



Shipwrecked!
An Entertainment:
The Amazing
Adventures of Louis
de Rougemont
(as Told by Himself)

by Donald Margulies
Directed by Doug West

Know-the-Show
Audience Guide
researched and written by
the Education Department of

The
SHAKESPEARE
Theatre of
New Jersey



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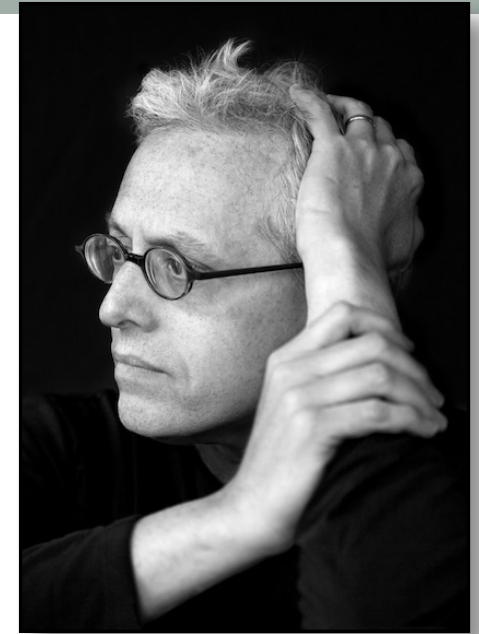
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About the Playwright: Donald Margulies

Portrait of
Donald Margulies



Donald Margulies was born September 2, 1954, and raised in Brooklyn. His family was poor and not involved in the theatre, but Margulies saw many plays and musicals as a young boy. His father, a Jewish wallpaper salesman, was able to afford \$3.50 tickets to Broadway shows for his children.

In elementary school, Margulies developed his writing skills through various projects such as a book report on the Congo written as parody lyrics to the songs of *My Fair Lady*. In addition to his interest in theatre and writing, Margulies also showed skill in drawing at a young age and pursued visual arts in college.

At Purchase College in New York, Margulies received a BFA in Visual Arts. While in school, Margulies introduced himself to Julius Novick, theatre critic, and expressed his interest in playwriting. According to Margulies, Novick asked him "Have you ever written a play before?" When Margulies responded "no," Novick said "Great!" and became Margulies' first mentor in playwriting. Margulies enjoyed the first production in his own words his senior year at Purchase College.

After college, Margulies enrolled in an MFA writing program in New York. However, his graduate career was short-lived, lasting only eight weeks. Instead, he joined play writing groups such as The New York Writers Bloc, a "plucky band of playwrights, performers and directors, who met in living rooms and, as [they] grew, in rented spaces, every Monday night for more than a decade." Margulies credits this job as the beginning of his career in writing.

Margulies wrote many plays before gaining notoriety with *Sight Unseen* in 1991, for which he won an Obie Award for Best New American Play and was a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. After becoming a finalist once again for *Collected Stories* in 1997, Margulies received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for his play *Dinner with Friends*. These and other plays including *Time Stands Still* and *The Model Apartment* have been produced on and Off-Broadway and in theaters across the United States and around the world.

Today, Margulies continues to write plays, screenplays, and in recent years, has rekindled his love for collage-making. He is also an adjunct professor of English and Theater Studies at Yale.

Shipwrecked!

A Brief Synopsis

SPOILER ALERT: The following includes spoilers about the events of the play.

"I'm about to tell you a story. A fantastic and amazing story! A story all the more remarkable because every word of it is true."

With the help of a few players on stage, Louis de Rougemont travels back in time to childhood and sees himself as a sheltered young boy engrossed in the wild adventures of *Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*. As a restless teen, Louis takes his first bold step into the world when he leaves his home, bound for Australia on a pearling expedition.

Louis is scared but excited for his new adventure. His journey is cut short when a whirlpool capsizes the ship and Louis is left as the sole survivor. Days later, Louis and Bruno, the ship's dog, wash up on dry land. During the next two and a half years, Louis and Bruno live a meager existence on a deserted island.

To pass the time, Louis does acrobatic feats and rides on the backs of giant sea turtles. One day, a small boat carrying three Aboriginal people (an elderly man, his daughter, and his young son) arrives on the island. Louis returns with them to their tribe, marries the woman, and becomes warchief of the tribe. Despite his happiness, Louis longs for home. Thirty years after leaving London, he finally returns.

