

Italian-American Theatre

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An Italian-American actor hesitates before the entrance to a shop in Little Italy at the turn of the century. It is a day in the life of a skilful, practiced ticket-vendor of the Italian-American theatre. To disguise the distress he feels at performing the onerous task that awaits him inside the shop, he assumes the mask of confidence, tinged slightly with arrogance. Summoning up a glib tongue, the actor enters the shop and before the shopkeeper knows what has happened, the actor fires away at him this familiar reprise: «Buongiorno. Come sta? La famiglia sta bene? Lei è un mecenate, lei è un benefattore della colonia. Io non so cosa faccia il governo italiano, dorme? Ma quando lo faremo cavaliere? Vuole un biglietto per una recita che si darà il mese entrante: “La cieca di Sorrento?” Spettacolo drama [sic]»¹.

With an unsuspecting shop owner, this spiel would almost always be successful in selling a ticket, but this one has been through this game before and when he learns that the performance is scheduled for a Thursday evening, he is quick to respond: «Oh! Guarda un po’, proprio giovedì che aspetto visite. Vi pare, con tutto il cuore!»². But the actor is even quicker and has purposefully misinformed the storekeeper: «Mi sono sbagliato, è di venerdì»³. The shopkeeper, stunned, mumbles: «Oh! Venerdì... vedrò»⁴. Tricked, and now the reluctant buyer of a ticket, the shop owner spits back «Come siete seccanti voi altri teatrati!»⁵. This anecdote is only one example of many colorful stories describing how the artists of the early Italian-American theatre had to resort to their wits to keep themselves and the theatre alive.

Italian-American theatre begins in New York City. In 1805 the first Italian-American playwright, Lorenzo Da Ponte (famous as Mozart’s librettist),

was living with his family at Bayard Street and the Bowery. After a short sojourn in Elizabethtown, New Jersey in 1807⁶, he returned to New York City and staged Vittorio Alfieri's play *Mirra* in 1808. He also wrote short plays in Italian performed in his home by his American students at Columbia University. But the first significant amateur phase of this vital ethnic theatre truly emerged when the waves of Italian immigrants began pouring into this country in the 1870's, bringing both the performers and audiences necessary for theatrical entertainments.

The last quarter of the XIXth century was a time of great immigration. In 1900, 100,000 new Italian immigrants entered this country. By 1905 the figure increased to 616,000. While twenty to thirty percent of these migrants returned to Italy, having come here only to work, the greater part settled here permanently because living conditions in Italy were so difficult. Overpopulation, natural disasters and an unstable economy prompted such large scale immigration.

Arriving here, immigrants chose for the most part to settle in the larger cities on the Eastern seaboard. Since so many new entries were unskilled laborers, illiterate in English and Italian (many only spoke a regional dialect), the industrial East was an inevitable attraction. The greatest concentration of Italians was in New York City. The 1900 census showed that over 225,000 Italians lived within New York City's boundaries alone. That was at the time greater than the population of Rome.

The average immigrant was a male, ex-agricultural worker from the south of Italy, unskilled, uneducated and unattached, discriminated against by the mainstream of American society, and often exploited as an underpaid laborer, sometimes even by his own countrymen. He was either unmarried or had a family in Italy which he came here to support. The twenty to thirty percent that returned to Italy seasonally had no desire to assimilate themselves into their new surroundings, even had they been welcome to do so. They retained their regional speech, their social and religious customs, their eating habits, etc. and congregated in communities that allowed them some free expression. Hence, the «Little Italies» of America.

All these factors contributed to creating an original theatrical expression: the Italian-American immigrant theatre of New York City. Its audiences were the displaced men and women of Italy, and they were hungry for entertainment, recognition, a support system and social intercourse, all emotional needs which the theatres and the nightclubs helped to satisfy.

The Italian immigrant community, located in tenement «Little Italies» throughout the city supported itself through a network of fraternal and benevolent associations that often sponsored dances, concerts and lectures to celebrate holidays and benefit social causes in New York City and in Italy. Soon

amateur theatrical clubs evolved. The earliest amateur prototype was the Circolo Filodrammatico Italo-Americano (The Italian-American Amateur Theatre Club) which mounted the first Italian-American production, the Italian play *Giovanna Marni* on October 17, 1880 at Dramatic Hall on East Houston Street. The company performed exclusively to benefit the Italian community in New York and Italy, raising money for worthwhile social causes: cholera epidemics, earthquakes and floods in Italy, funeral and trial expenses, the Italian Home and Hospital, the Columbus Statue fund, holidays commemorating Italian milestones in history, and many, many more. Under Fausto D. Malzone's artistic direction, they were the first and most prolific theatre company of the XIXth century in New York City.

Fausto (Domenico) Malzone (1852-1909) was born in Castellabata (Sa) and emigrated to the US in the late 1870's. He married Amelia Asselta and because of his love for theatre and opera, he named their children Electra, Ulysse and Elide. Fausto changed his own name from Domenico because his favorite opera was *Damnation of Faust*. Fausto lived on Elizabeth Street in New York and later at 249 6th Avenue (between Carroll and Garfield Streets) in Brooklyn. From 1886 to 1902 Malzone owned the Banca Malzone, a small bank, travel agency and wine shop at 88 Mulberry Street, between Bayard and Canal Streets in the heart of Mulberry Bend. He advertised money changing, postal services, travel services by ship or rail, and imported Italian wines. Many such banks peppered the Italian colony and assisted illiterate immigrants with letter writing and legal matters. At 88 Mulberry, Fausto installed the last known headquarters of the Circolo Filodrammatico. As a banker Malzone was a respected member of the Italian immigrant community. He also served as honorary Vice-President of the Società Stella d'Italia, of the Società Italiana dei Barbieri, and of the Società Militare Sant'Arsenio Italo-Americana di Mutuo Soccorso di New York. Fausto and his theatre company paved the way for the professional Italian immigrant theatre that followed in the XXth century. The company disbanded after 1902 when he became ill with malaria and after suffering for seven years, he died at 57 in 1909.

During the XIXth century, a great variety of dramatic forms and entertainments were essayed on the stages of the Italian-American theatre. Italian and European writers were introduced to immigrant audiences, many of whom had never before experienced the theatre or the classics of literature. They heard the plays of their homeland and other European theatres spoken, if not in Italian, translated into their own Neapolitan, Sicilian or other regional dialects.

