

Farrah's struggle

The 1970s icon and actress battles a spreading cancer. **PAGE 2**

The fix is in

Maureen Ryan is now liking "Dollhouse" and "Fringe." **PAGE 5**

Naval gazing: How 'NCIS' helped me learn to love again



Julia Keller
TRIBUNE CULTURAL CRITIC

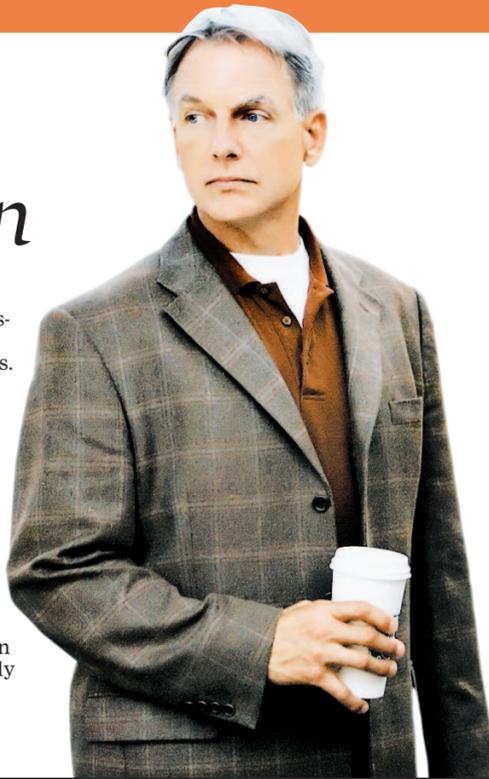
Let me count the ways. We've got Gibbs and McGee and DiNozzo and Abby and Ducky and Vance. Have I forgotten anyone else in the—oh, right! And there's Ziva, who is likely to retaliate for my forgetfulness as only a former Mossad agent can: cleverly, stealthily, leaving no forensically discernible marks.

Spring is here, and I'm in love again. But it's not some unreliable human being who has snatched my heart away. It's a TV series: "NCIS." The initials stand for "Naval Criminal Investigative Service," a real-life federal agency that, like its fictional avatar, handles law-enforcement cases relating to the Navy and Marine Corps. The series premiered Sept. 23, 2003, as a spinoff of "JAG," and has been airing at 7 p.m.

Tuesdays on CBS ever since.

In TV years, that length of time translates to "forever, give or take." A TV series typically sheds viewers as it ages. "NCIS," though, is that rare thing: a venerable franchise whose audience is actually increasing. The show moved into the top 10 in its fifth season. Between its first season and the current one, it rose from No. 26 to No. 5. In recent weeks, more than 18 million people have tuned in each Tuesday to watch it. Among scripted shows, "NCIS" regularly lures more viewers than anything on NBC, ABC or Fox, a CBS spokesman reports. And it's more popular among young people than shows such as "The Simpsons," "Family

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What to watch for

Signature "NCIS" moments:

◀ Gibbs' (Mark Harmon) back-of-the-head slaps at DiNozzo (Michael Weatherly)



▶ Abby's (Pauley Perrette) yen for Caf-Pow, a gigantic beverage reminiscent of a 7-Eleven Big Gulp

■ McGee's (Sean Murray) affection for fantasy video games and manicures



◀ Ducky's (David McCallum) habit of chatting with corpses

■ DiNozzo's appreciation for a pretty face (Trans-lation: He's a horn dog)

■ Gibbs' favorite conference room: an elevator with the "Emergency Stop" button pulled

"Shock value is really important when showing up."

—Singer Rose Guccione



Rose Guccione prepares for an appearance. Her OperaGram.com offers a dramatic spin on personalized greetings. **TOM VAN DYKE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Diva at your door

Singer ready if the occasion calls for some operatic drama

By Robert K. Elder
TRIBUNE REPORTER

When Rose Guccione walks into a room, people notice.

Maybe it's the viking horns. Or the long blond braids. Maybe it's the spear.

But even if they miss those details, they can't miss the ear-splitting climax when she sings "Happy Birthday."

