counter-Reformation austerity, letting go of his tempestuous struggle between "profane desire and sacred ideal" and effectively dismissing his attachment to Cavalieri.⁹ However, the persistent presence

⁹ Saslow, James M. "Reform and Reaction: Michelangelo and Cellini." *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. Viking, 1999. p. 114.

of a close friend who failed to reciprocate his love would have undoubtedly continued to contribute to Michelangelo's emotional isolation.

Following his most documented interactions with Cavalieri, Michelangelo came into contact with Vittoria Colonna, a well-respected widow and one of the most popular female European poets of the sixteenth century. Michelangelo and Colonna became close, fostering an intellectual romance by writing each other poetry. As Michelangelo aged, he became steadily more devout as a Catholic. It follows, then, that he and Colonna would have been likely friends, both increasingly pious intellectuals. In addition to his poems, Michelangelo produced several drawings for Colonna, which were fittingly packed with Christian imagery. The most striking are the depictions of Christ's *Crucifixion* and the *Pietà*, revisiting Michelangelo's obsession with his own mortality while also affirming his and Colonna's faith. Like most of Michelangelo's drawings, they were drafted in black chalk. The first shows Jesus on the cross and the second depicts his body being supported by two putti, while the figure of the grieving madonna behind him closely resembles Vittoria Colonna.¹⁰ If one were to closely examine the tomb that Michelangelo built for Pope Julius II,¹¹ they would notice that the figure on the first level to the left of Moses also bears a strong resemblance to Colonna. Perhaps this is where Michelangelo immortalized her, reverently pictured among prophets, her hands clasped together in prayer.

¹⁰ Putti are the representation of a cherub or cupid-like child, though they do not necessarily have wings.

¹¹ The Tomb of Pope Julius II is an architectural and sculptural construction designed by Michelangelo. It was commissioned in 1505 by Pope Julius himself, and was intended to be a three-story, free-standing tomb in St. Peter's Basilica, adorned with 40 figures carved by Michelangelo. The project went through several significant changes and was eventually downsized to a wall tomb which was placed in the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

Although his relationship with Colonna may be the most documented of Michelangelo's friendships, it is unclear whether the two ever consummated a physical romance.

Unlike those written to Colonna, the legitimacy of Michelangelo's letters to Tommaso have been debated by several of his biographers. In "The Role of Letters in Biographies of Michelangelo," Deborah Parker critiqued the assumptions of Aurelio Gotti, who believed that the letters were actually meant for Vittoria Colonna. Apart from his association with Michelangelo, Tommaso dei Cavalieri was never famous, certainly not in his own time. Therefore, Gotti suggests the unlikelihood that Michelangelo would have professed his love to a younger, historically insignificant nobleman. He proposed that, at the very least, Colonna must have been the inspiration for the letters, for she alone was worthy of Michelangelo's time and profound praise. Unfortunately there are several writers and historians, Gotti included, who prefer to reinforce certain misconceptions about Michelangelo to suit their own opinions and preferences. His sexuality, namely, is an incredibly important part of his personality that has often been overlooked. "Gotti's arguments, along with Milanesi's comments on the Michelangelo-Cavalieri correspondence, and Michelangelo the Younger's and Cesare Guasti's misreading of the poems addressed to Cavalieri, are the work of a small group of Italian scholars operating under what Symonds aptly notes were 'grotesque misconceptions' fostered by a 'mistaken zeal' to protect Michelangelo from any hint of love for another man."¹² Symonds' biography of Michelangelo aims for the most accurate portrayal possible, acknowledging his homosexuality as an essential part of his identity.

¹² Parker, Deborah. "The Role of Letters in Biographies of Michelangelo." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, Spring 2005. pp. 114-115. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1353/ren.2008.0656.

1.3: The Marble Forms A Mirror: The Homoerotic Nature of Michelangelo's Art

A vast quantity of Michelangelo's works include overt sexual and homoerotic overtones. While he excelled in multiple medias, he always preferred sculpture, which he considered the most beautiful and challenging to perfect. He loved the idea of being a rugged, macho sculptor who's strength was required to chip away marble. It would follow, therefore, that Michelangelo would be most inspired to conceal parts of himself in his sculptures. The depiction of David of Nazareth¹³ he completed in 1504 is a nude, recalling the glory of the art in antiquity and challenging it, while simultaneously exploring similar erotic tones as Donatello did with his controversial and androgynous bronze *David*¹⁴ sixty years prior.

Nudity and close examination of the male form is a commonality found in many of Michelangelo's drawings as well. During the Renaissance, drawings were not considered to have any inherent value; they were not saved or framed by any patron, only considered a means to an end. Vasari was the first to declare that studying drawings allow us a window into the mind of their artist, inspiring him to begin collecting the studies and sketches of the likes of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. The gifts that Michelangelo drew for Cavalieri were distinct, featuring muscular men in intense, often compromising positions suggestive of sexual conflict and lust. They are far more detailed and refined than the kind made in preparation for his commissions or for study, which is exactly why they stand out. *The Punishment of Tityus*¹⁵ depicts the mythological son of the Greek God Zeus who attempted to rape Leto and was sentenced to eternal torture in hell, where two vultures would feed on his liver which grew back daily.

¹³ See Figure 1 on p.70.

¹⁴ See Figure 2 on p.70.

¹⁵ See Figure 3 on p.71.

Michelangelo's depiction of such a violent myth bristles with a surprising sensuality, as Tityus reclines on the rock to which he is bound, his entire body exposed and vulnerable to attack by the vulture, who hovers over him, appearing to take pleasure in the act. *The Rape of Ganymede*¹⁶ serves a similar purpose, depicting the vicious abduction of Ganymede by Zeus in the form of an eagle. The interlocking limbs of Ganymede and the eagle seem to curl around each other in a perverted beauty. The manner in which Michelangelo depicts Zeus powerfully and sensually embracing Ganymede is striking, reflecting the attraction he felt toward Tommaso, thirty years his junior. James Saslow credits Michelangelo's careful selection of the Ganymede myth to three separate factors: an acknowledgement of Cavalieri's appreciation for art (especially that which references the culture of antiquity), a declaration of Michelangelo's own feelings toward Cavalieri, and the broader cultural associations with the Ganymede myth. The Platonic conception of the myth was that the story was invented in order to justify sexual relations between boys and men, while the philosopher Xenophon argued that it was a moral allegory for denoting the mind as superior to the body, which would in turn inspire the Gods' favor in Ganymede, granting him access to immortality for his intelligence as opposed to his physical beauty.¹⁷ While it is likely that Michelangelo would have been aware of both schools of thought, he likely intended to convey the value of intelligence in his depiction of Ganymede's ideal beauty, while simultaneously acknowledging the physical beauty that Cavalieri was said to possess.

¹⁶ See Figure 4 on p.71.

¹⁷ Saslow, James M. "Michelangelo: Myth as Personal Imagery." *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*. Yale University Press, 1986. pp. 21–22.

Cavalieri was not the only man to inspire Michelangelo. On the contrary, there are several finished drawings in circulation of the handsome noblemen that Michelangelo befriended, illustrated wearing lavish jewelry and accessories.¹⁸ Michelangelo's keen eye for drawing handsome men was no accident, deciding only to spend his time illustrating people who exemplified his perceptions of beauty. This is likely why Michelangelo drew so few portraits. Similar to his commissions, he selected his subjects with care, and would then spend the time required to bring them to life on paper. His *Portrait of Andrea Quaratesi*¹⁹ is perhaps one of the most recognizable, completed in his customary black chalk. Quaratesi's piercing eyes and expression overflow with distinct personality and skepticism. Despite the small collection of portraits and the beautiful people they depicted, Cavalieri stood out to Michelangelo in ways that can only be described as complex. While it was Cavalieri's beauty that intrigued and opened the door for Michelangelo's curiosity, he ultimately captured the heart of the artist with his intellect, charm, and apparent love and appreciation for the quality of art that Michelangelo could achieve. It was the perfect storm that caught Michelangelo off guard.

In 1532, just a year after Michelangelo first crossed paths with Cavalieri, he began work on a figure known as *Victory*,²⁰ which was likely intended for the Julius Tomb. This sculpture depicts a handsome, muscular youth overpowering a bearded older man who kneels on the ground in chains. It serves as an allegorical depiction of victory, encompassing both conqueror and conquered, the perseverance of one over another. Saslow astutely notices the resemblance

¹⁸ "Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman & Designer." The Metropolitan Museum of Art November 2017-February 2018. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

¹⁹ See Figure 5 on p.72.

²⁰ See Figure 6 on p.72.

between the older man and Michelangelo, suggesting that it could be a metaphorical, if not literal self-portrait.²¹ He justifies this claim by tying it to Michelangelo's apparent obsession with slavery and submission, referencing the many unfinished *Slaves* carved for the Julius Tomb and one particular quote from one poem written to Cavalieri: "Michelangelo groans that 'to be happy, I must be conquered and chained.'"²² According to Saslow, *Victory*, although intended to be a part of a grand tomb for a deceased pope, is actually a thinly-veiled embodiment of Michelangelo's submissive sexual fantasy, which he intended to vicariously experience by shaping the marble. If indeed the older man in the sculpture is a self-portrait as Saslow suggests, then there is surely a possibility that the 'victor' in the piece is based on Cavalieri, the man who unequivocally captured Michelangelo's heart at that moment in time. This is a perfect example of Michelangelo's prerogative to explore a most private component of his life through the very public lens of his sculpture, which he knew would be seen by both the public and clergy of the Catholic church.

Michelangelo evidently used sculpture as an outlet to explore and articulate his own struggles with religion, sexuality, and mortality, especially later on in his career. A close study of Michelangelo's *Florentine Pietà*,²³ also known as *The Deposition*, overtly demonstrates the emotional and religious conflict within the artist. It woefully reflects the mentality of a mature, tortured Michelangelo, maintaining the peaceful yet somber articulation of the Madonna and

²¹ Saslow. "Reform and Reaction: Michelangelo and Cellini." *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. p. 100.