Concetta Arcamone was described as «an actress very pleasing in emotional and humorous situations, graceful, touching and poetic, and in the Italian plays of passion and blood her dark face and Southern manner are always

adequately expressive». 190 Grand Street between Mott and Mulberry Streets was the residence of Antonio Maiori and Concetta Arcamone in 1902. Concetta Arcamone eventually went into untimely retirement from the theatre to care for her large family. But at one point c. 1919 she was managing Maiori's Theatre on the Bowery and signed a contract with Farfariello for his appearance there. Eventually Maiori and Concetta split up and he married the opera singer Itala Dea. Concetta died very young c. 1925.

In general the XIXth century phase of the Italian-American theatre represents a breaking of ground for the more ambitious, professional endeavors of the XXth century. All in all, the active years after 1900 represent a major transition for this ethnic theatre. In 1900, the theatre had just begun to emerge from its predominantly amateur phase. By 1905, the Italian-American theatre had become firmly rooted in its professional phase which would continue for at least five more decades until its decline.

By far the professionals outnumbered the amateurs during the XXth century, with respect to both performers and performances. But whether amateur or professional, the theatre continued to serve the same functions: entertaining its audiences, educating them to the best literatures of Europe, raising money for worthy causes, perpetuating Italian language and culture, and providing a forum for socializing with other members of the immigrant community.

By 1900 the community had produced the major forces that created the professional theatre of the ensuing decades: Antonio Maiori, who introduced Shakespeare to his immigrant audiences in his southern Italian dialect productions; Francesco Ricciardi who held sway as the Prince of Pulcinellas in the nightclub arena; Eduardo Migliaccio, whose stage name «Farfariello» means «Little Butterfly» and who created the unique art form – the *macchietta coloniale*, the Italian immigrant character sketch; Guglielmo Ricciardi, who created Italian-Brooklyn and went on to a successful career in the American theatre and cinema; Antonietta Pisanelli Alessandro, who started in New York City, performed in Chicago and then went on to create single-handedly, the Italian-American theatre of San Francisco; and many, many more. Many professional liaisons, marriages and business partnerships took place between these major families, creating a strong theatrical network in later years. More often than not, children in these families started their careers early and continued the family theatrical tradition for as long as there was a theatre to nourish them.

Financial problems were an ever present worry for these young companies. Groups appear and, with equal facility, disappear. The more stable theatre companies tried everything to «make a go» of business: they would flourish one year, only to have a lean year next, and so might go on the road

to try new audiences, sometimes returning poorer than when they left; they would move to smaller or bigger theatres in the hopes of juggling finances to better advantage; they would change their fare, from the classics to comedy and vaudeville, or vice versa; nightclubs would as easily change ownership, renovate, bring in stars from Italy. Successful or unsuccessful as these attempts might have been, efforts to create theatre were constantly in force and constituted an enormous output of energy during the 70 odd years of its existence in New York City. The names of the personalities involved in the theatre in one way or another number in the tens of thousands.

In following the fortunes of the many characters in this story, we also venture outside the New York City limits, up and down the Eastern seaboard to the Midwest and inevitably to California. The abundance of theatrical energy spilled out over the city's boundaries with the effect that professional New York City companies were bringing professional theatre experiences to Italian immigrants who lived in rural and suburban areas. Most of the major figures – Antonio Maiori, his comic sidekick Pasquale Rapone, Guglielmo Ricciardi, Giovanni De Rosalia who created the comic halfwit «Nofrio», the itinerant actor and singer Rocco De Russo, Eduardo Migliaccio, Clemente and Sandrino Giglio, to name a few – made excursions out of town, to reach new audiences and get the most mileage out of their productions.

These are the stories of only a few of these many early impresarios.

In the field of dramatic prose theatre, at least for a few years, Giovanni De Rosalia was a very well known figure. De Rosalia was born in Sicily in 1864 and became a professional actor with major companies in Italy, one of them La Compagnia Cavaliere Scandurra, before coming to New York sometime before 1903. His story begins with performances in *Othello*, *Oreste* and *La morte civile* on the minuscule stage of the Villa Mascolo Concert Hall at 207 Canal Street between Mulberry and Baxter Streets, sometime after January 1903. During the Villa Mascolo's existence, the newspaper *La follia* published a novel in the Sicilian dialect by Giovanni De Rosalia, *Litteriu Trantulia ovvero Lu nobili sfasulatu* (Litteriu Trantulia or The fallen noble). On its back cover is an ad for the Villa Mascolo, boasting: «Unico locale spaziosissimo, rinfrescato da 6 grandi finestre e ventilatori elettrici. Con primo e secondo balcone»⁷. The «spacious place» described above actually measured 26'2 «for the facade and back walls, while the east wall reached 64' in length and the west wall, 54'7». The bend in Canal Street accounts for the irregular angle. Beer sold for five cents a glass. Another 1903 ad in *L'Araldo Italiano* described the place as a «Lager Beer Saloon and Ristorante», warning that the establishment was an honest place and that police would be called in should there be any disturbance. De Rosalia's debut with La Compagnia Costantini-Vela in New York City was announced for Tuesday, March 31, 1903 at the Drammatico

Nazionale Theatre. He wrote and performed in the Sicilian dialect. He played dramatic and comic roles with this group, which performed in Manhattan and Brooklyn, until April 1903. At some point after this, De Rosalia started writing, directing and performing independently. He starred as Othello at the Manhattan Lyceum on Thursday, November 12, 1903.

De Rosalia was apparently well educated, had earned the title of Professor and was teaching in the New York City School system by 1904. In one issue of *L'Araldo Italiano*, the anonymous reporter exhorted the Italian-American readers to learn English as soon as possible in order to succeed in America, pointing out that the Germans who come to this country study English immediately. Also, the reporter added, Professor De Rosalia offered his assistance and those Italians wishing to learn better English could come to his school at 227 East 113th Street. Perhaps he was even the anonymous reporter. The Italian-American opera impresario Alfredo Salmaggi remembered that De Rosalia was a journalist⁸.

