

# Adamo Ruggiero

Staying true in life and work:  
on stage with *The Neverending Story*

By Rosanna Bonura

Italian-Canadian actor Adamo Ruggiero's latest role is starring in David S. Craig's stage adaptation of *The Neverending Story*. Presented by Young People's Theatre, the production, described as being 'a thrilling, epic adventure in the spirit of *The Lord of the Rings*', is based on the classic German novel by Michael Ende. Produced by Roseneath Theatre, it stars Dalal Badr, Kate Besworth, Walter Borden, Natasha Greenblatt, Richard Lee, Billy Merasty, Charlotte M. Moore, Derek Scott, and Adamo Ruggiero. Director and Playwright, David S. Craig has written over 20 professionally produced plays and in Canada is considered as one of the top in the industry. His stage adaptation of *The Neverending Story* tells the journey of Bastian- a bullied boy who escapes his troubles by burying himself in books. His latest find takes him on the most thrilling adventure of his life to the land of stories known as Fantastica which is facing oblivion from an enemy known only as 'The Nothing'. The 'Childlike Empress' has chosen an unlikely hero named Atreyu to shoulder the heavy task of saving their world. As the adventure continues, Bastian discovers that he needs to find the key that will change both their worlds. Adamo will be playing the role of lead hero, 'Atreyu'. "He's a really interesting character that is quite relatable to young people because he's a hero, but a real hero in the sense that he's not always succeeding and in the end he might even think he has failed. It's not the kind of classic storybook notion of triumph. There are endless amounts of conflicts that my character has to overcome and he recognizes the importance of the journey and what it means to come of age. The message is that it's not about what you acquire but what you've been able to survive and surpass. In that sense I think he's a great role model for young people," says Adamo.

Adamo Ruggiero is likely best known for playing the role of Marco Del Rossi in the second season of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* where he made his television debut in 2002. Throughout his eight years on the successful show, this lead role had Adamo playing a brave, openly gay teenager, garnering the actor much attention and acclaim. Having such a character on Canadian television is particularly important in today's society especially considering the numerous stories of bullying and suicides among young gay men and women. For Adamo, playing this character had even more meaning. In 2008, a year before his last year on the show, Adamo came out. "I was incredibly excited and blessed to have this role. It was one of those meant to be moments when I was coming out myself and playing such a character especially at a time where young people were looking for some kind of guidance as this generation of coming out started to take hold, it became this beautiful line up of me realizing myself as a human

being and gay person, and putting that into my character so I could help other young people realize their self," explains Adamo.

He also credits *Degrassi's* creators and producers for making a show where education and entertainment blended simultaneously, showcasing the vulnerability of young people and things that are happening in the news and around the world in a way that audiences can relate and learn from, which ultimately contributed to the show's success. "Having all kinds of characters was absolutely about educating people as well as their peers, friends, and parents, all with the intent of creating a community. Television, literature, theatre, it's all about understanding people that are different from yourself and building an understanding about how the world works and I think *Degrassi* always did that," says Adamo. "For me the most rewarding part of playing Marco was that I was able to find myself a community of young gay people like myself and like my character. I looked up to Marco the same way fans did and I look up to fans the same way they look up to me. It just reminds me how much this LGBT movement is a community-oriented thing and the more we assemble ourselves as one cohesive body, the greater effect we can have on equal rights, equal love and ac-

ceptance," he continues.