²² Saslow. "Reform and Reaction: Michelangelo and Cellini." *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. p. 100.

²³ See Figure 7 on p.73.

Christ displayed in his *Vatican Pietà*²⁴ but forming a darker depiction of the events after the crucifixion. The figure of the Pharisee Nicodemus bears a striking resemblance to the artist, and considering the piece was originally intended for Michelangelo's own tomb, it becomes clear that it is, indeed, a self-portrait. The choice to insert himself as the looming form of Nicodemus becomes hauntingly personal considering its intended placement, depicting Michelangelo joining the Holy family to support Christ in their grief, and suggests a reinforcement of his religious conviction and a plea for salvation. The last sculpture that Michelangelo ever sculpted is known as the *Rondanini Pietà*,²⁵ which he incessantly carved thinner and thinner until the body of Christ and the Madonna had fused together in one form, a painful and elongated depiction of the suffering Holy family. Both *The Deposition* and the *Rondanini Pietà* are near-perfect visual representations of Michelangelo's slow descent into a manic depressive state, tormented by the question of his own mortality and fear of judgement by God.

²⁴ See Figure 8 on p.74.

²⁵ See Figure 9 on p.75.

CHAPTER 2 - REFLECTING ON MY TRANSLATION PROCESS AND THEATRICAL PRODUCTION

2.1 Three Love Letters

Michelangelo's writing is often overlooked because it lives in the shadow of his art. I would argue that dissecting his prose is equally beneficial to uncovering the truths of his character, and is perhaps an even more direct way of doing so. There are scores of poetry that have been collected, identified, and analyzed in an effort to understand his mysterious and contradictory persona. Instead of focusing on vast quantities of his poems, I decided to translate and analyze Michelangelo's letters to Tommaso dei Cavalieri. Although Michelangelo was a prolific writer, only four letters to Cavalieri have been documented, all of which are especially poignant and revealing.

Michelangelo sacrifices nothing in his direct and stylistic approach to writing when he pens his love letters to Cavalieri. Even compared to his other notes written to his family and colleagues, his use of language here is in a league of its own. His prose forms long, lyrical sentences that exude a playful confidence while somehow revealing an extreme vulnerability. After examining the four letters, I decided to translate three that reveal and represent the arc of Michelangelo's attraction to Cavalieri. The first letter was written in December of 1532 and is a declaration of emotion, his attempt to document and share the feelings that have been brewing and can no longer be stifled. The second letter, (chronologically the third), is a solemn note from July, 1533, which acknowledges the disparity of emotion between Cavalieri and himself while attempting to appreciate the profundity of his own emotion, knowing that his desires can never

be matched. The third letter that I translated is the last of four, and is both a reassurance and a plea to preserve their friendship.

2.2 Literary Analysis and Close Reading

The first letter is the longest and was likely the most difficult to write. Michelangelo needed three drafts to convey his intended message, eventually managing to capture a beautiful honesty and vulnerability while retaining an underlying hint of his signature self-confidence. The first half of the letter consists of an intricately crafted literary metaphor that describes the difficulty Michelangelo faced when deciding to share his emotions in complete honesty. He did not expect to find himself so affected by young Cavalieri, thinking he would hardly get his feet wet in revealing his emotion. He conveys this by comparing the risk to crossing a small river or ford,²⁶ that is, he thought that he could handle what he believed to be a small crush. He was astounded to find that the more he thought about Cavalieri, the deeper he fell into the abyss of his infatuation.

“But I did not discover something small; instead I found myself at the shore, an entire ocean appearing before me with crashing waves. If I could, I would return to the shore that I left to avoid being entirely submerged. Because I am here, I will make my heart stone and go forward...”²⁷

²⁶ “Primo a muovere, come se creduto m’avesse passare con le piante asciute un picciol fiume, o vero per poca acqua un manifesto guado.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 468.

²⁷ “Ma poi che partito sono dalla spiaggia, non che picciol abbi trovato, ma l’oceano con soprastante onde m’è apparito inanzi; tanto che se potessi, per non esser in tucto da quelle sommerso, alla spiaggia ond’io prima parti’ volentieri mi ritornerei. Ma poi che son cui, farèno del cuor roca e andereno inanzi...” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 468.

When he finally “reaches the shore” he cannot turn back. He acknowledges that it would be worlds easier to separate himself from the truth and disregard his feelings. However, he finally admits that commencing the letter marked the point of no return. The metaphor of the ocean that Michelangelo uses represents both the vast quality of his endless desire and the obstacles and uncertainty he must overcome to reach Cavalieri intellectually, longing to explain how he feels.

Throughout the letter, Michelangelo chooses to praise Cavalieri, insisting that his intelligence and grace is far superior to his own. He puts himself down several times, apologizing for even assuming that he is worthy of writing these words of praise. At one point, he writes: “I hope you will not be offended at an attempt to be equal to you, nor desire what you cannot find in me: for he who is alone in everything cannot have companions in anything.”²⁸ It is a rare moment to see such a proud man as Michelangelo speak about himself in this way. His intention here is to demonstrate the extent to which he admires Cavalieri, speaking of Tommaso’s greatness in relation to his own, which simply cannot compare. The repeated use of phrases which complement Cavalieri and comparatively insult Michelangelo construct a power dynamic between the two. It almost seems as if Michelangelo would prefer to be in a position of vulnerability, dependent on the brilliance and beauty of Cavalieri. Similar to Saslow’s reading of the sculpture *Victory*, one could even argue that the tone of Michelangelo’s writing conveys a desire to be subservient.²⁹ The following phrase in the letter speaks to Michelangelo’s loneliness, insisting that Cavalieri be careful. Michelangelo is used to living in emotional solitude because so much of his life is caught up in his work. He warns Cavalieri that if he should respond as

²⁸ “...né si sdegnierà del mio disaguagliarsigli, né disiderrà da•mme quello che in me non è: perché chi è solo in ogni cosa, in cosa alcuna non può aver compagni.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 468.

²⁹ See page 16 for discussion of Michelangelo’s submissive sexual fantasy.

Michelangelo hopes, returning the same emotion, he must be wary of Michelangelo's limited capacity for intimate connection. As much as he longs to be with Cavalieri, he knows that he could not give him the attention he deserves. According to Michelangelo, a life so solitary in nature could never make room for the presence of a lover.

Although Michelangelo repeatedly defames his own intelligence in the letter, one must acknowledge the irony that exists within his prose. While examining the composition of the letter as a whole, it is worth noting the presence of a certain cheek and flirtatiousness hidden among the lyrical verbiage and ardent self-defamation. He must have known himself to be a good writer, capable of crafting such an elaborate and grand metaphor as he did.

By the time he penned his third letter to Tommaso, however, the sly yet grandiose nature of his writing gave way to a more uniformly solemn tone. Michelangelo writes to Cavalieri from Florence, voicing his regret that the circumstances of life always seem to get in his way. This letter is the first time he refers to Cavalieri as "the food which gives him life,"³⁰ a term he uses in this letter and in the next to describe the emotion he feels at the mere mention of Tommaso's name. The idea of Cavalieri is enough to inspire Michelangelo and give him strength. He finishes the letter in a gesture of heartfelt honesty: "As I preserve the memory of you, I feel neither boredom nor fear of death. Think, if the eyes could still play their part, what state would I find myself in?"³¹ As Michelangelo sits alone, thinking about the man who was unable to love him in return, he relishes the passing warmth of his infatuation. He obviously feels comfortable enough

³⁰ "Il cibo di che io vivo" Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 470.

³¹ "...riempiendo l'uno e l'altra di tanta dolcezza, che né noia né timor di morte, mentre la memoria mi vi serba, posso sentire. Pensate, se l'occhio avessi ancora lui la parte sua, in che stato mi troverrei." Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 471.

to speak about his melancholy to the man who unintentionally caused it. The final line is a devastating what-if, as he rhetorically asks Cavalieri what would happen if he were able to lay eyes on him again. Perhaps the passion that once struck Michelangelo would return to torture him once more.

The final letter to Cavalieri seems restrained in comparison, yet still maintains a hint of the quiet longing Michelangelo so desperately clung to. “I do not believe that you assume that I had forgotten or could forget the food that gives me life, which is nothing but your very name. Even in my inferiority I do not believe, although I speak very presumptuously, that anything could interfere with our friendship.”³² It seems that Michelangelo writes to reassure Cavalieri that he is intent on continuing their friendship, a connection which he deems most important. It is curious then, that he chose to include the same phrase as before,³³ a line which could hardly be interpreted as platonic complement. Michelangelo likely wished to preserve the basis of their friendship with an appreciation for their history. As Cavalieri and Michelangelo remained close until the artist’s death, it is reasonable to assume that Cavalieri sincerely cared about his companion, while accepting and appreciating the admiration he received. The friendship lasted thirty years because it was built on a sturdy foundation of love, admiration and mutual respect.

³² “Non credo però che voi crediate che io abbi dimenticato o possa dimenticare el cibo di che io vivo, che non è altro che ‘l nome vostro: però non credo, benché io parli molto prosuntuosamente, per esser molto inferiore, che nessuna cosa possa impedire l’amicizia nostra.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 471.

³³ “The food that gives me life.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 471.

2.3 Challenges Met and Lessons Learned

The act of translating elaborate and poetic love letters was certainly a challenge. Originally written in 16th century Florentine dialect, which was Michelangelo's native tongue, they reflect the flowery and rich language of the time. The distinctions that set these words apart lie within Michelangelo's deceptively understated genius and his willingness to be vulnerable. I was relatively lucky as far as dialects go, as the standardized Italian language was based on the Florentine dialect. Bridging the gap between the two was a relatively straightforward process. There are many words and verb conjugations that differ by one or two letters, and there are some minor differences in the use of pronouns. However, the tone and form of Michelangelo's prose is completely different from any modern sentence structure. The reason I constantly compare his prose to poetry is because he tends to write extremely elaborate and long run-on sentences, separating several intertwining phrases with commas. Each phrase seems to be expressive and self-referential.