He appeared at Ferrando's Music Hall on Saturday, June 11, 1904 when the program also included his adaptation of *La balia* (The Wetnurse). But by Wednesday, July 6, 1904 Giovanni De Rosalia had become the impresario and director of his own full-fledged professional theatre company, housed at the Villa Napoli, no doubt filling the gap left by Francesco Ricciardi's disappearance from that bistro. La Compagnia Comico-Drammatica Giovanni De Rosalia, as it was known, was absent from the Villa Napoli during the summer, when they returned to the theatre with a schedule of almost daily performances until November 1904. Taking his cue from Maiori, De Rosalia also tried two performances on some Sundays, at three and eight p.m., while on other evenings, performances began at 7:30. The proprietor of the Villa Napoli was now Gaetano Borriello and Angelo Maria held the title of President of the company.

On January 11, 1905, *Il Telegrafo* explained that Raffaele Penza, the owner of the next door Trattoria del Matese, had bought the building where there «once was» the Villa Napoli. This phrase suggests that performances had ceased for some time after the last recorded performance of November 6, 1904. Also, the notice ends with this criticism of the last performances at the Villa Napoli: «Non più drammi o commedia [*sic*] recitati finora così malamente, ma buona musica e buon canto»⁹. We assume this slur refers to De Rosalia's tenure at the caffè although his name is not specifically mentioned. Perhaps this was the reason for his leaving the Villa Napoli and why the De Rosalia Company ceased to exist for almost a year.

The next note on De Rosalia's theatrical activity reveals that he had returned to acting and was performing steadily with Antonio Maiori's Company from January to June 1905. In August, September and October of 1905, De Rosalia was acting and directing with his own company again, this time at

the New Star Casino, 105-115 East 107th Street between Lexington Avenue and Fourth Avenue. Surprisingly, the company was billed as La Società Filodrammatica Vittorio Alfieri for the single performance of Sunday, October 29, 1905 and oddly enough, a later edition of *L'Araldo* referred to the troupe for this same evening's program as Il Circolo Filodrammatico Manzoni. Neither name persisted after this date because, except for a single performance in November 1905 at Ferrando's Music Hall, De Rosalia went into partnership with the Perez-Picciotto Company and the new group became known as La Nuova Compagnia Filodrammatica De Rosalia-Perez-Picciotto. The first production by the newly merged groups consisted of Giacometti's *La morte civile* (Civil Death) on Wednesday, December 13, 1905 at Arlington Hall. In this particular production of Giacometti's drama, Giuseppe Perez played Abate and De Rosalia played Corrado. Mr. Affronto was described as «un poco troppo compassato e rigido» (a bit too formal and rigid) in the role of Dr. Palmieri, while Mr. F. P. Ingrassia appeared «mediocre» in the role of Fernando¹⁰. Ingrassia lived at 167 East 106th Street. The Perez-Picciotto-De Rosalia merger continued to produce in the ensuing years, at first together, but their merged operation did not have a long life in the years following and they later produced independently.

Giovanni De Rosalia was the director and the leading actor of his own company. His favorite and most frequent role was that of Othello. He also played the title roles in Vittorio Alfieri's *Oreste* and in the anonymous *Armando il Bastardo*; the role of Antonio in *Il Corsaro francese*, as well as the role of Father Eusebio in *Tosca* when produced by Maiori; and Corrado in his own production of *La morte civile*. The reviewer Giovanni Fabbriatore of *L'Araldo* described his acting as Oreste: «la voce potente [...] gesto franco e sicuro, la dizione simpatica e corettissima, la padronanza assoluta del palcoscenico. Nulla di esagerato»¹¹.

A great number of plays were mounted by De Rosalia and his company, both serious and comic in nature. Among authors were the Italians: Vittorio Alfieri, Luigi Camoletti, Felice Cavallotti, Carlo Roti, Paolo Giacometti, Stefano Interdonato, Eduardo Scarpetta, Carlo de Dottori, Giovanna Marni and E. Minichino; the French, D'Aubigny and Emile Zola; and William Shakespeare. Among the Italian-American writers produced there was, of course, Eduardo Migliaccio (Farfariello), who created his own *macchiette* while with De Rosalia at the Villa Napoli. However, the Sicilian *macchietta*, «Piddu Macca», although performed by Migliaccio, was actually written by De Rosalia and Filippo Dato.

Giovanni De Rosalia was also a playwright. He adapted the piece entitled *La balia*; and his untitled «brilliant» farce was produced by Maiori in 1905. De Rosalia teamed up with Paolo Cremonesi in 1907 and later continued in-

dependently to produce serious plays and comedies, including plays by Riccardo Cordiferro, his friend. The actress Francesca Gaudio became his wife and worked in his company also.

At some point De Rosalia decided to abandon the Italian prose theatre, as did Maiori, and turn his energies to comedy. We are fortunate to have his own explanation for the shift. One day as he sat with his friend, the «Prince of Pulcinellas», Francesco Ricciardi, in the Caffè Ronca, the young actor Michele Viola entered the caffè. Seeing his dejected face, Ricciardi and De Rosalia invited him at their table:

– Che fai ora? – domandò De Rosalia.

– Niente, don Giovà.

– E non farai mai niente se non cambi strada. Vedi, anch'io avevo cominciato con i drammi, anzi con le tragedie: *Otello*, *Amleto*, *Saul*. Applausi molti, danari pochi. E ho cambiato suonata. Sono diventato Nofrio, il lepido scemo, buffissimo Nofrio. Ed è spuntato per me il sole.¹²

So it seems, De Rosalia tired of the lack of financial support from the Italian community for his serious dramatic efforts, decided to form a Sicilian dialect theatre to cater to the great numbers of Sicilian immigrants in New York City. Nofrio, the half-wit comic character created by De Rosalia, made him very popular and the name became synonymous with De Rosalia's identity, as Farfariello had become identified with Migliaccio. Nofrio, a Sicilian immigrant hick with a knack for getting himself in difficult situations, wore raggedy clothes and big nose but no mask. A drawing of Nofrio shows him in baggy pants with large checkered pattern, held up by suspenders. His shirt is loose and baggy and white. He has a bushy head of black, curly hair¹³.