Fascinated by his story, *Wide World Magazine* publishes Louis' tales over several editions of the periodical. Soon all of London knows his name and wants to know more about his life. Louis is invited to give lectures and even

MARGULIES ON DE ROUGEMONT

"Louis de Rougemont was a man who claimed to have survived in the outback for 30 years after being shipwrecked. He eventually returned to society, where he told his story of heroics publicly and in print, and became a celebrity—until the story began to unravel. Various anthropologists and oceanographers began to find clues in his text that pointed to fabrication, and slowly his story fell apart until he was basically disgraced. The debunking is one of the things that fascinated me; the tale he told is so captivating that it raises the question, 'How significant is it that it was made up when the pleasure of the journey was so powerful?' I think that's an interesting question. It was then that, for me, *Shipwrecked!* became **a story about the power of storytelling**. It also became a way to **celebrate theater, to do what theater does better than spectacle, film or multimillion-dollar musicals: to simply get back to the essence of telling a good story.**"

-Donald Margulies, Playwright

to meet with Queen Victoria. He finds himself a popular and wealthy man. His hero status is threatened, however, when his claims are investigated and challenged by reporters and scientists.



Who's Who in the Play

LOUIS DE ROUGEMONT

Louis was a sickly boy who had little exposure to the outside world. As a teenager, he leaves his home in London in search of adventure. After 30 years, he returns home and tells the fantastical tale of his life, selling it to a popular periodical. Louis garners much wealth and fame from these stories before being ousted as a charlatan. Now old and tired, Louis narrates his story to the audience and hopes to provide evidence of its truth.

PLAYERS ONE, TWO, AND THREE

Three actors assist Louis by taking on roles of the various characters who appear in Louis' story. Some of these characters include:

MOTHER

Louis' mother, who does not allow him outside much but reads him bedtime stories and is constantly nursing him through his sicknesses.

CAPTAIN JENSEN

The Captain of *The Wonder World*, a ship leaving for a pearling expedition off the coast of Australia, invites Louis to join the ship as a crew mate.

BRUNO

Captain Jensen's dog, also aboard *The Wonder World*. Bruno is the only other survivor of the maelstrom that sinks *The Wonder World*. He is Louis' closest friend for years.

YAMBA

An Aboriginal woman who washes up on Louis' deserted island, Yamba and Louis teach each other their languages. Louis eventually marries Yamba and raises two children with her before heading back to London.

GUNDA

An elderly Aboriginal war chief and the father of Yamba. Gunda washed up on Louis' deserted island with Yamba and Bobo, his younger son.

QUEEN VICTORIA

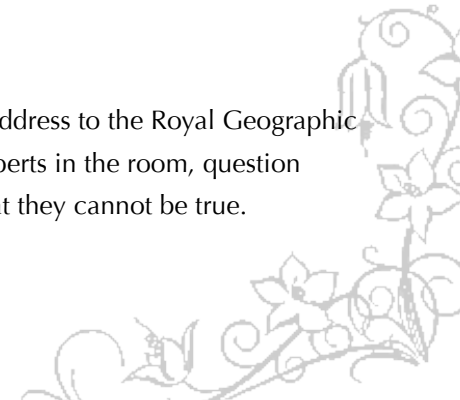
The real-life Queen Victoria reigned over Great Britain from 1837-1901 and showed a keen interest in science, art, and discovery.

ALBERT

A small boy who becomes a fan of Louis' stories. Louis, when his reputation is good, gives Albert a toy boat from his childhood. Later, when Louis' reputation is ruined, Albert confronts Louis and throws the toy on the ground.

TURTLE EXPERT

One of the scientists present at Louis' address to the Royal Geographic Society. The Turtle Expert, and other experts in the room, question Louis' stories and publicly proclaim that they cannot be true.





Shipwrecked!

A Historical Perspective

London in the 1860s

“My city is a grumbling monster now, grinding its gears and spouting its smoke, all day and night, without cease” - Louis de Rougemont



-Victorian Era London was the first city to embrace the Industrial Revolution, which quickly turned it into the original “megacity” of the world.

-London was populated by diverse peoples, most of whom were living on the extremes of the economic spectrum; either in immense wealth or in crippling poverty. This vast gulf between the rich and the poor,

and the abject conditions in London for the lower classes was vividly exposed by Charles Dickens in his writing.

-Transportation within the bustling city was primarily horse-drawn, which left the streets disgusting — riddled with horse dung and other excrement.

-The Industrial Revolution allowed for easier travel in and out of the city, as well as streetlamps and factories which provided work for many Londoners.