There were a few lines of text that proved particularly difficult to interpret and translate. Every small mistake eventually came back to bite me when I considered the meaning of a sentence as a whole. I encountered hurdles of this kind as I studied the metaphor at the beginning of the first letter. Michelangelo writes "come se creduto m'avesse passare con le piante asciute un picciol fiume, o vero per poca acqua un manifesto guado."³⁴ It took me quite a while to discern that the phrase "le piante asciute" does not refer plants, but to the soles of his feet. This small differentiation changed my perception of the whole sentence. I originally believed I was

³⁴ "...believing I would cross a small river without wetting the soles of my feet, or rather a bit of water in an unmistakable ford." Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 468.

reading something about dry plants, and I began to construct an absurd metaphor in my head about Michelangelo passing Cavalieri without ever being able to touch him, describing himself as a dry plant passing frustratingly near water. Once I noticed the mistake, however, I was able to link the sentence with the expression ‘to get one’s feet wet,’ which indicates stepping into new territory. Michelangelo inventively expands on this idiom many times over, writing about encountering an ocean of emotion which he can only cross by ship, requiring the skill to sail the waves of Cavalieri’s valiant intelligence.³⁵ One perplexing line that I struggled with read: “...né si sdegnierà del mio disaguagliarsigli...”³⁶ The difficulty in this case stemmed from “disaguagliarsigli,” which is a transitive and reflexive verb. It loosely translates to “to differ.” In this particular case, I was working with a verb that no longer exists in modern Italian, and one that certainly cannot be translated directly into English. “To differ” became to “be disagreeable to,” and eventually “to offend.”

When I began studying the letters I attempted translating them word for word, piecing several together in a phrase to see if they would make sense in English. I quickly learned the futility of such a straightforward method: any literal translation results in stunted and nonsensical sentences. I then proceeded to the far more practical system of reading the work phrase by phrase and attempting to write the closest possible phrase in English. Afterwards, I would go back over the text several times, refining the sentence structure and moving parts around, continually referring back to the original Florentine text. The greatest challenge I encountered, aside from testing my knowledge of Italian language, is the beautiful and frustrating test any translation

³⁵ “If I do not have the skill to sail the waves of the sea of your valiant intelligence, you will excuse me.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 468.

³⁶ “I hope you will not be offended at an attempt to be equal to you.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 470.

process poses: attempting to capture the same meaning as the writing of the original author without sacrificing their authenticity and style. This is perfectly obvious for anyone who has ever spent a significant amount of time on translation, but for me it was a considerably new experience. I have worked to translate texts before, from Italian and even from French or Latin in grade school. Never before have I worked so closely with one text, however, or something so personal as a love letter. The process has given me a newfound respect for the art of translation. I found myself wincing at an attempt to convey Michelangelo's bold statements to the quiet articulation of his emotion, worried that every time I made changes I was, in fact, making the translation worse, or otherwise diverging completely from the original significance. I felt like I was powerless to prevent the loss of his theatricality, though I eventually came to the realization that modern English is simply less provocative, less flowery, and less lyrical. If I am to translate or rewrite Michelangelo's letters for a modern audience, I must consider my limitations as a translator and modern English as a means in which to experience his writing. I only hope that my work is able to convey his brilliance.

2.4 From Page to Stage

Closely analyzing Michelangelo's distinct voice directly informed my perception of him, and therefore affected the way I wrote his character in my play. He appeared to me as introverted, melancholic, and obsessive with a sharp wit. He projected a gruff machismo, preferring to hide his private thoughts and vulnerabilities in his letters and the crevices of his sculptures. I consider the first letter to hold the most weight because it represents Michelangelo coming to terms with his feelings, confessing his deepest desires to the man he loves. It was the

most difficult to write because he overcame the hurdle of his own emotional isolation, throwing reason to the wind in favor of honesty and self-expression. For these reasons, I knew that I wanted to incorporate it into my script. I found that the most powerful moment to investigate on stage was the actual writing of the letter. I imagined Michelangelo second guessing himself in his decision to divulge his love, which led me to the idea of sharing his inner monologue with the audience. This concept evolved into the conversation with his brother Lionardo. The segment of the letter which Michelangelo reads in my play is taken from the middle of my translation. It includes the line referring to Cavalieri as the “light of our century,”³⁷ but also provides a greater context to his emotional state, hinting at the loneliness associated with a life of incessant work. The second time the play directly uses the text is during the final sequence, as Michelangelo writes his final letter to Tommaso. I decided to incorporate the letter as a voiceover in the original Italian to preserve its lyrical quality. Hearing the letter read as it is written bridges the gap between Michelangelo’s imagination and the audience’s perception of his reality.

2.5 Starting From Scratch

In the spring of 2017 I began considering possible intersections of my two majors that would fulfill the necessary academic requirements. I admit that my knowledge of Italian playwrights at the time was hardly encyclopedic. I decided to begin my creative process by examining *Commedia dell’Arte*. I found the reliance on archetypal characters particularly interesting, so I began considering the relationship between archetype and stereotypes and how we form a perception of a person based on a pre-existing idea. Franco suggested that I research

³⁷ “luce del secol nostro unica al mondo.” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 470.

Dario Fo, the late Italian actor, comedian, and playwright known for his groundbreaking theatrical work and use of Commedia dell'Arte in modern political context.

That same semester I took my first ever art history class with Diana DePardo-Minsky entitled *16th Century Italian Art, Architecture & Urbanism*. The course proved to be wonderfully inspiring and provided me with a way to feed my general interest in Italian Renaissance art and culture. Roughly halfway through the semester, I realized I wanted to find a way to incorporate my interest in Renaissance art history into my Senior Project. I began to think about what kind of performance I could invent based on the two prominent artists I found most fascinating. Perhaps they are obvious, but Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti stood out to me as the most vibrant and eccentric artists living in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and would therefore be the most intriguing of personalities to explore. Without hesitation, I enrolled in Diana's next class in the fall, *Michelangelo: The Man, the Master, the Myth*. I briefly considered formulating a theatrical piece based on the rivalry which blossomed between Michelangelo and Leonardo when they were both commissioned to paint patriotic scenes of renowned Florentine military victories in the Council Hall of the Palazzo Vecchio. I considered writing a two-character piece, or even a one-man show in which I would play both Leonardo and Michelangelo. As I flicked through paper topics for the class, however, I came across a brief description of Michelangelo's love letters and poetry to Tommaso dei Cavalieri. Examining a more personal aspect of such a complex and talented person intrigued me, and I realized that investigating his romantic and platonic relationships would be an excellent place to start.

My very first idea for a play based on Michelangelo's relationships occurred to me when I was looking into his connections with Cavalieri and prominent poet Vittoria Colonna. I

considered writing a play about a love triangle between the three in which Michelangelo was forced to confront his desires and choose one of the two. After further research, however, I learned that he and Colonna never consummated any physical relationship. With the intention of preserving some historical accuracy, I moved away from using her as a second love interest. I was still intrigued by their friendship fueled by poetry and religion, however, and I decided to include her as a pivotal character in my piece about Michelangelo's infatuation with Tommaso.

2.6 Filmic Inspiration

In the fall, Karen Raizen suggested I watch *Il Decameron* (1971) by Pier Paolo Pasolini. The film is based on *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio and is an anthology of short stories written in the 14th century, detailing 100 tales surrounding the outbreak of the Black Plague in Italy. Pasolini himself decided to act in his own film as a former pupil of the artist Giotto, a character of his own invention who becomes the commonality in the lives of many characters, eventually tying their stories together. Karen knew that I was setting out to act in my own piece, so *Il Decameron* became a perfect place to start my search for aesthetic and thematic inspiration. I was deeply curious about the stylistic choices Pasolini made in his film. He examined simplicity and poverty during the early Renaissance, finding authenticity in his characters by utilizing the neorealist technique of casting non-professional actors. There was a scarcity of color and glamour, and a simple yet honest quality to the dialogue. Pasolini puts a great deal of emphasis on visual language and facial expression, giving the viewer time to grasp the emotional language he uses, rather than spelling absolutely everything out with spoken word. I was fascinated by this style, and it stuck with me throughout my writing and rehearsal process the following semester.

In the fall I also happened to watch *8 1/2*, in which Federico Fellini masterfully synthesizes the reality and dreams of his protagonist. It stars Marcello Mastroianni as a successful Italian director named Guido Anselmi who struggles with his latest project, his relationships with his past and current lovers, and his own cynicism. There are several scenes in which the audience is given a window into the character's mind, deceptively toying with the space between reality and daydreams. Fellini transitions seamlessly into Guido's fantasies of sex and violence, only to abruptly return to reality, revealing that those events did not actually occur. By allowing the audience to observe this dream-like depiction of Guido's life and experiences, we are allowed us a much closer look into the mind of the character and his own personal journey. Later I realized how perfectly the film related to my own eventual goal: a close examination of the thoughts and internal struggle of an arrogant artist, struggling with his romantic relationships and the execution of his artistic vision. By allowing the audience a glimpse into the mind of Michelangelo I would be able to tell a more personal story. There are a few sequences in my piece that heavily invoke the sense of dreamy surrealism present throughout, forcing the audience to see Michelangelo's experiences directly through his lens.

2.7 Script, Style, and Imagery

While contemplating how to craft my script, I considered using Michelangelo's own writing to formulate the dialogue. I soon realized that doing so would require me to excessively translate his letters or else use another scholar's translation in the interest of time. Ultimately, I chose to study and translate three of four letters that were written by Michelangelo and addressed to Cavalieri. The three letters served as a basis for my theatrical script, which I decided to write

from scratch, ensuring creative control in its formation. Michelangelo had few truly close friends, and I wanted to explore a juxtaposition between scenes examining his solitude and scenes involving his interactions with Cavalieri and Colonna. I chose to write it as a period piece because I thought that modernizing the context of Michelangelo and Cavalieri's interactions would remove the romanticism associated with the Renaissance, something I believe was vital to my story.