De Rosalia at first began by creating monologues for Nofrio and eventually he wrote a number of farces in the Sicilian dialect with Nofrio as the central character, interpreted on the stage by De Rosalia himself. Many of them were published, some by Cordiferro's *La follia di New York*. Titles of these «siciliana newyorkese» farces include: *Nofrio si deve tirare* (Nofrio Has to Shoot), *Nofrio eroe del 31 febbraio* (Nofrio Hero of February 31), *Nofrio locandiere* (Nofrio the Innkeeper), *Nofrio ai bagni* (Nofrio at the Baths), *Nofrio al telefono* (Nofrio on the Telephone), *Nofrio arricchuto* (Nofrio Gets Rich), *Nofrio senzali di matrimoni* (Nofrio the Matchmaker), *Nofrio spara lu jocu di focu* (Nofrio shoots off his fireworks), among many, many others.

An early work was a book, *Raccolta di brindisi per ogni occasione in dialetto siciliano* (A collection of toasts for all occasions in Sicilian dialect), published in 1916. Just as Cordiferro wrote a book of speeches for all occasions, He was also a writer of Sicilian and Italian verse poetry. *Amuri chi chianci: versi siciliani* (Love that cries: Sicilian verses), was published in 1923. His

stories and songs, some of which were made into records on the Columbia, Victor, and Okeh record labels and for a brief time in the 1920's, on his own «Nofrio» label. Between 1916 and 1928, almost two hundred abridged versions of his larger stage farces were made into three minute recordings which sold to a national audience¹⁴. His *Il duello di Nofrio* (Nofrio's Duel) was performed as far away as St. Louis, Missouri and Woodriver, Illinois by the Luigi Pirandello Dramatic Club in from 1938 through 1942.

The following is a profile of De Rosalia written by his contemporary, Totò Lanza:

«Nofrio» in Arte

Di fronte alla moltitudine dei comici, Giovanni De Rosalia è il solo che rappresenti qualche cosa di singolare e di staccato: fisionomia originale, voce potente e armoniosa, e una natura d'artista tutta propria. Di carattere bonario, ma acutamente compassato. Egli s'è fatto avanti pian piano, senza posa e senza pretese, superando una grande difficoltà, la più grande che s'incontra sulla via spinosa dell'arte: non è stato l'idolo d'un momento e non è passato mai di moda!¹⁵

Like Maiori before him, and like others who would follow, Giovanni De Rosalia became involved in the unsuccessful efforts to establish a permanent Italian Theatre. It had the support and encouragement of Riccardo Cordiferro and was to be called the Teatro Alfieri but failed to achieve any permanent success.

An air of schizophrenia surrounds the memory of Giovanni De Rosalia. On the one hand he was an educated, intelligent teacher, actor, writer and director who appreciated the classic theatre of Italy and Shakespeare. But he was forced, on the other hand, to perform as a clown, in order to survive in the theatre and because of his limited financial and critical success in the dramatic arena. When he acted Nofrio, did he really want to be doing Othello, his favorite role and the dramatic role with which most later commentators associate him? He seems to have been pulled in two directions. Giovanni De Rosalia died in February 1935.

One of the great female performers and producers was Antonietta Pisanelli who was born in Naples in 1869. Emigrating to New York City, she worked with the early amateur *società filodrammatiche*. On Monday, March 11, 1901, in the Francesco Ricciardi Company benefit for the murdered Mamie Mogavero, Antonietta sang Neapolitan folk songs and duets with Farfariello. She worked outside New York as an actress, singer and dancer on the Italian-American stages of Philadelphia, New Haven and other cities, including Chicago where she played Desdemona on February 23, 1903 with Il Club Eduardo Scarpetta at Scandia Hall. By November 20, 1904, in Union, Illinois, she had become the proprietor of Margherita Hall, where she acted in Verga's *Cavalleria rusticana*. With the deaths of her mother, then her husband and

youngest child, Antonietta and her young son sought a new life in California. By the spring of 1905, Mrs. Pisanelli had commenced producing theatre at Apollo Hall on Pacific Street in San Francisco. Then she turned Berglieri Hall at Stockton and Union Streets into a *caffè concerto* which she ran as actress, director, producer, dancer, and singer and which she called the Circolo Familiare Pisanelli, San Francisco's first professional Italian-American theatre. It served as a place for socializing and entertaining and became integral to the Italian Community of North Beach.

She brought in companies from the East: Pasquale Rapone, Francesco de Cesare, Antonio Maori and Eduardo Migliaccio to other theatres she later ran in San Francisco: the Iris, the Beach, the Bijou, the Washington Square, the Liberty, the Teatro Alessandro Eden. She also toured with her company, billed as «Survivors of the San Francisco Earthquake». With a second husband and a new name, Signora Alessandro continued to produce even as the theatre declined due to the Americanization of its audience. She then delved into Mexican and even Chinese theatre before retiring from theatrical production by 1925.

One effect of this theatrical migration was to inspire the formation of amateur theatrical groups in other cities. During the XIXth century several amateur groups existed in New Jersey, Boston, and Philadelphia. By the early XXth century there were over 80 amateur groups scattered throughout small and large cities all over the United States. Some were professional. But many follow the pattern already established by amateur clubs in New York: they form either for the sole joy of performing theatre, or to raise money for worth social causes. And they are often associated with some religious, fraternal or educational organization. Of course, not all amateur groups outside New York City owed their existence to the example set by traveling professionals. The great numbers of new immigrants alone would have inevitably resulted in the emergence of new theatre clubs. But what is certain is that major performers from the city came in contact with actors outside and often used them in their productions, thereby creating temporary marriages between companies. New York's Francesco Vela, actually taught a drama school in Providence, Rhode Island. It is conceivable that New York's ready access to the latest printed scripts, songs and sheet music found their way to other cities via the traveling companies, thereby increasing the repertory of local amateur clubs. Riccardo Cordiferro journalist and playwright brought scripts of his play *Lost Honor* to many places out of town.

The «road» made reporters out of some New York actors and directors. The actor playwright Salvatore Abbamonte sent in information about his activity in Asbury Park to *L'Araldo Italiano* as did the actor Salvatore Melchiorri when he performed in Chicago. Riccardo Cordiferro included frequent out of town notices in his radical newspaper *La follia*. Many of the anonymous notices of pro-

ductions out of town came from the pens of well-known New York personalities. Furthermore, many regional reporters, who may also have been actors and directors, reported to the New York dailies about shows in their towns and about their own local stars. The list of out-of-town reporters is a long one.