Coming out in a competitive industry that is often surrounded by speculation also proved to be a bit difficult for Adamo at first. However, having a strong belief in who he was made this easier. "In the beginning it was difficult for me because in my mind I had this idea that it was going to ruin my career but then I realized that I didn't care. I have no fear playing gay characters, and no fear about being typecast. I truly believe that art and talent will prevail and I also think my calling to help young people like myself was even more important than just myself," shares Adamo. The support of his parents also made this an easier step in his life. "My parents are incredible people. It wasn't that they didn't accept me they just didn't understand me, and they needed time to understand. And that's what I tell young people all the time, when we come out we become ambassadors for change in terms of our new role in educating people who are different from us, about us and who we are. My parents just needed to be educated because they had never met a gay person in their life. It was about teaching them that things don't have to change, letting them understand the history of the community and move-

ment, struggles you go through, and incredible things you're still able to do especially living in Toronto. My parents are the most accepting people and I'm very lucky as a first generation to have such cool, hip parents," he shares. Adamo's cultural background has also been an influencing force in his career and life. His dad was born in Italy, his mom here in Canada. "Some of the most fundamental values I have come from my Italian heritage and act as my moral compass. I'm very close with my family and will always cherish that," he says.

Acting was a career Adamo knew as early as 7 years old that he was destined to pursue. His first professional job was playing Cupid in Stage West's *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. He attended Cawthra Park Secondary School- an arts high school, which enabled him to balance his academics and acting skills and also allowed him to play several leading roles in plays including *Godspell*, *Carnival*, *Auntie Mame* and *The Bath*. "I was always interested in the arts as a young person and I got involved in a lot of community theatre. My parents were really great in fostering that for me. I always followed by instinct as a kid and my instinct always led me towards performance. It's all I really know," says Adamo. Pursuing acting even further, Adamo attended York Univer-

sity, where he graduated with a degree in Communication Studies and Film Theory. Other acting credits include roles in CBC's *Being Erica* and YTV's *That's So Weird*. He was also cast in the feature film *Make the Yuletide Gay*. In addition to acting, Adamo Ruggiero has also done his share of television hosting for shows including *MTV Canada*, *Video on Trial*, *Canada's Next Top Model*, and *eTalk*. This coming spring/summer he'll be hosting YTV's hit series *The Next Star*. His hosting credits also garnered him a Gemini nominations in 2010 and 2011 for 'Best Host in a Pre-School, Children's or Youth Program or Series'.

*Tandem* had the opportunity to speak with Adamo about his current role as Atreyu in David S. Craig's stage adaptation of *The Neverending Story*.

**Can you tell us about the play and what audiences can expect?**

They can expect an incredible imaginative spectacle with real life characters you can relate to and that will bring you to tears at the end. The set is incredible and interacts closely with the characters. The costumes are also incredible and larger than life that bring you into this realm of imagination, yet the characters are very grounded, especially Atreyu and Bastian who deal a lot with conditions of the human mind and human spirit.