The process of writing my script was erratic. I mentally edit as I write, and I often abstain from writing dialogue that does not live up to my own expectations. It will take me an hour or more to write a couple of pages of dialogue, as I often convince myself that any 'bad' writing will be a waste of time. I started working on my script far later than I had intended. Knowing that I would be writing in English and not Italian, I began searching for a style to best suit my five-hundred-year-old characters. I believed that colloquial lingo would have felt far too informal, yet I worried about losing the audience in a mess of flowery words that served no specific purpose within the context of my piece. I settled on Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* as my textual inspiration, who wrote the dialogue of his 19th century characters by suggesting how they might have talked, without attempting to stay within the constraints of historical accuracy. In the same way, the style I used alludes to a more formal language, reminiscent of a Renaissance era dialect and the characters' sensibilities.

The first scene I wrote was the "Vatican Pietà," which remained exactly the same for the remainder of my creative process. I considered the image for a few months, and it eventually became the aesthetic basis for my piece. When I finally wrote it down I managed to convey exactly what I intended to. The first scene includes this living image to introduce the importance

of Christian imagery in the play and in Michelangelo's life, alluding to his relationships with Cavalieri, Colonna, and Catholicism. The decision to include this particular sculpture was to acknowledge its significance in the context of Michelangelo's life (it was his first public commission and the only one he ever signed), and because I have a particular fondness for it, ever astounded by its near-flawless ability to simultaneously convey tranquility and unspeakable pain. It might be my favorite of all of his sculptures, although I would never have included it if it did not make sense for the piece. I realized that deciding who would inhabit the forms of Christ and the Madonna was momentarily important. However, I found that I had little difficulty in resolving to place Tommaso and Vittoria as Christ and Mary, both directly foreshadowing Michelangelo's relationship with his two friends and their roles in the play. The actor playing Tommaso would be double-cast as the near-nude figure of Christ, alluding to his and Michelangelo's eventual meeting, as well as the artist's appreciation for male beauty. The actress playing Vittoria would also be double-cast as Mary, mother of Jesus, hinting at the religious nature of Michelangelo and Vittoria's close friendship and the comforting and sturdy demeanor I wanted her character to convey. I included Michelangelo in the image because it is his story, and I wanted to incorporate the artist examining his own handiwork at its completion. The scene introduces the audience to the protagonist in a personal moment that displays his own personal stake in the art.

2.8 Assembling A Cast

I knew from the beginning of the creative process that I would act in my play. I consider myself an actor, so I devised a project that I would want to perform. When I decided that the

piece would be about Michelangelo, I briefly considered casting someone else as the lead. I choose to play the role myself, however, excited by the challenge of portraying such a historic and complex figure. I also recognized that my knowledge of Michelangelo would be far broader than anyone I might cast, giving me insight into his character. After making the decision to act I began to hunt for a director. I needed someone willing to dive into such extremely specific subject material, ideally someone familiar with visual language and film. I spoke with a few theater and film students but eventually found myself in discussion with my close friend, Diego Marquez. Diego is a filmmaker and is familiar with several styles of Italian film. He was particularly intrigued by my pursuit of the dreamy quality Fellini so skillfully utilized in *8 1/2*. We had collaborated before and were thrilled at the opportunity to create something new together. As I would be acting, I needed a pair of eyes on the outside to see my artistic vision through. I trusted Diego to respect my goals while additionally bringing his own ideas to the table.

In October I participated in a group senior project audition with my graduating classmates, hoping to find actors for my project. I held callbacks for eight actors with the intention of casting Tommaso dei Cavalieri and Vittoria Colonna. At that point, my script was still incomplete, and I was unsure about the size of my final cast. I knew I wanted to keep it small and manageable, however, beginning with these two crucial roles. Elisabeth Staak seemed to possess a natural sense of timing and had great stage presence; I thought she would be a good fit for the role of Vittoria. Just a few weeks before I planned to begin rehearsals in the spring semester, the actor that I originally cast as Tommaso decided to drop out of the production. The script was nearly finished, and in addition to the role of Tommaso, I desperately needed to cast

actors in the roles of Giuliano da Sangallo and Fra Lionardo Buonarroti. Based on my previous experience holding auditions in the spring at Bard, I worried that another round of auditions would result in a slim turnout, even if it were well publicized. I decided that I would seek out the remaining actors directly.

When I spoke to Jean about my struggle to find available actors, she suggested I reach out to Stavros Kalomoiris, a first-year student who had taken her “Actor in the Moment” class the previous semester. We met the following weekend, and I offered him the role of Tommaso. In hindsight, I am very pleased by his growth as an actor throughout the process, and I am grateful for the uplifting energy he brought to the project. I enlisted three more actors by contacting them directly and discussing my script and vision with them face-to-face. Caleb Short, Samuel Willner, and Evan Dibbs stepped into the roles of Giuliano da Sangallo, Fra Lionardo Buonarroti, and the Minstrel respectively. All in all, I was pleased by the enthusiasm that my cast brought to the project. I made a point of assigning them all research to learn about the historical figures that inspired their characters, while also working with them to develop their identities within the context of my piece. In the consideration of time, we began rehearsals just before I had enough actors for every speaking role. Frustratingly, Spring Break cut through the middle of our schedule, resulting in a mere two weeks of rehearsal before we moved into the Old Gym.

2.9 Set, Lighting, Costumes, and Music

The set design began with a straightforward and minimalist approach. I only chose stage pieces that were essential to the blocking in the script. These included Michelangelo’s workshop table complete with chair, the stool Tommaso sits on as he is being drawn, the bench on which

Vittoria Colonna reclines, and the large throne-like chair on which the *Vatican Pietà* appears in the first scene. The minimalism fit with the stark visual inspiration I drew from *Il Decameron* and allowed me to create a multi-purposed space that would require no mid-show set changes. The decision to set the play in Michelangelo's workshop, (his visit to Vittoria Colonna and Giuliano's party excluded), was based on the intention to bring the audience into the artist's private space where he is most vulnerable.

Upon moving rehearsals from studios into the Old Gym, I was pleasantly surprised that I was able to find all of the furniture required for my play. There was a park bench perfect for the scene with Vittoria, a large, white, wooden chair that fit Vittoria and Tommaso for the *Vatican Pietà*, and a long rectangular table that I dressed with a canvas cloth. I covered its surface with brown sheets of drawing paper that would steadily accumulate my drawings of Tommaso and playful sketches done by the cast. I decided to add a bit of context to the space by curating elements that would suggest the contents of a sculptor's workshop. I originally intended to add large, white styrofoam blocks to conceal either entrance at the sides of the curtain, alluding to the white Carrara marble³⁸ that Michelangelo used to carve his sculptures. When confronted with financial limitations and the feasibility of finding clean, white styrofoam blocks, I decided to paint a handful of the wooden staging blocks in the Old Gym with glossy white paint. I added a generous amount of wooden beams beneath and around the 'marble' blocks to imitate scaffolding that they would have been placed on after delivery. I knew early on that I wanted to disperse chalk dust around the theater to represent the results of Michelangelo chipping away at a slab of

³⁸ Carrara is an Italian city in the region of Tuscany, located roughly 60 kilometers north of Pisa. It is where the high quality white marble has been mined since antiquity. The name 'Carrara' is derived from the Latin term *carrariae*, meaning 'quarries.'

marble. I hoped it would add a gritty, powdery texture to the space. To my delight, the chalk that I procured worked flawlessly.

I have come to describe the aesthetic of my play as “surrealist renaissance.” I knew from the beginning of the creative process that lighting would be an integral part of telling the story. Since the story focuses on a sculptor and painter, I decided that the production should feature a healthy emphasis on visual storytelling and thematic imagery. The selective and stark lighting inspired by Pasolini came to life and seemed to blend naturally with the sparse dialogue. I wanted to utilize high contrasts between light and dark, providing a clear focus on the events on stage, making it overtly clear that the audience should focus on what is most significant from Michelangelo’s perspective. Spotlights and selective illumination of the characters and space were employed as well. For example, in “The Invitation” scene,³⁹ we see Michelangelo in his element, alone in his workshop. His table is illuminated, but so is the empty throne where the *Vatican Pietà* stood earlier, indicating the absence of the sculpture. The natural assumption is that the piece has been moved after its completion. However, its absence also alludes to the impending nature of Michelangelo’s meeting with Tommaso. Once the Christ figure disappears, he returns to Michelangelo’s life in the form of Tommaso, appearing to the protagonist like a divine entity.

Perhaps the most evident use of Fellini-inspired, dream-like surrealism is in the following scene: the moment when Michelangelo first spots Tommaso at Giuliano’s party. The entire cast freezes with the exception of Michelangelo, who slowly walks over to flirt, mesmerized by the man standing before him. I intended this first interaction between protagonist and love interest to

³⁹ See Figure 10 on p.76.

be powerful, evocative of a love-at-first-sight moment. The change from warm ambient lighting to sharp red is meant to indicate the passion and anticipation that Michelangelo feels at that moment, while also indicating to the audience that they have moved out of a neutral space and into the mind of the protagonist. Although time does not literally stand still, Michelangelo's world comes to a screeching halt, and the other partygoers become irrelevant. As this voyeuristic daydream concludes, the return to the warm ambient lighting mirrors Michelangelo's return to reality.

Another quintessential example of this style is Michelangelo's conversation with his older brother Lionardo. While little is known about Lionardo Buonarroti, aside from his lifetime dedication to the Dominican Order, I decided that his inclusion would be a perfect device to hint at the artist's struggle with spirituality. Lionardo appears behind Michelangelo as he writes, illuminated by a single spotlight.⁴⁰ The only door to Michelangelo's studio is at Upstage Right, but I decided that Lionardo should enter from Upstage Left, as if he had materialized out of thin air. At the end of their exchange, Michelangelo turns to look at Lionardo for the first time, only to realize that he has vanished completely. The way in which Lionardo appears to his brother is intentionally ambiguous: he could be a supernatural specter or simply a figment of Michelangelo's imagination. I like to believe he serves both purposes, acting as Michelangelo's omnipresent religious and personal conscience, while he concurrently fills the role of watchful and caring older brother. I considered multiple methods of choreographing Lionardo's disappearance, such as having him vanish upon Michelangelo's completion of the letter to Cavalieri, or at the very end of the scene as the courier leaves with the note. I decided against

⁴⁰ See Figure 11 on p. 76.

both of these choices, however, as each would have clarified whether Lionardo was a divine presence or a figment of Michelangelo's imagination, a definition best kept ambiguous to preserve the mysterious and omnipresent nature of the character. Lionardo's costume needed to be perfect, so I ordered a monk costume from Amazon, which worked surprisingly well.