All this reportage goes to show that New York City's Italian-American theatrical consciousness was not a parochial one. It included an awareness and a sharing of the theatrical tradition with other immigrants who no doubt went to the theatres in their respective cities for the same reasons Italian-American New Yorkers did: socializing, entertainment, and a support system in the difficult and incomplete process of assimilation.

Riccardo Cordiferro was a castigating critic of the amateur theatre clubs that flourished at the turn of the century. Serious criticism, of which Cordiferro was capable, was the exception and not the rule among Italian-American theatre reviewers. The reviews of performances continue for the most part in the patterns established in the XIXth century. Glowing reviews appear with annoying frequency, possibly because the reporter hoped to encourage groups who often performed benefits for worthwhile social causes. The attitude is best summed up in a remark made by *L'Araldo's* Philadelphia correspondent about the efforts of La Compagnia Filodrammatica Silvio Pellico of that city. His comments about their production of the play *Tosca* were gentle: «La critica, se critica vi sia, la lascio ai critici, cioè agli incontentabili»¹⁶. Examples of negative criticism, so valuable because they are so rare, lend a welcome dose of reality to our idea of what a typical night in the theatre might have been. No writer formally and systematically encoded a poetics or theory of theatre. The nature of the reviews, makes it impossible to reconstruct a consistent theory, but many other factors contribute to recreating the idea of what critics, audiences and directors expected theatre to be. In the XIXth century, the stated aim of the Italian-American theatre was to delight and instruct. These two concepts continue to be important after 1900 but to them we can add a third: the concern for social justice.

First and foremost, audiences came to the theatre expecting to be entertained. The hardworking laborers came to the theatre either alone or with families in tow to escape the harsh reality of their lives, to be dazzled by the glamour of the costumes and the beauty of the performers, to be reminded of home by hearing familiar folk songs, ballads and operatic arias, to hear Italian spoken, as well as their own regional dialects, to laugh at the antics of their own regional stock character from the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, to be stirred by the patriotic sentiments and grandeur of the historical dramas, to be moved by the emotions played out in the melodramas, and to be reassured by the well-ordered universe depicted therein. The average audience, we can safely say, was quite dispassionate, or at best ambivalent, about whether a production was educational or socially relevant.

These concerns instead were voiced by the writers and directors. When Paolo Cremonesi and Giovanni Flecchia formed a company to perform for Hoboken's Italian immigrants, they called the group «The Club for Instruction and Entertainment» and also «The Study and Work Club». Salvatore Abbamonte called his group «The Club of young studious Italians» whose stated purpose, was the propagation of Italian culture overseas, as well as entertainment. On Saturday, December 2, 1905, Professor F. R. Lauziers gave a lecture in Italian entitled «L'Arte drammatica come fattore educativo» at Grace Chapel. Although the text of the speech had not remained, the speaker's point of view is inherent in the title.

Intentionally or unintentionally, Italian-American theatre did play an educational role in the life of the immigrant. The history, literature and culture of Italy were paraded across the stages of Little Italy. Furthermore, dramatic literature of other European countries was equally accessible and the actor and director Antonio Maiori introduced Shakespeare in dialect to Italian immigrant audiences. The gentle, humorous satire of Eduardo Migliaccio provided another type of education. Farfariello, the character he created, was a comic stock character, a *caratterista*, in the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte, only this character, instead of originating in Naples or Bologna or Calabria or any other Italian region, was a product of New York City's immigrant community and spoke a curious, new regional dialect, which I call *Italo-Americanese*.

Farfariello was the typical newly arrived immigrant, the bewildered greenhorn, trying to make his way in a strange and inhospitable country. Education was an incidental byproduct of Migliaccio's *macchiette* or characterizations. «Pasquale Passaguai» showed the immigrant how to avoid being duped by thieves, while his parody of «Il Presidente della Società» cured many community leaders of their habit of wearing pretentious military uniforms at public functions. Eduardo Migliaccio was one of the most popular entertainers of the Italian-American music hall arena. He was born April 15, 1882 in Salerno and attended the Institute of Fine Arts in Naples. In 1897 he emigrated to the United States and worked in the Banca Sandolo in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, writing letters to Italy for the bank's clients, illiterate Italian-American laborers. But he relocated to New York City where he secured a similar position at the bank of Don Pasquale Avallone on Mulberry Street. In 1900, he lived at 57 Kenmare Street and began a stage career playing small roles in the Shakespearean productions of the Antonio Maiori Company. He also sang at the intermissions of performances in the Sicilian marionette theatre. But the arena in which he produced his greatest work, created a singular new art form and enjoyed enormous popular success, was the Italian-American music hall, or *caffè concerto*. Migliaccio launched his career in the Caffè Concerto Pennacchio at 109 Mulberry Street in 1900, singing the latest Neapolitan hits with a contract of four

dollars a week. In this hall, later called the Villa Vittorio Emmanuele [*sic*] III, he performed the song «Femmene-Fe» every night, from which the name Farfariello, in the refrain, was derived. This became his signatory stage name with which his identity became indelibly associated and which carries the double meaning of «Little Butterfly» and womanizer.

The caffè concerto, or music hall or nightclub, La Villa Vittorio Emmanuele III was previously named for Umberto I (1878-1900), the son of Victor Emanuel II (1820-1878), who was popular as a ruler, and was known as the «honest king», and was himself the son of Charles Albert, the general-prince of Piedmont and Lombardy. Upon the assassination of Umberto I, about which many plays were written here and in Italy, the caffè concerto was renamed La Villa Vittorio Emmanuele III, after Umberto's son and successor. At the Villa Vittorio Emmanuele III, Farfariello performed the Neapolitan comedy skit called a *macchietta*, a musical sketch combining sung verses and spoken prose passages. Farfariello's original creation was the *macchietta coloniale*, or colonial skit, meaning the Italian immigrant community skit. In this type of skit he impersonated and satirized community figures recognizable to his audiences: Enrico Caruso, the bandleader, the President of the Social Organization, the Irish-American, the greenhorn or hick, the wet nurse, the opera diva, the schoolgirl, the soldier boy, the bride, the street cleaner, the iceman, the fireman, the singer, the dancer, the soubrette, the policeman, the gangster, the bootlegger, the undertaker, the street vendor, the Irish cop, and many, many more, comprising the entire panoply of Italian immigrant society. These photographs of Italian-American life demonstrated the bewilderment of the Italian immigrant in a foreign country. They earned their creator the title «King of Impersonators», «King of New York Vaudeville Entertainers» and «King of the colonial character sketch». Migliaccio spoke the newly evolving language of the Italian-American community, a linguistic soup of Italian, English, American slang and various dialect mutations. Migliaccio wrote both the lyrics and monologues for all his skits and sometimes the music as well. He directed and choreographed all his own routines, rehearsing on front of a mirror and constructing his own wigs and masks. He performed a dozen routines in a half-hour set with quick costume changes. By 1914 he had a repertoire of 150 skits, and by the time of his death in 1946 he had five or six hundred. Many were recorded by the Victor Company in 1916, and published by the Italian Book Company and the Italian newspaper *La follia*.