That is what happened recently at Nola's Cup, an Oak Park restaurant, when the owner bought an OperaGram for one of the waitresses.

Heads whipped around and conversations hushed as Guccione asked, in a booming voice, "Is Sarah here?"

Moments later, as Guccione's voice jumped several octaves to sing the final "Tooooo yooooou!" the birthday girl's eyes popped open, her smile peeled back—as if in a wind tunnel—and she burst into giggles.

"The recipient often looks embarrassed and honored at the same time, which is a rare thing," Guccione says.

A voice teacher and chorus member at Chicago's Lyric Opera, Guccione started OperaGram.com in December 2006 as a part-time gig. It has become a surprising source of



Guccione serenades waitress Sarah Hudelson with a birthday song at Nola's Cup in Oak Park. What began as a part-time pursuit has become a dependable source of income, the singer says.

income during the recession.

Guccione has been singing all her life, but not always opera music. Over the years she has been cajoled and pushed into the spotlight at office birthday parties, family celebrations, etc.—whenever the occasion required a song. Then, at a baby shower a few years ago, a friend said to her, "You know that birthday message you on my birthday and play it."

Hmm, Guccione thought, maybe people would pay for this. Thus, OperaGram.com was born. Guccione coupled her Web design skills with her singing experience and now does six to eight jobs a month,

some in person (\$150) and others over the phone (\$20) and by e-mail video (\$30). Of the dozen or so singing telegram services in Chicago—which include everyone from Blues Brothers impersonators, Frank Sinatra-like crooners and exotic dancers—Guccione appears to be the only one dedicated to opera. Guccione sings traditional celebration songs, arias—even operatic songs with lyrics she tailors to the occasion.

On this day, it was an in-person job. At 9 a.m., Guccione began to "diva up" in the bathroom of her west suburban home. Sheet music and opera posters decorate the house she shares with her husband, a lawyer.

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Willem Dafoe studies his script before going on stage at the Steppenwolf. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/TRIBUNE PHOTO**

Algren fights from page to stage

By Chris Jones
TRIBUNE CRITIC

In "The Lightless Room," the newly discovered Nelson Algren masterpiece read in public for the first time ever at the Steppenwolf Theatre Monday night, we meet an ill-fated boxer, Blackie Cavanaugh. He was played by Willem Dafoe, no less, who wisely let the words do the fighting on lines like: "Then it was just me and the big cool dark and no wind near at all."

"I couldn't tell you straight," says Blackie's manager in the story, "if he was a contender or a bum."

That was, of course, Algren's not-so-secret insecurity. Although better veiled these days, it is also the insecurity of Chicago, his paradoxical town. It is the insecurity of a writer—especially, right now, this writer, frantically pecking out words on a Blackberry after being ejected from a Borders, the kind of joint Algren would have hated anyway, since such places now occupy the kind of street corners he once immortalized.

Waubonsia and Bosworth, Madison and Aberdeen, 1958 W. Evergreen. All were extolled from the Steppenwolf stage, the hookers, pimps and, yes, poets, who once hung on their corners lingering like shadows cleared away to snag the Olympics.

The ubertext of "Nelson Algren Live," a literary evening that had the great Don DeLillo happy merely to read little bits of narration, and featured the truly delicious casting of Martha Lavey as Simone de Bouvoir? Algren spent a life writing about others and kept this hitherto-unpublished story hidden, because Blackie Cavanaugh, a gaping, emotional, closed, taciturn wound, was far too much like himself.

I'm sold. Algren had to run because he was always at the center of an American paradox, Chicago truth.

Aside from the new piece, the gathering of Algren aficionados, the sense of mutual hometown discovery, the endlessly repeatable puncturing of the pretensions of de Bouvoir and all those who had it easier in some other town, the best parts of the night were the snapshots of Algren interviews. As played, movingly played, by Barry Gifford, Algren could be heard revealing everything and nothing, an essential figure convinced of his own marginality.

A high note

Come along as opera singer Rose Guccione warms up and then outfits herself with helmet, spear and long blond braids for a special delivery in Oak Park.

chicagotribune.com/operagram