The costume design for the other characters presented a particular challenge. Instead of enlisting the help of a costume designer, I rashly resolved to do the costumes myself. If the show was going to be a period piece, it would be essential for the clothing to reflect that. Although the Italian Renaissance was filled with ornate fabrics, robes, and dresses, my access to believable renaissance costumes was nonexistent. At first, I asked my actors to bring in certain pieces of clothing to see what we were working with, then I worked around what we had available. The costume pieces that I decided on would not be wholly accurate, but would be suggestive of Renaissance garb or at least historically ambiguous. I found a few items on amazon, a few in my closet, and a few at the Salvation Army. I knew I wanted Michelangelo in a tunic, belt, leggings, and a cape. While I did not find a suitable cape, I doctored an XXL t-shirt from the Salvation Army by cutting off the sleeves and elastic from the neck to make a tunic. The flowing robes donned by Vittoria and the tattered cloth worn by Tommaso for both pietàs were constructed from my old bed sheets, which I pinned around my actors with safety clips. When I first saw a photograph of the final pietà in full costume, however, I was immensely pleased and surprised by the consistency of the costumes.

When searching for musical accompaniment I was careful to select a style that would fit with my minimalist visual approach while remaining temporally ambiguous. Early in the semester I was listening to a lot of music composed by John Adams. His classical music is

strongly rooted in minimalism, and I found that one of his pieces would be perfect for my show. I selected the second and third movements of “Hallelujah Junction” because the second is somber and stirring, and the third is manic and energetic, perfect for the “Invitation” scene.

2.10 Additions to the Script

Aside from minor edits to the script concerning lines and blocking, there were two notable additions that we made to the play during the rehearsal process. The first came while discussing blocking and thematic resonance with my director, and the second, albeit last minute, was entirely necessary to the pacing and the construction of tension toward the climax of the piece. The final scene depicts Michelangelo attempting to come to terms with his exchange with Tommaso, moments after learning that his love will never be reciprocated. Originally the script concluded with Tommaso and Michelangelo’s physical exchange at the end of the “Confrontation.” The two agree to stay friends and they meet at center stage. Tommaso puts his hand on Michelangelo’s shoulder, and they share a single, harmonious moment of mutual understanding. As Diego and I discussed the final sequence, we agreed that the piece was lacking an ending that carried the same visual resonance as the *Vatican Pietà*. In a moment of beautiful brainstorming, Diego asked me if I could think of another sculpture or pietà that would make sense within the context of the story. I replied enthusiastically in the affirmative as I thought of *The Deposition*, or *Florentine Pietà*. It struck me as the perfect way to bookend the piece: We would begin with a still image of Michelangelo and his sculpture foreshadowing what is to come, and end with a piece that places Michelangelo directly into a scene of Christ’s suffering and the grief of the Holy Family, thus reflecting the state of his own depression and loneliness.

Constructing *The Deposition* required four figures to represent Jesus, his mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Nicodemus. Fittingly, Michelangelo had already inserted himself into his piece, disguised as the looming figure of Nicodemus. He was certainly not the focus, however, and considering my aim was to tell Michelangelo's story, I went a step further to shift the emphasis of the sculpture. By putting Michelangelo in the position of the Christ figure, he would become the tragic focus of the image. Vittoria Colonna would reprise her role as Mary, and Tommaso's role would shift from Christ to the position that Mary Magdalene originally held. He supports Michelangelo's body, but unlike Vittoria, keeps his distance. He looks out over the audience and away from Michelangelo, seemingly filled with the guilt of breaking his friend's heart. Replacing Nicodemus with Lionardo made perfect sense, reinforcing his role as an omnipresent guardian angel of sorts, strictly religious but unwavering in his support for his younger brother. Instead of using music in the final scene of the piece, I decided to play a voiceover of Michelangelo's letter to Tommaso, read in Italian by myself. The voiceover was intended to serve more as an emotional backdrop to the events onstage than simple exposition of what was going through Michelangelo's head. The audience learns in the "Confrontation" scene that he and Tommaso will stay friends, so I found it unnecessary for the audience to know exactly what is said in the letter.

The second major addition was implemented in response to a concern that Jean brought up at one of our weekly meetings. After watching one of our earlier run-throughs of the show, she felt like it was missing a moment of brightness, that the joy and passion that Tommaso spurred in Michelangelo needed to be made clearer to the audience. At this point we were far into the rehearsal process, too late to make any major changes to the structure of the plot. I decided to

take Jean's suggestion quite literally, however, and decided to try something. That night during our rehearsal, I told Diego to switch to the workshop lighting of "The Invitation" scene after the "Drawing Lesson," which is when Michelangelo becomes conscious of the profundity of his attraction to Tommaso. I improvised the moments after the establishment of apparent sexual tension leading up to Michelangelo's decision to write the first love letter. My goal was to capture that purity of inspiration and to allow the audience insight into an incredibly private moment. To indicate that the sequence was finished, I sat at the table and began to write the letter, which transitioned perfectly into Lionardo's scene, "Elder Brother." At the end of the run, Diego and I agreed to keep the sequence in the piece, believing that it slightly relaxed the pacing and made Michelangelo's decision to pour his heart into a letter all the more believable.

2.11 Final Thoughts

While applying for space in the Old Gym, I decided to share the Blackbox Theater with Victoria Haschke, an old friend and classmate who was also working on a Theater and Italian Studies Joint Senior Project. We were allotted the weekend of April 7th and 8th, and decided to present our projects back to back as a double feature. We advertised with a poster courtesy of Johnathan Mildner and a Facebook event page, and worked together to design a program for our performances. As expected when dealing with a limited amount of rehearsals and time in the blackbox, I continued to work on every aspect of the show until the last possible minute. I painted the 'marble' blocks on the Thursday and Friday, and continued to work on the costumes up until the beginning of the invited dress rehearsal that Friday night. All in all, the final dress rehearsal went smoothly. The addition of a small audience changed the energy of the actors as I

expected it to, and the only noticeable errors were confined to minor technical difficulties (“Hallelujah Junction-2nd Movement” kept cutting in and out thanks to a faulty AUX cord, and the voiceover in the final scene stopped halfway through because my iPhone decided to reboot.)

When we were gearing up for our first show, I felt my cast was energized and confident; we knew that we were running a well-oiled machine. The biggest challenge at that point was nailing the pacing. This script relies on somber and intentional pauses, allowing the time between words to inform the plot almost as much as the dialogue does. During tech week rehearsals, the show began to slow down slightly. All we needed to do was feel out the natural timing and go with our instinct. The sequences are intentionally contemplative and take their time telling their part of the story, though none are longer than four minutes, ensuring a structurally enforced pacing that keeps the plot moving.

Just before we opened the house for both performances, I walked up into the tech booth holding my hammer and chisel, preparing to make my entrance down the center isle for the first scene. I was immeasurably happy at the turnout we received. The Saturday night opening was overly crowded, and even the Sunday matinee boasted a full house. I think the nerves we experienced from having a full crowd was the just the kick we needed to tighten up the pacing and all the moving parts. The Saturday show seemed to bristle with energy, no doubt because it was opening night and we had a full house, although my cast unanimously agreed that our Sunday performance was the most successful. I felt the same about my own performance in reference to one moment in particular. In the “Confrontation” scene, just after Tommaso lets Michelangelo down and admits that he cannot return the same emotion, I walked Downstage Left in front of the table and attempted to bring myself to a sad place. Almost immediately I

thought of my impending graduation, the speed at which the process passed me by, and the fact that it was my last chance to perform in the climax of my senior project. It all hit me in a way that was very profound in that moment, and I was able to harness that for the scene. It was a performance that I am very proud of.

I think it is worth mentioning that not a single member of my cast or crew study theater at Bard. A majority of them had never performed in a theatrical college production. I am especially proud of my collaborators for their hard work and progress as performers. The readiness with which they committed themselves to my project and their roles was incredibly humbling. Every facet of my project seemed to fall into place. Whenever I felt overwhelmed, a convenient and worthwhile solution would arise. Still, I owe a great deal to my director Diego for all of the thought and care that he brought to the process. I feel very content with the execution of my play, and am happy to have completed a production so stylized and different from anything I have worked on before. The interdisciplinary quality of my project, combining Theater, Italian, and Art History is unlike anything I would have expected to be completing in college. “Many things fail to go the way you expect them to,”⁴¹ and thank goodness for that.

⁴¹ “andando tante altre cose al contrario” Buonarroti. *Michelangelo Rime e Lettere*. Trans. by Miles Messinger. p. 470.

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8 1/2. Directed by Federico Fellini, performances by Marcello Mastroianni, Claudia Cardinale, Anouk Aimée, Sandra Milo, and Barbara Steele, Cineriz, 1963.

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Sunday in the Park with George. Written by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, 1984.

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The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. Directed by Mary Zimmerman, 2003.

TRANSLATIONS

Lettere #141

Michelangelo à Tommaso Cavalieri [In Roma]

[Roma, fine di dicembre 1532].