Farfariello was well known to communities along the East coast but he also toured to Chicago and California in 1919, appearing at the theatre of Antonietta Pisanelli Alessandro in San Francisco. He formed his own operetta company and developed his art form into longer genres, one act and full length plays. During the heyday of Italian radio, he performed on many radio

programs including the Donna Vicenza Company, and on many stations, including WAAM, WAAT, WEVD. In 1936 he toured Italy and he was knighted a «Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Corona» by King Victor Emanuel in 1940. He died in Brooklyn of cancer March 27, 1946. Migliaccio's creations in particular and the immigrant theatre in general helped ease the tensions and anxieties of living in a foreign country, and indirectly helped the immigrant in the process of assimilation.

Another celebrated star to emerge from the caffè concerto arena was Gilda Mignonette (1886-1953), considered one of the world's greatest interpreters of Neapolitan songs. She was born in Naples and had a singing and recording career there as an interpreter of Piedigrotta songs. She first emigrated to the US in 1926. She met with immediate success and was noted for her wonderful voice and spectacular costumes. She became known as «La Carusiana» (recalling the power of the great operatic tenor, Caruso), «The Queen of the Italian Songs», and «The Queen of Diamonds». Brooklyn was the venue for her most popular performances, followed once by the crowds carrying her through the streets. Mae West was a fan. Some of her best remembered songs are «Piscatore e Pusillo», «Zappatore», «Tazza di caffè» and «Cartulina a Napoli».

In the dramatic prose theatre, the task of education was imposed on it by its more educated and literate observers and participants. It was not long before the *litterati* of the day imposed yet another role on the immigrant theatre – that of propaganda. The actor Salvatore Abbamonte told of «red» evenings of theatre which included radical speakers, revolutionary songs, plays on social topics. He claimed that, for love of the theatre, he too had become a revolutionary. His play, *Senza lavoro* (Unemployed), deals with a contemporary social problem of the time. Theatre groups identified themselves by names reflecting their political leanings. New York City had La Filodrammatica dell'Unione Socialista (The Drama Club of the Socialist Union), while Paterson, New Jersey, the home of King Umberto I's assassin Gaetano Bresci, was also the home of Il Teatro Sociale (The Social Theatre). Il Nuovo Club Democratico Italiano (The New Italian Democratic Club) was located in Washington, DC, New Haven, Connecticut, had La Sezione Socialista Italiana (The Italian Socialist Department) and New Castle, Pennsylvania, had Il Circolo Socialista Enrico Fermi (The Enrico Fermi Socialist Club). On the Italian-American stages, immigrant audiences were confronted with contemporary social concerns, among them the exploitation of laborers by American bosses and Italian *padroni*, the miserable living conditions of crowded tenement slums, corruption and social injustice. At the turn of the century the left wing journalist Riccardo Cordiferno began writing what would become a formidable list of social protest plays. Even the regular professional theatres would sometimes put on productions of plays they described as «social dramas».

Riccardo Cordiferro, poet, lyricist, journalist, editor, satirist, lecturer and political activist was born Alessandro Sisca on October 27, 1875 in San Pietro in Guarano in the province of Cosenza. In 1886 Alessandro entered the Franciscan seminary San Raffaele a Materdei in Naples, but left the religious life for a career in letters. In Naples, his early poetry was published under the pen name of Riccardo Cordiferro. Although in later years he briefly used other pseudonyms (Corazon de Hierro, Ironheart, Eisenberg, Sandro, Ida Florenza) for political and personal reasons, Cordiferro (which means «heart of iron») all but supplanted his real name in the literature and politics of this period. In 1892 he emigrated to Pittsburgh, and later settled permanently in New York City. In January 1893, together with his father, Francesco and brother, Marziale, he founded a weekly literary newspaper, *La follia*, at 202 Grand Street. The paper was widely read not only in New York City, but by the *litterati* of the Italian colonies in the major cities of the East. His literary articles, editorials and political commentary usually expounded socialist doctrine. He gave speeches to labor organizations and political rallies, a practice which sometimes landed him in jail. Threats and persecutions led to his resignation from *La follia*'s editorial board, although under his various pseudonyms he continued to publish in that paper and in other publications: *La Notizia*, *the Haarlemite*, and *La sedia elettrica*, the weekly paper of which he later became editor.

His three-act comedy in martellian verse, *Chi ha la testa di vetro non vada a battaglia di sassi* (If you can't take the heat stay out of the kitchen), published in 1900 in *La sedia elettrica*, satirizes the tendency on the part of the amateur theatre groups to undertake productions of plays beyond their capabilities. The professional theatre company, the Maiori-Rapone-Ricciardi troupe, mounted Cordiferro's first plays in the XIXth century: *Mbruoglie 'e femmene* (Feminine Intrigues, 1893), a one-act comedy in the Neapolitan dialect, staged May 1, 1894, and *Il genio incompreso* (The misunderstood genius) a one-act comic and satirical verse treatment of the immigrant theatre companies, staged May 2, 1894. Dramatic social monologues were recited in 1895: *Per la Patria e per l'onore* (For the Fatherland and for honor), and *Il pezzente* (The beggar) which describes the plight of the beggar Cordiferro produced on September 3, 1896, a one-act satirical comedy in martellian verse, *Dio dollaro* (Mammon) and the one-act comedy *Il matrimonio in trappola* (The marriage in a trap) on May 26, 1897. Also in 1897, Cordiferro wrote a three-act social drama, *Da volontario a disertore* (From volunteer to deserter). A full-length three-act social drama followed in 1901, *La vittima* (The victim). Another social drama in four acts, *L'onore perduto* (Lost Honor, 1901) was adapted from his poem of the same name and depicts the exploitation of Italian immigrants in Little Italy. It premiered February 20, 1901. En-