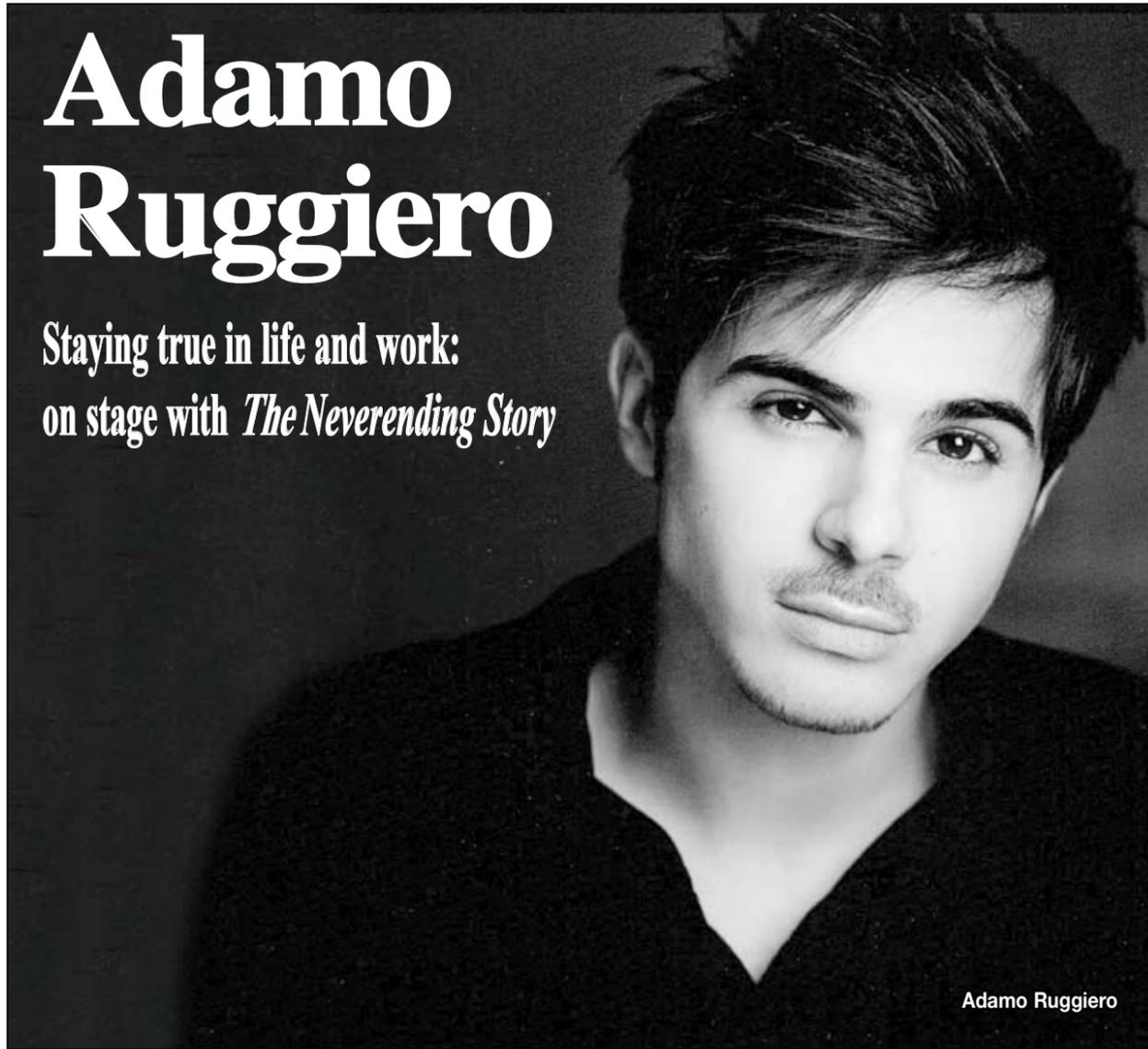
**What attracted you to the role and the script?**

I watched the movie growing up and I had taken a children's literature course in school and I was always really drawn to how powerful children's literature is with the messages they convey. When I read this, I was really taken back by it especially with the power of imagination. Michael Ende argues that imagination can create a powerful space that is closer to honesty, truth and love than our kind of false notions of rationalism. He wants to celebrate our imagination through literature. David S. Craig and artistic director Andrew Lamb are using the power of theatre to use the imagination and I thought it was a beautiful and quite an honest show about why our imaginations are important. I knew I wanted to be a part of it- and I always wanted to play a youth hero (he chuckles).

**What do you hope audiences gain from the play?**

I hope young people can see how powerful theatre and a live performance is and hopefully that encourages them to return to the theatre especially in this day in age of frivolous content on television. I want young people to see that theatre can be cool and hopefully it makes them want to come back.

*The Neverending Story runs until March 17, 2012 at Mainstage, with extra performances during March break week. Tickets: \$10-\$20. For more information and to purchase tickets, call: 416-862-2222 or visit: [www.youngpeopletheatre.ca](http://www.youngpeopletheatre.ca)*



On left (from left to right): Natasha Greenblatt, Adamo Ruggiero. Middle (from left to right) Adamo Ruggiero, Richard Lee. On right (from left to right): Natasha Greenblatt, Adamo Ruggiero (Production Photos courtesy of Mir Lada)