Inconsideratamente, messer Tomao signor mio carissimo, fui mosso a scrivere a Vostra Signioria, non per risposta d'alcuna vostra che ricevuta avesse, ma primo a muovere, come se creduto m'avesse passare con le piante asciute un picciol fiume, o vero per poca acqua un manifesto guado. Ma poi che partito sono dalla spiaggia, non che picciol abbi trovato, ma l'oceano con soprastante onde m'è apparito inanzi; tanto che se potessi, per non esser in tucto da quelle sommerso, alla spiaggia ond'io prima parti' volentieri mi ritornerei. Ma poi che son cui, farèno del cuor roca e andereno inanzi, e se io non arò l'arte del navigare per l'onde del mare del vostro valoroso ingegno, quello mi scuserà, né si sdegnierà del mio disaguagliarsigli, né disiderrà da•mme quello che in me non è: perché chi è solo in ogni cosa, in cosa alcuna non può aver compagni. Però Vostra Signioria, luce del secol nostro unica al mondo, non può sodisfarsi d'opera d'alcuno altro, non avendo pari né simile a•ssé. E se pure delle cose mia, che io spero e promecto di fare, alcuna ne piacerà, la chiamerò molto più'avventurata che buona; e quand'io abbi mai e esser certo di piacere, come è decto, in alcuna cossa a Vostra Signioria, il tempo presente, con tucto quello che per me ha a venire, donerò a quella, e dorrami molto forte non potere riavere il passato, per quella servire assai più lungamente che solo con l'avenire che sarà poco, perché son tropo vechio.

Non altro che dirmi. Leggiete il cuore non la lectera, perché “la penna al buon voler non può gir presso.” Ho da scusarmi che nella prima mia mostrai maravigliosamente stupir del vostro peregrino ingegno, e così mi scuso, perché ho conosciuto poi in quanto errore i' fui; perché, quanto è da maravigliarsi che Dio facci miracoli, tant'è che Roma produca uomini divini. E di questo l'universo ne può far fede.

Letter #141

Michelangelo to Tommaso Cavalieri [In Rome]
[Rome, end of December, 1532].

Thoughtlessly, sir Tommaso my dearest Lord, I write first to your lordship, not expecting response once you receive this, but I write first, believing I would cross a small river without wetting the soles of my feet, or rather a bit of water in an unmistakable ford. But I did not discover something small; instead I found myself at the shore, an entire ocean appearing before me with crashing waves. If I could, I would return to the shore that I left to avoid being entirely submerged. Because I am here, I will make my heart stone and go forward, and if I do not have the skill to sail the waves of the sea of your valiant intelligence, you will excuse me. I hope you will not be offended at an attempt to be equal to you, nor desire what you cannot find in me: for he who is alone in everything cannot have companions in anything. Nevertheless your Lordship, light of our century unique in the world, you cannot be satisfied by the work of any other, having no equal or one alike. And if you do not like the work that I hope and promise to do, others will, and I will call it much more daring than good. As I said your lordship, when have I ever been certain of your approval? I will dedicate myself at the present time to all that awaits me, but it hurts me greatly knowing that the past cannot be regained. The future that I have to invest in is short, and I am too old.

Nothing else can be said. Read the heart not the letter, because “the pen cannot do man’s good will justice.” I must apologize that in my first letter I marveled at and was amazed by your rare intelligence, and so I am sorry, for I knew then that I was in error; As we marvel at God’s miracles, we marvel at the divine men of Rome. The entire universe bears witness to that.

Lettere #143

Michelangelo à Tommaso Cavalieri [In Roma]

[Firenze, 28 luglio 1533].

Signiore mio caro, se io non avessi creduto avervi in Roma facto certo del grandissimo, anzi smisurato amore che io vi porto, non mi sare' paruta cosa strana, né mi sarea maraviglia il gran suspecto che voi mostrate per la vostra avere avuto, per non vi scrivere, che io non vi dimentichi. Ma non è cosa nuova, né da pigliarne ammirazione, andando tante altre cose al contrario, che questa vadi a rrovescio anch'ella: perché quello che Vostra Signioria dice a me, io l'arei a dire a quella; ma forse quella fa per tentarmi o per riaccender nuovo et maggior foco, se maggior può essere. Ma sssia come si vuole: io so bene che io posso a quell'ora dimenticare il nome vostro, che 'l cibo di che io vivo; anzi posso prima dimenticare il cibo di che io vivo, che nutrice solo il corpo infelicemente, che il nome vostro, che nutrice il corpo e l'anima, riempiendo l'uno e l'altra di tanta dolcezza, che né noia né timor di morte, mentre la memoria mi vi serba, posso sentire. Pensate, se l'ochio avessi ancora lui la parte sua, in che stato mi troverrei.

Letter #143

Michelangelo to Tommaso Cavalieri [In Rome]

[Florence, 28 July, 1533].

My dear Lord, if I had not believed with great conviction that I made clear in Rome the rather immeasurable love that I feel for you, it would not make me feel strange, nor would I be surprised by the great concern you displayed when I failed to write back, concerned that I would forget you. But this is nothing new, nor might it be admirable, for many things fail to go the way you expect them to, and it would follow that this too would turn upside down. That which your Lordship says to me, I would air to him as well; but perhaps that is done to test me, or to relight a new and greater fire, if greater is possible. But be it as you like: I know well that I can, at that very moment, forget your name, the food that gives me life. Rather, I can first forget the food that gives me life, that which unsuccessfully nourishes the body. Your name nourishes the body and the soul, filling one and the other with such sweetness. As I preserve the memory of you, I feel neither boredom nor fear of death. Think, if the eyes could still play their part, what state would I find myself in?

Lettere #144

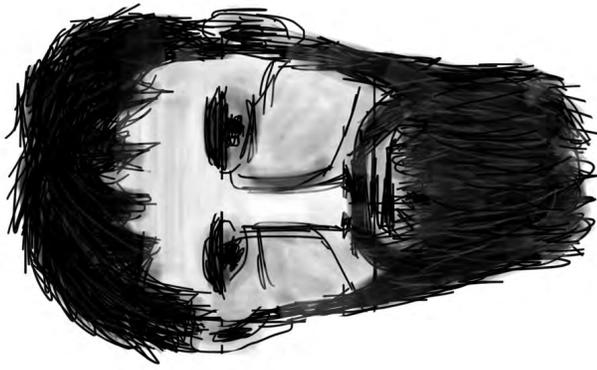
Michelangelo à Tommaso Cavalieri [In Roma]
[Firenze, 28 luglio 1533].

Messer Tomao, signiore mio caro, benché io non rispondessi all'ultima vostra, non credo però che voi crediate che io abbi dimenticato o possa dimenticare el cibo di che io vivo, che non è altro che 'l nome vostro: però non credo, benché io parli molto prosuntuosamente, per esser molto inferiore, che nessuna cosa possa impedire l'amicizia nostra.

Lettere #144

Michelangelo to Tommaso Cavalieri [In Rome]
[Florence, 28 July 1533].

Sir Tommaso, my dear Lord, although I did not answer your last letter, I do not believe that you assume that I had forgotten or could forget the food that gives me life, which is nothing but your very name. Even in my inferiority I do not believe, although I speak very presumptuously, that anything could interfere with our friendship.



Signor Mio Carissimo

I Married You for Fun

Two Theater and Italian Studies Joint Senior Projects
by Miles Messinger & Victoria Haschke

April 7th and 8th, 2018
The Old Gym at Bard College
Please expect a brief intermission after the first performance.

Signor Mio Carissimo

Written by Miles Edmonds Messenger

Michelangelo Buonarroti represents the pinnacle of artistic achievement during the Italian Renaissance, known primarily for his sculpture of the biblical hero David, his frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and his contribution to the development of mannerism. In 1532, he fell in love with Signore Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a younger Roman nobleman with whom he developed a profound friendship. By translating and analyzing Michelangelo's writing in the form of three love letters written to Cavalieri, I aim to uncover the more private, human side of his genius. The following piece is inspired by Cavalieri's enduring impact on Michelangelo.

Michelangelo's *Vatican Pietà* (1499) depicts the body of Jesus on the lap of his mother Mary after the Crucifixion. The piece was commissioned for the French Cardinal Jean de Bilhères and remains the only sculpture Michelangelo ever signed.



Michelangelo's *Florentine Pietà* (1555) depicts the body of Jesus after the crucifixion, supported by the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the Pharisee Nicodemus. The figure of Nicodemus is believed to be a self-portrait of Michelangelo, who originally sculpted this piece for his own tomb.



Cast

Michelangelo Buonarroti Miles Messenger
Tommaso dei Cavalieri Stavros Kalomoiris
Vittoria Colonna Elisabeth Staak
Lionardo Buonarroti Samuel Hugo Willner
Giuliano da Sangallo Caleb Short
Minstrel/Courier Evan Dibbs

Giuliano's Guests Micah Hastings, Ryan Cason, Eleanor Bennett, Phoebe Hiltermann

Directed by Diego Marquez Todeschini
Lighting Designer Sabina Diaz-Rimal
Light Board Kate Brashear

I would like to warmly thank my Senior Project Board for all their support:

Jean Wagner
Franco Baldasso
Diana Depardo-Minsky

Special Thanks to:

My parents Kate Edmonds and Matthew Messenger
Marisa Finkelstein
Aurora Amidon
Arianna Lomolino
Giorgio Vasari and John Addington Symonds

SIGNOR MIO CARISSIMO
by Miles Edmonds Messinger

Cast (in order of appearance):

MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI	MILES MESSINGER
VITTORIA COLONNA	ELISABETH STAAK
TOMMASO DEI CAVALIERI	STAVROS KALOMOIRIS
GIULIANO DA SANGALLO	CALEB SHORT
MINSTREL	EVAN DIBBS
LIONARDO BUONARROTI	SAMUEL WILLNER
PARTY GUESTS	Various Extras

Scene 1-PIETÀ

John Adams Hallelujah Junction Movement 2 begins to play.

AT RISE:

(MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI's workshop in Rome. Several blocks of white Carrara marble stand at the sides of the stage. There is a wooden worktable with a white cloth draped over it. Several drawings, pens, and pieces of red and black chalk are scattered on top of the table, as well as measuring instruments, a goblet, a few paint-stained ceramic pots and bowls, their brushes sitting in them. There is a singular wooden chair at the table, a wooden stool, and a coil of heavy rope in a pile on the floor. Almost everything seems to have come into contact with chalk dust. A stone sculpture stands UPSTAGE CENTER.)