cased in the structure of domestic melodrama, it examines the dishonesty of some Italian-American bankers and its tragic effects on the newly arrived immigrant. The play also touches, however lightly, on the emancipation of women, and was produced in many Eastern cities for Italian immigrant audiences until 1933. It's sequel, another four-act social drama entitled *Giuseppina Terranova ovvero L'onore vendicato* (Giuseppina Terranova or Honor Avenged), premiered May 15, 1906 and was later translated into the Sicilian dialect by Filippo Catalfo and into English by Annie Leitch. In 1906 Cordifero worked on the third part of a potential trilogy that never materialized into production: *L'onore conquistato* (Honor Conquered).

Cordifero also wrote *macchiette*: «Il prominente coloniale» (The prominent colonist), «Io me 'u fatto monaco» (I became a monk), «Don Vicienzo 'o portugallero» (Don Vicienzo the Portuguese), «'O guappo» (The dandy), «Muglierema m'ha passato» (She passed as my Wife), and «Il Cavaliere» (The Knight) all in 1898; «I falsi monetari» (The False Coins) and «Don Vincenzo o Cammorista» (Don Vincenzo the Grafter) both in 1899; and «Il poliziotto italo-americano» (The Italian-American detective) in 1902. A prolific poet, his odes and poems were published in *La follia* and other publications. His lyrics in the Neapolitan dialect for songs such as: «Nun 'o credere Luci», «Abbrile», «Nu Riccio 'e capille», «Strazio d'o core», «Si a capa femmene 'e sta citta», and «Luntano 'a te», some of which were performed by Farfariello (Eduardo Migliaccio) and Enrico Caruso. The latter popularized the song «Cor 'ngrato» with lyrics by Cordifero. A frequent lecturer at political meetings and labor rallies, Cordifero's many lectures and speeches dealt with social issues: «Il destino della Russia» (The destiny of Russia) and «La donna del passato, la donna d'oggi e la donna dell'avvenire» (The woman of yesterday, the woman of today and the woman of the future) and he became active in the Sacco and Vanzetti controversy. Cordifero, «the Singer of the Red Muse», died August 24, 1940. However significant these plays might have been, however satisfying their enactment may have been to the more educated members of the audience, they never achieved the popularity of the comedies, the variety shows and the classics of the European theatre. In the theatre at least, Cordifero was no match for Farfariello, in terms of popularity and exposure. But in the years that follow the class struggle became more desperate and the voice of reform more insistent, all of which was reflected in the theatre.

The progress realized by the Italian-American theatre of the xxth century was outstanding. First, the theatre made a notable transition from an essentially amateur status to its predominantly professional phase; secondly, the time saw an enormous output of activity and the participation of thousands of theatre artists; third, theatre proliferated within Italian-American communities outside New York City, as far as California, partially as a result of traveling profession-

al and amateur companies from New York City; fourth, a distinctly Italian-American language and literature developed; fifth, the theatre was responsible in part for the evolution and celebration of a uniquely Italian-American identity; finally, this new identity contributed, in the characterization of Farfariello, a new comic stock character or *caratterista* in the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. By 1905 despite the vagaries of artistic life, the Italian-American theatre had persistently, obstinately, devotedly and lovingly «arrived».

Immigration statistics throughout the first quarter of the xxth century reveal a steady flow of new immigrant arrivals from which emerged eager new audiences. The major impresarios were still actively engaged on production for the better part of these years: Maiori, Francesco Ricciardi, De Rosalia, Cremonesi, Enrico Costantini, Migliaccio, Ragazzino, De Russo, the Marrone brothers, Imperato, Silvio Minciotti, Esther Cunico, Clemente and Sandrino Giglio. Their ranks were enlarged and infused with the energies of new recruits and entrepreneurs, among them: Ilario Papandrea, Alberto Campobasso, Gennaro Cardenia (father of Vincent Gardenia), Francesco De Cesare, Gino Caimi, Giuseppe Sterni, Ettore Mainardi, Rosario Romeo, Emma Alba Gloria, Angelo Gloria, Attilio and Olga Barbato, and a host of amateur clubs as well.

Throughout the 30's (despite the depression) and early 40's, radio gave the theatre a boost. Italian food companies determined that Italian language programming was an excellent advertising vehicle. Every day had numerous hours of programming on an alphabet soup of radio stations. In the theatre and on the Italian radio shows, Emma Alba Barbato Gloria (1893-1956) created the hilarious, inimitable character of the bossy Sicilian housewife, «Donna Vicenza». Emma Alba (related to the famous Alba Bakery family of Bensonhurst) was born at Caltagirone in Catania in 1893. The child of a professor father, she acted with the Giovanni Grasso and Marcellini companies. At the age of 18 she married actor Ernesto Barbato and toured in his traveling theatre company. In 1924, under contract to the Rosario Romeo company, they emigrated to the US. After her first marriage failed, director, actor and writer Angelo Gloria hired Emma Alba to star in his productions, then married her and together they became the leading actors of their own company, which also included her two children, Attilio and Olga Barbato. In 1934 the *Donna Billonia* radio program featured Emma as Donna Billonia.

Emma as Donna Vicenza played opposite Angelo Gloria on WOV. Gloria renamed his troupe the Donna Vicenza Company after the radio program of the same name achieved popularity. A favorite radio comedy was *La classe degli asini* (The School for Donkeys), with Donna Vicenza as teacher. Her 1939 *Diary of Donna Vicenza* chronicled the milieu of the popular Italian radio shows of the 30's. Angelo and Emma shared ideas for comedies any time of the day or night but Angelo Gloria wrote, directed and produced the radio

programs for his family operated troupe, which achieved great popularity. The company traveled to Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New Jersey and places in between in the Northeast. After Angelo Gloria's death, Attilio Barbato managed the company. Licia Albanese, the diva of the Metropolitan Opera, also performed with their company and on radio.