Exploration & Colonization

-By the 1800s, the British Empire had already touched nearly every continent on the planet. It was the largest empire in the history of the world and, by the start of the 20th century, it held sway over nearly one-quarter of the population of the planet. Territories under British rule could be found in India, Canada, Egypt, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia to name only a few.

-Crews such as the one depicted on *The Wonder World* were very common at this time. As opportunities presented themselves, captains rushed out on what they hoped would be their next profitable venture, much like the pearl-divers in the play.

-Until the early 20th century, natural pearls were only accessible to the wealthy.

Real black pearls would have only been found in the area de Rougemont and Captain Jensen explored. They continue to be incredibly valuable today.



FAR LEFT: A bus makes its way down Fleet Street towards St Paul’s Cathedral, London, c.1888. Photo by London Stereoscopic Company/Hulton Archive.

LEFT: Imperial Federation, map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886 by John Charles Ready, 1886. Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collection



Australia

-Extensive Aboriginal Australian communities existed for centuries prior to the arrival of the British. The ancestors of the indigenous peoples arrived from Asia over 65,000 years earlier, and it is believed that their population had reached over one million prior to the European invasion.

-Aboriginal peoples spoke over 250 different languages.

-Despite their nomadic lifestyle, there were many language-based Aboriginal groups who shared cultural features and traditions. Unlike the North American indigenous groups, they did not travel in strict "tribes." Rather, ethnocentric group boundaries were often blurred by kinships, marriages, and exchange systems.



-Aboriginal spirituality teaches that humans share a life force with the rest of Nature, creating a strong human connection to the land and an eternal identity in the Universe.

-In 1606, the Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon was the first known European to reach Australia. In 1770 the north-eastern territory was claimed for Great Britain by James Cook. By 1788, British fleets had arrived and established the penal colony of New South Wales. They

determined the continent to be a "wasteland" and ignored the existence of the larger indigenous population. Almost immediately, foreign European diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and measles killed thousands of Aboriginal people.

-British colonists held attitudes that the Aboriginal peoples were "inferior" and that they led "primitive" lifestyles.

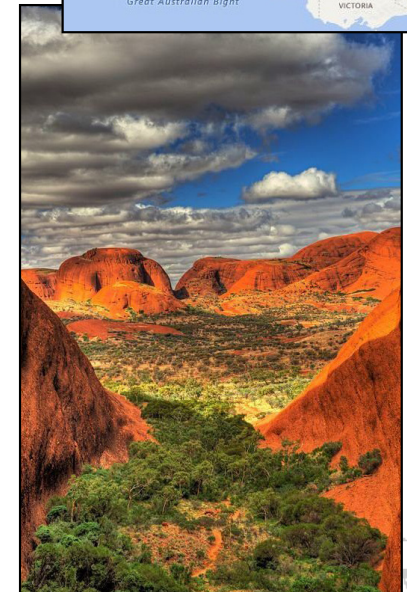
-British-led massacres of the indigenous population encroached on land belonging to the Aboriginal Australians, and irreversible damage was done to the size, strength, and cultures of the native population.

The Coral Sea Islands and the Australian Outback

-The Coral Sea Islands are a collection of mostly uninhabited islands and reefs off the north-east coast of Australia. The area was first charted by Europeans in 1805. The lack of fresh water kept the area uninhabited.

-The extremely harsh environment of the Australian Outback has made it a fabled place for brave (or foolish) adventurers like Louis to explore. Temperatures in the Outback can rise well over 104 degrees Fahrenheit, and without proper supplies, it can be deadly.

-The Australian Outback is famous for its gargantuan spiders and mobs of kangaroos.



FROM TOP: Group of Aboriginal men with weapons and Aboriginal woman and child. Both images by Antoine Fauchery and Richard Daintree (photographers), c. 1858, State Library Victoria

RIGHT ABOVE: Map of the Coral Sea.

RIGHT BELOW: Image of the Australia Outback.



Shipwrecked!