(A yellowish spot illuminates MICHELANGELO standing DOWNSTAGE CENTER in his workshop, just in front of the audience with his back to them. He wears his work clothes: shorts and a loose fitting shirt which appear to be linen the color of burlap, and bare feet. His clothes are smudged with chalk dust and smudges of charcoal or paint. MICHELANGELO holds a hammer and chisel in his hands, as if he has just stopped working. He gazes upstage at his Vatican Pietà, bathed in grayish light. The Madonna (VITTORIA COLONNA) sits gracefully on a throne, holding the body of Christ (TOMMASO) across her lap. She is in mourning the death of her son, yet she emits a certain grace and composure that captures the eye. The sculpture is still, and so is MICHELANGELO, though his body visibly rises and falls as he breathes. The Madonna (VITTORIA) slowly and silently bows her head so that the audience can no longer see her face. The music returns to the bars that it began with.)

SLOW BLACKOUT.

Scene 2-MUSINGS

(Lights come up on MICHELANGELO and VITTORIA COLONNA in a shady corner of a garden. The sun is shining through the leaves, and birds can be heard chirping. The two stroll slowly across stage from UPSTAGE LEFT to the bench DOWNSTAGE RIGHT.)

VITTORIA

To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Michelangelo?

MICHELANGELO

The beauty of this day reminded me of the time that has passed
since I have seen you.

VITTORIA

So you came to see me.

*(Both smile as VITTORIA sits on the bench. MICHELANGELO gazes
out over the audience.)*

VITTORIA

I have been spending more and more time writing outside. You
know, I think I prefer it.

(Pauses, looks at MICHELANGELO) If you don't mind me saying, you
look pale... I think some time in the sun would do you good.

MICHELANGELO

(Smiles and joins VITTORIA on the bench) Most of my days are
spent inside. Such is my curse. I plan to visit Carrara next
month to select marble for my next commission. I miss the smell
of fresh cut stone, that dust which invades and exposes every
line in my hands.

VITTORIA

Not to mention all the time you spend watching shirtless stone
masons.

MICHELANGELO

(Stands excitedly) An artist must study anything and everything
that inspires him! *(Pauses)*

May I read you something, signora?

*(VITTORIA smiles her approval. MICHELANGELO produces a piece of
paper from his pocket. From it he reads the poetry he has
written for her.)*

MICHELANGELO

When that which is divine in us doth try
To shape a face, both brain and hand unite
To give, form a mere model frail and slight,
Life to the stone by Art's free energy.

So, born a model rude and mean to be
Of my poor self, I gain a nobler birth,
Lady, from you, you fountain of all worth!

Each overplus and each deficiency
You will make good. What penance then is due

For my fierce heat, chastened and taught by you?

(VITTORIA smiles, considers the verse.)

VITTORIA

(Playfully.) You spend far too much of your precious time on me.

MICHELANGELO

Vittoria, time spent honoring you is never wasted. Inspiration so divine deserves the same reverence as the greatest works of art.

VITTORIA

Do you always know exactly what to say?

MICHELANGELO

Mostly...

(VITTORIA surveys MICHELANGELO carefully. He attempts an unconvincing smile. There is concern in her eyes. VITTORIA stands, walks to MICHELANGELO, and takes his hand.)

VITTORIA

Something troubles you. I can see it in your face.

(As VITTORIA finishes her last line, John Adams' Hallelujah Junction-3rd Movement begins to play. The lights and atmosphere shift to MICHELANGELO's workshop, and VITTORIA breaks away from MICHELANGELO, leaving him alone in his own space once again.)

Scene 3-THE INVITATION

John Adams' Hallelujah Junction-3rd Movement continues throughout the scene.

(MICHELANGELO sits at his desk rifling through his drawings, facing the audience. The 1498 Pietà is gone. He holds a drawing up to examine it, and sees an imperfection. He looks around for chalk, then spots a piece on the table. He picks it up and carefully corrects his drawing while leaning on the table, then blows off the chalk dust and holds it up in order to see it better. His eyes wander and he notices a sealed letter on the other end of the table. He picks it up and opens it. It is hand written, and his eyes dart back and forth. When he reaches the end, he rests his hand on the table, still holding the letter,

deep in thought. He turns his head to look at the place where the Pietà was.)

The music fades.

BLACKOUT.

Scene 4-LA FESTA

(Lights come up on an intimate celebration. Resting on the tables and hung from above are several glimmering candles. Guests of nobility either mill around or sit and talk, laughing and drinking. A MINSTREL begins in the corner, strumming his lute, then proceeds to weave slowly between groups of partygoers, who allow his music to be the soundtrack to their conversations. MICHELANGELO enters, smiling somewhat abashedly, and is greeted warmly by GIULIANO DA SANGALLO who announces his entrance. GIULIANO is a few drinks in.)

GIULIANO

(Grinning broadly) Ah! Il maestro, Michelangelo!

The other guests raise their glasses and smile and call out to greet him.

MICHELANGELO

(Greeting GIULIANO) You said it would be a few people...

GIULIANO

(Puts his hand at MICHELANGELO's back) Yes, a small gathering! I know you prefer to be removed from such things, but how do you consider yourself anti-social? You have twice as many assistants as this! You spend enough time working. Here are the best people in Rome! I insist you meet them.

(MICHELANGELO follows GIULIANO over to the table at DOWNSTAGE LEFT where the wine is kept.)

MICHELANGELO

Prego. I suppose I owe you a lifetime of gratitude as it is.

GIULIANO

(Pours wine for MICHELANGELO) For what?

MICHELANGELO

For bringing me to Lorenzo il Magnifico, rest his soul.

GIULIANO

(Hands MICHELANGELO the goblet of wine) I know talent when I see it. I'm glad I spotted you when I did, when you were a student under Ghirlandaio.

(MICHELANGELO throws him a look of disapproval.)

You can't go on pretending you never stayed there if everyone knows.

MICHELANGELO

(Loudly as if to change the subject) Introduce me to your esteemed guests!

(Smiling, GIULIANO picks up his cup, puts his arm behind MICHELANGELO, and leads him UPSTAGE CENTER to introduce him to the other guests. As a guest laughs, TOMMASO enters. MICHELANGELO smiles and greets a few people in a group, then looks up and sees TOMMASO. As he does, the lights change, and every person freezes with the exception of MICHELANGELO. There is complete silence as he gazes longingly upon TOMMASO. He breaks away from the motionless group and walks slowly, carefully over to him. Now directly in front of TOMMASO, MICHELANGELO takes a swig of his wine, keeping his eyes affixed. The party comes back to life and the lute player resumes his song. GIULIANO seamlessly joins MICHELANGELO across the stage.)

GIULIANO

And here, Signore Tommaso dei Cavalieri.

MICHELANGELO

Piacere.

TOMMASO

The pleasure is mine, signore. I must say that I visited the Sistine Chapel and marveled at your work. It is an honor to be in your company.

MICHELANGELO

(Cheekily to GIULIANO.) I like this one.
(To TOMMASO.) Where are you from?

(One of the guests pulls GIULIANO back to their conversation UPSTAGE.)

TOMMASO

Rome, signore. I was raised here—my family resides just north of the Pantheon.

MICHELANGELO

Well messer, I would be honored if you would visit my studio.

TOMMASO

I wouldn't want to intrude!

MICHELANGELO

I insist!

(One of the guests call to the MINSTREL, requesting he play a song. The MINSTREL walks downstage to take his place DOWNSTAGE CENTER, and begins to strum a 4 chord melody.)

MINSTREL

♪ In Caesar's day he ruled supreme,
his goblet o'erflown with wine,
yet by the theater knives a gleam,
fell swiftly in his regal spine.

♪ Good Christians visit church on Sunday,
bell-ringers jump and pull the rope,
good men will meet the lo-ord one day,
though in truth they're not the Pope.

MICHELANGELO

(To everyone) Would you join me in a toast?

(He clears his throat.)

Fine people raise your cups of wine,
to Giuliano our gracious host,
his architectural visions are divine,
so pour the man a heavy dose!

(All cheer and drink. MICHELANGELO turns to TOMMASO.)

MICHELANGELO

Meet in the Piazza della Rotonda, tomorrow at midday.

BLACKOUT.

Scene 5-DRAWING LESSON

(Lights up on MICHELANGELO's studio. It is late in the afternoon, and light is shining in through the windows. MICHELANGELO and TOMMASO can be heard from offstage, already in the midst of a conversation.)

TOMMASO

I finally get to see the famous workshop of il Maestro Michelangelo!

MICHELANGELO

It took you long enough...

TOMMASO

Well you seem to be so busy!

MICHELANGELO

My apologies.

(The two enter the workshop. TOMMASO takes a moment to look around and take everything in. MICHELANGELO walks across to STAGE LEFT of the table, then looks back and realizes TOMMASO is still gazing around the room.)

TOMMASO

(Examining the throne.) So this is where the magic happens!

MICHELANGELO

Most of it.

TOMMASO

(Turns to MICHELANGELO) You don't have assistants?

MICHELANGELO

A few. I gave them the rest of the day off.

TOMMASO

(Makes his way toward the table) Very generous!

MICHELANGELO

Sometimes I prefer to be alone.

(TOMMASO arrives at the table, inspecting the drawings and designs on its surface. The two stand at the opposite ends.)

TOMMASO

These are beautiful. How to do select your subjects?

MICHELANGELO

I actually prefer to draw my friends.
(Hesitates before asking) Would you do me the honor?

TOMMASO

(Surprised) Are you sure?

MICHELANGELO

(Moves stool for TOMMASO to sit) Please.

(TOMMASO excitedly sits and poses in preparation to be drawn. MICHELANGELO finds his seat behind the table.)

MICHELANGELO

(Gesturing.) Would you turn your head, messer?

(TOMMASO does so. MICHELANGELO nods and begins sketching. The room is completely silent with the exception of the chalk scratching the paper. He looks up every few seconds, then back at his work. After a few glances, he does not look back at the paper. He cannot help but stare.)