Olga Barbato was born in Sciacca, Agrigento Province, Sicily. She was fond of saying how she started acting on the stage «in the womb» since her mother, actress Emma Alba, while pregnant with Olga, was performing in their traveling theatre company. At the age of four, Olga debuted on the stage. In Italy she was called the «Italian Shirley Temple». With her father's company, she toured Italy, Africa, Tripoli and Tunis.

Olga spoke several dialects including Sicilian and Neapolitan. Eventually though, advertisers realized that their Italian-American market needed no advertising and the funding source dried up. Then during World War II when many Italians who were not naturalized were interned, including journalists and broadcasters, signs went up in public places warning: «Don't Speak the Enemy's Language». Italian radio felt the blow. But the old radio shows were prerecorded and preserved on records almost 1 1/2 feet in diameter.

After Emma's death in 1956, Olga played the *Donna Vicenza* records as guest announcer on radio programs in Tampa, Clearwater, Sarasota and Miami, Florida. She crossed over into the American arena with a 1971 commercial as the face for Aunt Millie's Tomato Sauce and as the voice of AT&T. Among her many film roles, she played Angelina, the medium, in Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*. After the death of her brother Attilio, and seeing the demise of this last great impresario, she pronounced dramatically in the documentary *Teatro*: «The curtain is down and the theatre is finished».

The Italian immigrant community needed a theatre, and the Italian-American theatre needed an immigrant population to exist. The Italian-American theatre gradually began to see dwindling audiences. Furthermore, as the second and third generations of Italian-Americans became acculturated, they turned to the new and readily available popular forms of entertainment: radio, the movies, and eventually television. Giglio, into the 40's and Cardenia into the 50's were two of the last holdouts. Some, like Guglielmo Ricciardi long ago, managed to cross over into American spheres. Ester Cunico for instance, played Ernest Borgnine's mother in the film *Marty*; Mimi Cecchini appeared in *Serpico* and other films; and the late Vincent Gardenia, who played in the Italian-American Theatre until the 60's, is still highly visible in television and films.

But the Italian-American Theatre is virtually non-existent today. The Italian Actors' Union still exists, conducts meetings, and functions minimally as a liaison for visiting Italian professional entertainers. Even if large numbers of Italian speaking immigrants were suddenly to materialize, our modern

technological age has manufactured other diversions which assure that a popular immigrant theatre is now impossible. In the New York metropolitan area, Frizzi & Lazzi, the Olde Time Italian-American Music and Theatre Company revives some of the material created a century ago. But in general, if Italian-Americans today speak the lines of an Italian play on a stage, they are probably college students studying the language of their grandparents, in the tradition started by Lorenzo Da Ponte at Columbia University in 1808.

Around 1951, a retired impresario, advanced in years, was visited by a younger actor. The older actor asked of the younger: «Che se dice? 'O Teatro che fa? Chi ce sta mo' 'ncopp' 'e scene?...»¹⁷. To which the younger man replied: «Nessuno»¹⁸.

Notes

- 1 «Good Morning. How are you? Is your family well? You are a patron of the arts, you are a benefactor of the community. I don't know, what's the Italian government doing, sleeping? Whenever are they going to make you a *cavaliere*? Would you like a ticket for a show we are performing next month: "The blind woman of Sorrento?" Spectacular drama». All quotations from Italian or English have been reproduced exactly as they appear in the original source, including misspelled words and other typographical or grammatical errors. Farfariello (Eduardo Migliaccio), «Il mio rivale... Rinaldo di Montalbano», *Corriere d'America*, March 18, 1923, p. 6.
- 2 «Oh! Wait a minute, that's the very Thursday that I am expecting company. With all my heart, I am really sorry!», *ibidem*.
- 3 «I made a mistake, it's Friday», *ibidem*.
- 4 « Oh! Friday... I see...», *ibidem*.
- 5 «How annoying all you theatre people are!», *ibidem*.
- 6 Pearlman, n.d.; and Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte Mozart's Librettist*. translated with an Introduction by L. A. Sheppard, New York, NY, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929, p. 316.
- 7 «The only spacious place, refreshed by 6 large windows and electric fans. With first and second balconies».
- 8 My interview with Alfredo Salmaggi, April 2, 1971; and *L'Araldo Italiano*, XI, 227, August 14, 1904, p. 5.
- 9 «No more dramas or comedies performed so badly as before, but good music and good singing», *Il Telegrafo*, v, 11, January 11, 1905, p. 3.
- 10 *L'Araldo Italiano*, XII, 345, December 14, 1905, p. 3.
- 11 «the voice is powerful [...] the gesture is direct and certain, the diction is pleasant and very correct, the absolute command of the stage. Nothing is exaggerated», Giovanni Fabbriatore, «L'Artista De Rosalia», *L'Araldo Italiano*, XII, 290, October 18, 1905, p. 3.
- 12 «What are you doing now?», asked De Rosalia. «Nothing, don Giovà!» «And you will never do anything if you don't switch course. You see I also had begun

with dramas, even with tragedies: *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Saul*. Great applause, little money. So I changed my tune. I became Nofrio, the wise fool, the clowning Nofrio. And the sun began to shine for me», Falbo, in «Figure e Scene», September 13, 1942, p. 9.

¹³ De Rosalia, 1918, cover.

¹⁴ For the preceding information in this paragraph I am indebted to Joseph Accardi, currently Dean of Learning Resources at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois. His article, «Giovanni De Rosalia: Playwright, Poet, and Nofrio», was published in the Summer 2001 issue of *Italian Americana*.

¹⁵ «*Nofrio in Art*. At the forefront of a multitude of comedians, Giovanni De Rosalia is the only one who exhibits something striking and distinct: original appearance, powerful and harmonious voice, and an artistic nature all his own. A goodnatured person, but precisely poised, he has advanced himself little by little, without posturing and without pretensions, overcoming a great difficulty, the greatest that is encountered on the thorny path of art: he was not the idol of a moment and he never passed out of style!», Lanza, 1917, p. 13.

¹⁶ «Criticism, if there should be any criticism, I leave to the critics, that is to say, to those who are difficult to please», *L'Araldo Italiano*, XI, 284, October 9, 1904, p. 5.

¹⁷ «What's new? What's happening in the theatre? Who's up there on stage now?...», Pasquale De Biasi, «Prefazione» in Ricciardi, 1955, p. 19.

¹⁸ «No one», *ibidem*.

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