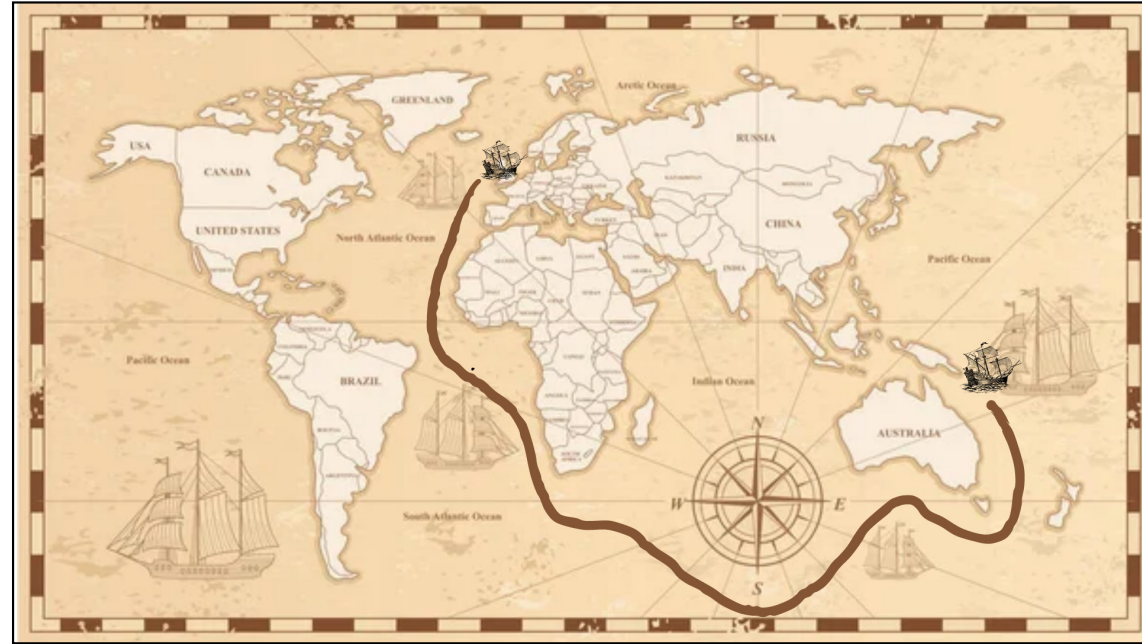
A Production History

Shipwrecked! An Entertainment made its world premiere in the September 2007 Pacific Playwrights Festival at South Coast Repertory, where it starred Gregory Itzin and was directed by Bart DeLorenzo.

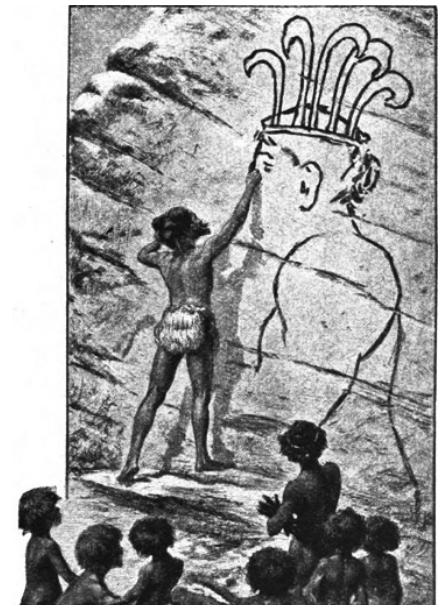
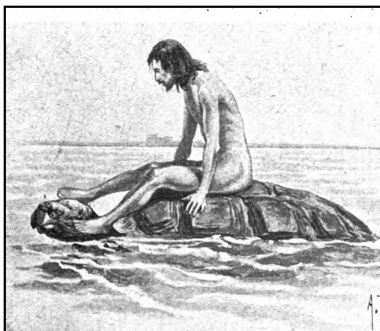
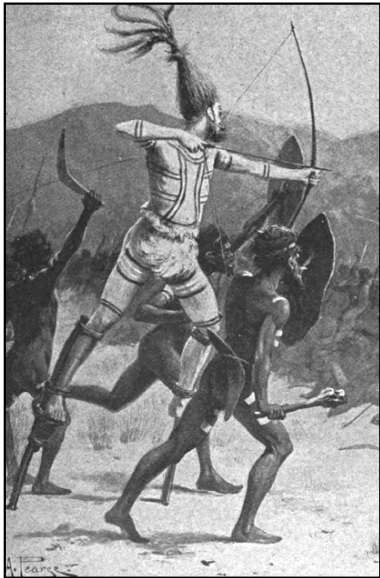
The play went on to productions at the Geffen Playhouse, where it again was directed by DeLorenzo and starred Itzin, and Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, directed by Evan Cabnet in February 2008.

The play opened Off-Broadway at Primary Stages, directed by Lisa Peterson, running from February 8, 2009 to March 7, 2009. Michael Countryman appeared in the Long Wharf and Off-Broadway productions. It received the 2009 Outer Critics' Circle Award nomination for Outstanding New Play.