TOMMASO

Should I...

MICHELANGELO

(Taken aback, pulled out of his dream.) Just turn slightly.

(MICHELANGELO continues drawing.)

TOMMASO

How is it?

MICHELANGELO

I just hope to do you justice.

TOMMASO

I have no doubt you will.

(Both smile. A few moments later, MICHELANGELO gestures TOMMASO over to inspect the drawing. They stand together behind the table. TOMMASO is overjoyed.)

MICHELANGELO
It needs some more time.

TOMMASO
It's beautiful.

(MICHELANGELO gazes at TOMMASO, who is admiring the drawing. TOMMASO looks up and meets MICHELANGELO's eyes.)

BLACKOUT.

Scene 6-BLISS

(Lights up on MICHELANGELO standing at his table, examining his drawing of TOMMASO. As he picks it up and gazes at it, the shadow of a smile appears on his face. He wanders around the table and stops at the stool where TOMMASO posed. He slowly climbs onto it and settles, basking in his own excitement and arousal. He takes a breath and stands, walking around the DSL end of the table and returns behind it, an uncharacteristic spring in his step. He pauses for a moment, then quickly sits and pulls a sheet of paper toward him and begins to write.)

BLACKOUT.

Scene 7-ELDER BROTHER

(Night. MICHELANGELO sits at his work table writing STAGE RIGHT. Several papers lay spread out on the surface while a single flickering candle aids his vision. He stops writing, holds up the piece of paper, reads it, and grimaces. He puts it back down and scratches out a portion, then resumes writing. FRA LIONARDO BUONARROTI appears UPSTAGE LEFT, as if he had materialized. MICHELANGELO does not look up. After a moment LIONARDO speaks.)

LIONARDO
You should light another candle. That way you needn't squint so much.

MICHELANGELO
(Does not look up) My eyes are just fine as they are.

LIONARDO
You're writing a letter.

MICHELANGELO

And you are blessed with clairvoyance!

(MICHELANGELO continues scribbling. For a moment all that can be heard is the sound of his quill.)

LIONARDO

Personally I think the contents of your letter are intriguing...

(MICHELANGELO turns his head but never looks directly at LIONARDO.)

LIONARDO

I am sure the recipient would be honored to receive such a note.

MICHELANGELO

Don't get too excited, I am writing to Giovansimone.

LIONARDO

You would never write to our little brother so earnestly. *(He pauses.)* Do not fear my opinion. I am not suited to judging the actions of others. I live to serve God, who alone passes judgement.

(MICHELANGELO continues writing for a moment, then looks up.)

MICHELANGELO

Do you believe that the duty of all good Christians is to live in the shadow of God?

LIONARDO

I believe it our duty to love God as God loves us.

MICHELANGELO

Yet somehow He will judge me regardless of my faith?

(LIONARDO takes a moment to consider.)

LIONARDO

He will judge you by your actions as a man made in his image. *(He realizes what MICHELANGELO is doing.)*
You're changing the subject.

MICHELANGELO

Am I?

LIONARDO

You know there is no use in hiding the contents of your letter.

(MICHELANGELO scowls.)

MICHELANGELO

Well what do you want?

LIONARDO

What do you want?

MICHELANGELO

(MICHELANGELO knows his game is up) A second opinion.

LIONARDO

(Smiles knowingly.) I'm listening.

(MICHELANGELO reads aloud from his letter.)

MICHELANGELO

"My dear Tommaso, you will excuse me. I hope you will not be offended at an attempt to be equal to you, nor desire what you cannot find in me: for he who is alone in everything, cannot have companions in anything. Nevertheless your lordship, you are the light of our century, unique in the world, one who cannot be satisfied by the work of any other, one who has no living equal."

(Pauses) What do you think?

LIONARDO

It's beautiful.

(MICHELANGELO looks like he is about to say something.)

LIONARDO

(Knowingly) And your honesty is imperative.

MICHELANGELO

Imperative? It's inescapable.

LIONARDO

You fear his answer.

MICHELANGELO
It terrifies me.

(As MICHELANGELO turns to speak to LIONARDO again he realizes his brother has vanished. He looks back to the page and carries on writing. He finishes, folds the paper, and stands up. As he does so, a COURIER walks into the studio, meets MICHELANGELO at CENTER, and the letter is handed over for delivery.)

Scene 8-VITTORIA RETURNS

(Early evening, the sun has just gone down and the warmth of natural light through the window is waning. MICHELANGELO is wearing his work clothes, nervously fidgeting with his tools. A sharp knock on the door interrupts his manic state and he looks up. VITTORIA appears at the entrance to the studio.)

MICHELANGELO
Signora Vittoria!

VITTORIA
Buonasera mio caro! Am I interrupting?

(MICHELANGELO Puts the hammer on the table and attempts to brush the dust from his clothes.)

MICHELANGELO
No, not at all! May I offer you something to drink?

VITTORIA
No grazie. *(Pauses)*

(He moves toward his chair as he prepares to move it for her.)

MICHELANGELO
Would you like to sit?

(VITTORIA sees through his deflections and cuts to the chase.)

VITTORIA
How are you feeling?

(MICHELANGELO looks sadly at VITTORIA.)

MICHELANGELO

Like I have jumped from a cliff and am waiting for the eventual
impact.

VITTORIA

(Walking to him) Don't be so grim!

MICHELANGELO

I wrote Tommaso a letter declaring my love. I told the truth.
And it haunts me.

(MICHELANGELO slumps down into the chair.)

VITTORIA

But your love for him is real. You have made your move. You may
think and pray and torment yourself, but it will change nothing.
You can only wait.

(She holds his hand.)

Scene 9-CONFRONTATION

(MICHELANGELO's studio, evening. The air is still. MICHELANGELO is pacing back and forth in his workshop, heavily distressed to the point of feeling physically ill. After a moment he stops to lean against the table. TOMMASO appears across stage at the entrance to the workshop, MICHELANGELO'S letter in his hand. He looks at MICHELANGELO, who has frozen. They stare at each other intensely.)

TOMMASO

Buonasera.

MICHELANGELO

Buonasera.

TOMMASO

I thought I should come in person.

MICHELANGELO

Of course...

TOMMASO

(Holding up the letter) This is...

MICHELANGELO
A confession.

TOMMASO
Yes... I read it many times. But now that I'm here,
I don't know what to say.

(There is a silence.)

MICHELANGELO
Tommaso-I did not recognize the extent of my feelings until I
began writing that letter. To me the sound of your name is
equally beautiful and torturous.

(Pause.)

TOMMASO
I am beyond flattered. I admire you as an incredible artist, and
a close friend. *(Pause)*
But I cannot give you what you seek.

(MICHELANGELO is struck with the terrible but inevitable truth.)

TOMMASO
I'm sorry... *(Pause)*
Please don't think lesser of me.

MICHELANGELO
I could never.

(Pause.)

TOMMASO
If I may be so bold... I would choose to remain friends.

(MICHELANGELO smiles, trying to keep it together.)

MICHELANGELO
I would like that.

(The two slowly walk toward each other making eye contact. AS they meet at CENTER, TOMMASO puts his hand onto MICHELANGELO's shoulder in a friendly gesture. In response, MICHELANGELO places his own hand on TOMMASO's. TOMMASO then turns and walks out of the workshop, still holding the letter. MICHELANGELO watches him leave. He walks over and sits down at his desk.)

Scene 10-PIETÀ FINALE

(MICHELANGELO is sitting at his desk, illuminated by a single spotlight. He pulls out a new piece of paper and begins to write purposefully. The voiceover of MICHELANGELO's final letter to TOMMASO begins to play.)

MICHELANGELO'S VOICE

Messer Tomao, signiore mio caro, benché io non rispondessi all'ultima vostra, non credo però che voi crediate che io abbi dimenticato o possa dimenticare el cibo di che io vivo, che non è altro che 'l nome vostro: però non credo, benché io parli molto prosuntuosamente, per esser molto inferiore, che nessuna cosa possa impedire l'amicizia nostra.

(After the voiceover, MICHELANGELO examines what he has written, attempting to hold himself together. The lights begin to slowly fade and a yellowish spotlight appears at CENTER. MICHELANGELO walks into the light and begins to crumble, but is caught by the Madonna (VITTORIA), who appears at his left. Christ (TOMMASO) moves in to support MICHELANGELO's body at his right. Finally Nicodemus (LIONARDO) seamlessly appears behind MICHELANGELO, hooded and ominous, yet concerned and forlorn. The four figures freeze in The Florentine Pietà.)

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

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Figure 3. Buonarroto, Michelangelo. *Punishment of Tityus*. ca. 1532. Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Windsor, UK. http://library.artstor.org/asset/HBARD_122413686975.



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Figure 7. Buonarroti, Michelangelo. *Florentine Pietà*. ca. 1547-1555.
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Figure 8. Buonarroti, Michelangelo. *Pietà*. 1498-1499.
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Figure 9. Buonarroti, Michelangelo. *Rondanini Pietà*. c. 1559-1564. Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Italy.

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PRODUCTION STILLS (Photographs courtesy of Gus Aronson and Alexander Habiby)

Figure 10. "The Invitation" *Signor Mio Carissimo*. Saturday, April 7th, 2018.

Michelangelo reads the letter from Giuliano da Sangallo.

Figure 11. "Elder Brother" *Signor Mio Carissimo*. Saturday, April 7th, 2018.

Fra Lionardo Buonarroti materializes behind Michelangelo.



Figure 12. "La Festa" *Signor Mio Carissimo*.
Saturday, April 7th, 2018.

The Minstrel entertains the guests of
Giuliano da Sangallo.



Figure 13. "Pietà Finale"
Signor Mio Carissimo.
Saturday, April 7th, 2018.

Christ and the Madonna catch
Michelangelo as he falls.



Figure 14. "Pietà Finale" *Signor Mio Carissimo*. Saturday, April 7th, 2018.

(Clockwise from left): Christ, Lionardo, the Madonna, and Michelangelo form the *Florentine Pietà*.