

A NIGHT WITH FARFARIELLO

Popular Bowery entertainer who impersonates local Italian types

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ONE day, conversing with a young man who professes to know a great deal about the New York theatre I casually, and perhaps a little maliciously, let slip the name,



Eduardo Migliaccio (Farfariello) in one of his characterizations

Farfariello. Who is Farfariello? my friend enquired, not wholly to my surprise, for if a questionnaire in which: Who is Farfariello? was the key question, were put into the hands of an audience at a Belasco première probably not more than two people in the house would be able to make even a vague reply. I doubt, however, if there is a single Italian in New York—and are there not more Italians here than in Rome?—who would not genuflect before the name, the name behind which Eduardo Migliaccio has become *il re dei macchiettisti*.

Come with me on a Saturday or Sunday night, for Farfariello is not to be heard on every night of the week. We are in one of the delightful old Bowery theatres with its sweeping horse-shoe balcony and its orchestra sloping gracefully up to the orchestra circle, a charming old theatre of a kind in which it was possible for the audience to be as brilliant as the play; our theatres to-day are constructed on the principle that it is more important for the spectators to see the play than each other. The traditions

of the house have changed but its picturesque qualities have not been disturbed in the transformation. Now the theatre is filled with all sorts and conditions of men and women, working men in their shirt-sleeves, for it is summer, women with black hair parted over their oval olive faces suckling their babies, or with half-nude infants lying over their knees. Boys in white coats, with baskets of multi-colored pop and other forms of soda water, pass up and down the aisles, seeking customers, and you see mothers and children, young girls with their young men, grey-haired grandmothers tightly bound in thick black shawls in spite of the heat, sipping the red and pink and yellow pop through long straws directly from the bottles. In a box a corpulent gentleman fingers his watch chain stretched across his ample paunch. All this observed in the smoky half-light of the darkened theatre, for the performance going on is to the highest degree picturesque. George Bellows or Degas would begin to paint at once. A man and woman have just finished singing a duet from "The Count of Luxemburg" and have left the stage. Now, without a second's pause, a deft but coatless stage attendant slips past the proscenium arch and changes the placard of announcement on the easel. The new placard contains a single word:

F A R F A R I E L L O .

Violent applause sweeps over the play-house and perhaps the babies howl a little louder. Then, as their mothers, in an effort to quiet them, rock them to and fro in their arms, the orchestra strikes up a tripping tune and Farfariello appears in evening clothes. He walks to the footlights and announces his first song, *Femmene-Fe*, a trifle about women, with a pretty refrain which he sings with a pleasant baritone voice. This unexpectedly commonplace beginning is one of the many subtleties of Farfariello's act. The song over, he leaves the stage; the applause is perfunctory; the crowd knows that it must allow its idol time to prepare himself for his first impersonation. The orchestra stops playing. Chatter simmers up through the smoky atmosphere; the babies are permitted to cry freely; the pop vendors pass back and forth. But the hubbub dies away as the orchestra begins a new tune. A transformed Farfariello enters; from hair to shoes he is a French concert-hall singer of the type familiar at Coney Island. He has transfigured his eyes; his nose is new; gesture, voice, all his powers, physical and mental, are moulded in a new metal. He shrieks his vapid ditty in raucous falsetto; he flicks his spangled skirt; he winks at the orchestra leader and shakes his buttocks; his bosom has become an enormous jelly. Again he has gone but soon the figure of an Italian patriot appears, a large florid person with heavy hair and mustache. Across his chest, over his shoulder, and ending in a sash at his hip, he wears the tricolor of Italy. Farfariello paints the man in action; he is forever marching in parades (the moment when he falls out of step always arouses a hot chill of appreciation in

me!); he is forever making speeches at banquets; he is forever shouting, *Viva Italia!* Like all good caricatures this is not only a comment on the thing itself, it is the thing itself. And as this portrait is essentially provincial it thereby passes easily into the universal apprehension. We all know this man in some guise or other. Farfariello goes on, singing, acting, impersonating. Perhaps next he is one of the Bersiglieri, perhaps a Spanish dancer, perhaps a funeral director, or a night-watchman, or an Italian nurse-girl. He may sing *Pasquale Basciamento*, *Rosalina*, *Patsy*, *Quanno Spusaie Francisco*, or *'O Richiamato*, but always at the end he is the iceman. The applause grows wilder and wilder, the shouts more thunderous, as the half-hour of his appearance dwindles away, and sooner or later, mingled with the *bravos* are cries of "Iceman! Iceman!" this iceman who sings folk-songs of his native land to amuse his customers, who forget their empty ice-boxes while they watch him. Of all Farfariello's numbers this is the most popular and perhaps deservedly so for to his Italians it suggests both home and the adopted country.

More than any other interpreter before the public—if I except Yvette Guilbert—Farfariello has made his own material, created the stuff in which he works. This is his greatest claim to interest. Like a novelist he goes to the people themselves for his inspiration. His characters



Familiar figure of New York's Little Italy, as portrayed by Farfariello

are almost all of them typical Italian figures in *America*, not the Italians of Naples, Venice, or Rome, but the immigrant, the Italian as he behaves in his new environment under new conditions, in new occupations. Once having selected his model (or models, for often he combines the outstanding features of a dozen types) he writes his own songs, arranges his own gestures, designs his own costumes, and even *makes his own wigs*. This last detail amazed me when I learned of it. It would seem that Farfariello, without perhaps having heard of Gordon Craig, is exactly following out Craig's idea of the artist of the theatre who is to *be* and *do* every-

thing. All that remains for Farfariello is to paint his own scenery and write his own music! A practical reason dictated the wig making. He found that for each of his songs he would need a different wig and in his early days the price of wigs exceeded the weight in his purse. So he apprenticed himself to a wig maker and worked diligently at that trade all day while at night he sang in the old-time Bowery concert halls.

Eduardo Migliaccio was born thirty-eight years ago in the same small town in Southern Italy where Enrico Caruso was born seven years earlier. Coming to America twenty years ago

at the age of eighteen he went to work as a clerk in a bank.

Migliaccio had a voice and it seemed to him that he might make money more easily in a concert hall than in a bank.

And so the "*Rei dei Macchiettisti*" began his professional career, in a small room behind a Bowery saloon, frequented by his compatriots. At first he sang Neapolitan folk and popular songs, imitating types he had observed in Southern Italy but, although he was successful from the beginning, he soon found that his audiences showed their wildest delight when he impersonated some local figure.