Oil Lamp Theater in Glenview, IL off-Chicago produced *Shipwrecked: An Entertainment* in summer 2021, which was the first production of the theater company to be produced outdoors. At the 2021 BroadwayWorld Chicago Awards, this production of *Shipwrecked* won five awards, including Best Play and Best Production (In-Person) for Oil Lamp Theater.



ABOVE: Map of Rougemont's travels.
OTHERS: Illustrations from the 1899 publication of *The Adventures of Louis De Rougemont*.



The “True Story” of Louis de Rougemont

*“Truth is stranger than fiction,
but De Rougemont is stranger than both.”*

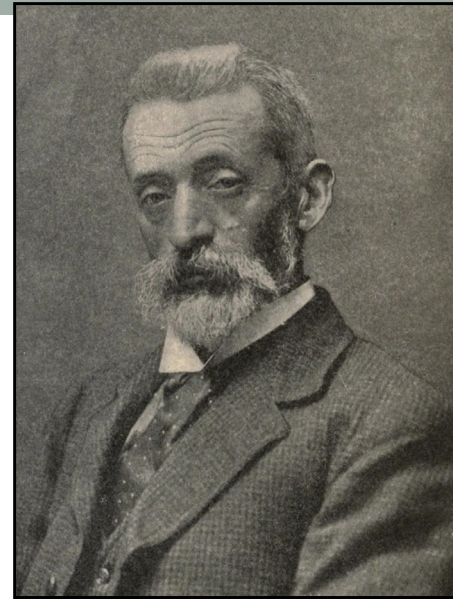
—*The Wide World Magazine*, June 1899, No. 14

In 1898, Louis de Rougemont created a frenzy with his periodical tales of “entirely true” fantastical travels and amazing feats that took place over 30 years in the Australian Outback. De Rougemont’s tales were so incredible, however, that some people began to question their authenticity and investigate Louis himself. It soon became clear that this larger-than-life personality was not who he claimed to be.

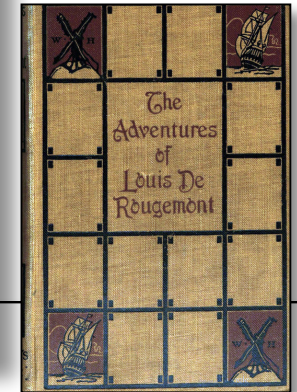
Louis de Rougemont was actually a poor Swiss immigrant born Henri Louis Grien. Though most of his story was proven to be false, there were some facts that were authentic, like the fact that Henri Louis did leave home at the age of sixteen. He became a footman to the actress Fanny Kemble, servant to a Swiss banker de Mieville in 1870 and, for a short time, a butler for the Lieutenant-Governor of Western Australia, Sir William Robinson. It is believed that it was in this last job that Louis overheard details from accounts of expeditions in the Australian Outback as he tended dinner parties at the Governor’s home.

Later, Henri Louis settled down in Sydney. In Sydney, he married Eliza Jane Ravenscroft and had seven children. Henri Louis soon became a career charlatan, peddling a variety of inventions that did not work and taking on various fraudulent jobs. He attempted to pass himself off as a doctor, a spirit photographer, and many other things.

Growing bored of his business ventures, Henri Louis abandoned his wife and children in Australia to head for London in 1898. In London, Henri Louis spent



LEFT: Portrait of Henri Louis Grien. BELOW: The cover of a printing of *The Adventures of Louis De Rougemont*, 1899 and a copy of the dedication page.



Dedication

To my Devoted Wife,

YAMBA,

The Noblest Work of the Creator,

A GOOD WOMAN,

*And to her People, my True and Steadfast Friends,
who never wavered in their confidence or
attachment, and to whom I owe the*

Preservation of my Life,

THIS WORK

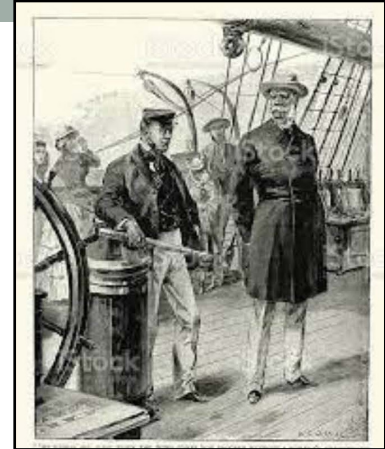
Is gratefully Dedicated

many days at the British Museum reading books on the Australian Outback and the South Pacific. Months later, he began to write about his invented adventures in *The Wide World Magazine* under the name Louis de Rougemont. The stories caught the public’s eye and rocketed Louis to fame.

With his likeness appearing in papers across the Empire, it was not long before Henri was recognized by his abandoned family and duped customers. Though publicly discredited, Grien continued to appear in theatres as Louis de Rougemont telling his fascinating tales and giving demonstrations of his skills to prove his authenticity. Despite this, interest in de Rougemont soon waned, and Henri Louis disappeared from the public eye. In 1921, he died a beggar, going by yet another name: Louis Redmond.

In This Production

Scenic rendering by Steven Beckel, Co-Scenic Designer and costume research from Patrice Trower, Costume Designer, for the 2023 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production of *Shipwrecked*, directed by Doug West.



Commentary & Criticism

“Margulies (*Sight Unseen*, *Dinner With Friends*) makes no apologies for the stripped-down nature of his new piece. On the contrary, he makes the art of bare-bones storytelling both the subject of his work and the style of its dramatic treatment. It’s a story about storytelling, and what it does is tell a story. “

-Marilyn Stasio, *Variety*

“Aside from offering immensely entertaining performances and a delightfully wacky story, *Shipwrecked!* is also a statement about storytelling itself. Margulies has devised a delightfully cheeky manner of telling this tale, with the highly theatrical use of a tiny cast aided by imaginative costumes and clever props. Without offering anything resembling verisimilitude, he makes his audience want to believe the unbelievable.”

-Arthur Dorman, *Talkin Broadway*

“Amiable but featherweight frolic.”

- Charles Isherwood, *New York Times*

“The play does have an imaginative visual coda providing a moving redemption for its tarnished narrator.”

-Frank Scheck, *New York Post*

“While Margulies could have opted for approaching the tale of Louis de Rougemont as a more complex exploration of the issues that crop up before the adventure is done, *Shipwrecked!*, as it stands, is an enjoyable theatrical yarn quite suitable for both adults and children with an attention span.”

- Kristin Salaky, *Broadway World*

“When the play begins, it feels as if Margulies, having done some dramatic heavy lifting, had given himself permission to turn out a lightweight entertainment. However, as it unfolds, *Shipwrecked!* is light in tone, but carries a well-structured dramatic arc worthy of an accomplished playwright.”

-Arthur Dorman, *Talkin Broadway*

“Recreating the pleasures of nineteenth-century platform entertainment with a tart contemporary twist, Donald Margulies’ *Shipwrecked* offers a self-promoting fabulist a forum to inform and persuade, and it delights in both respects.”

—*Variety*

“The Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Donald Margulies scampers to the defense of good old-fashioned yarn spinning with *Shipwrecked*. The breathless story of a Victorian gentleman [and] seafaring wanderer springs to life like a theatrical pop-up book. The audience is left to judge whether he is an inspirational figure touched by imaginative genius or a mere con man. We can also consider the possibility that the hero of this true story based on an untrue story is a little of each.”

—*New York Times*

“Margulies gives a sympathetic nod to the audacious autobiographer’s creative overreach in *Shipwrecked*, a deft literate narrative folded into a vaudevillian romp with radio theater overtones. Colorful [and] compassionate speculations on the real-life deficiencies and pain that may have been at the root of Louis’ need for self-aggrandizement.”

—*LA Times*

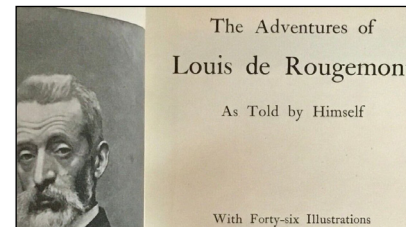


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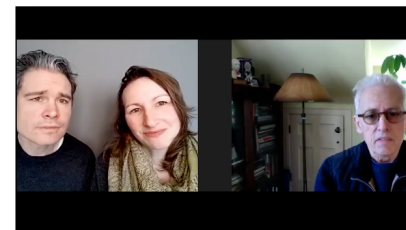
THE ORIGINAL SERIAL ADVENTURES

This digital facsimile of the *Wide World Magazine* includes the original publications of Louis de Rougemont's fantastical adventure.



AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD MARGULIES

Artists from AboutFace Theatre in Ireland have a conversation with Donald Margulies. (25 minutes)



A VIRTUAL MASTER CLASS WITH DONALD MARGULIES

This segment from Premiere Stages Virtual Master Class Series features Donald Margulies talking about his life, his work, and his career. (44 minutes)

