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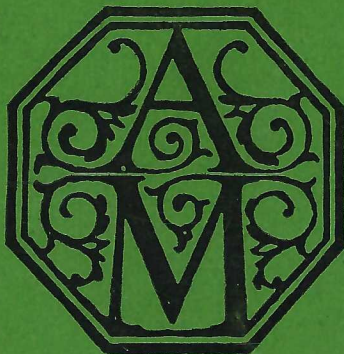
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A MONTHLY REVIEW

EDITED BY H · L · MENCKEN



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# The AMERICAN MERCURY

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# THE ITALIAN THEATRE IN NEW YORK

BY GIUSEPPE CAUTELA

THE first Italian stage in New York was the *caffé* or coffee-house. Thirty-five years ago the Italian actor or concert-hall singer, landing in this country with high hopes of fortune, found himself bewildered and stranded until, wandering into the Italian quarter, he saw in the sign *caffé* a gleam of safety. In the drowsy atmosphere of the place, heavy with the smell of anisette, cognac and coffee, he would sit, unkempt and hungry, and there ponder on his fate. Once he had revealed his profession, the proprietor, with tears in his eyes, would listen to his reminiscences of the theatre at home, and then arrange that he give a performance for the patrons. It was thus that the early Italian immigrants first heard the songs of their fatherland in America. The *caffé* was the only place where an audience could be found. It met the same social need that it had met for centuries in the old country. Even today the *caffé* and the Italian restaurants of downtown New York occasionally see a singer walk in with a guitar under his arm, and thrill an audience with his sentimental songs.

The first *caffé chantant* with a regular stage was opened about thirty-five years ago in Mulberry street, near Canal; it was called the Villa Vittorio Emanuele. It had tables and chairs, but no admission was charged. You had to order drinks, and after each singer was through with his number he came down into the audience to make a collection. He received no pay from the proprietor. Some time later on the actors rebelled against this system and the proprietor was compelled to charge a small fee for admission. However, the actor was

no better off, for his pay amounted to only seven or eight dollars a week. He remedied the deficiency somewhat by refusing encores. The audience understood: the only way to make him sing some more was to throw him money on the stage. The Villa Vittorio Emanuele was crowded to the doors every night. Those were the years of fluctuating Italian immigration. Laborers came here to work by the season; they came like a flock of birds in Spring, and went back home for Christmas. Their first stop was Mulberry street. Here they found the *paesano*, who kept either a money exchange or a boarding-house. At night they went to the Villa Vittorio Emanuele.

Competition appeared at last. Another *caffé chantant* was opened in Grand street, near Mulberry. It was called the Villa Giulia. Then came one in Sullivan street: Ferranto's Hall. The name of this place marked a change: it tried to appeal to the somewhat Americanized element. Soon afterward Little Italy saw its first stage when Dalessio's Concert-hall opened its doors. It was no more villa now, it was hall. But if the Italian psychology had undergone a little transformation, it was not so with the nature of the entertainment. It remained typically Italian. Those first years were the golden age of the *caffé chantant*. Artists of international reputation, such as La Dumont, Oscar Bianchi and La Delle Piere, sang in the four places I have named.

The material they offered was purely Italian. It had no reference whatsoever to the American characteristics that the immigrant was unconsciously acquiring. Those new traits and modes of speech were

to be discovered by Edward Migliaccio, alias Farfariello, of whom I shall speak later.

To Antonio Maiori goes the honor of having given the first Italian dramatic performance in New York. He started with weekly performances at the Germania Assembly Rooms. The theatre is always an exact reflection of the social condition of a people: the Italian colony would then go to see a dramatic performance only on Sundays. The worker was too tired during the week to go to the theatre. It was also traditional, and it is today, for the Italian to look upon Sunday as the one day for recreation.

Antonio Maiori made up a *répertoire* of plays like "The Iron-Master," by Georges Ohnet, "La Iena del Cimitero," and "I due Sergenti." After the drama there was always a farce, played in the Neapolitan dialect by Pasquale Rapone. He dressed as PUNCHINELLO, and in his broad comedy the people forgot the terrible life of the immigrant. The Italian went to the theatre then as he does today, with his wife and children. Pasquale Rapone had the gift of improvisation. His farces were never the same. He used to be so funny that many times people had to leave their seats for fear of laughing too much. Once, being surprised by a rival in the home of his sweetheart, he was chased from one room into another; he was so scared that the bang of a door made him think he had been shot. He fell face downward; told by his rival to get up, he answered, "No I cannot; I am shot; look, you'll find a hole sure."

Antonio Maiori and Pasquale Rapone next moved from the Germania Assembly Rooms to a store in Spring street, between Mott and Elizabeth streets. It was turned into a theatre, with a small stage and ticket-booth near the window overlooking the stoop, with its half-dozen steps. It had the familiar air of the improvised theatres that one sees in Italian villages. Situated in the heart of the Italian downtown colony, it was the immigrant's only theatre

for quite a while. Every night it was crowded to suffocation. Maiori grew ambitious and began to give Shakespearean plays. "Othello," "Hamlet," "The Merchant of Venice" and "Romeo and Juliet" passed before his hushed and attentive audiences. A beautiful girl by the name of Concetta Arcamone, who had been taught how to act and sing by William Ricciardi, playing PUNCHINELLO farces in Mulberry street, became Maiori's leading woman. She made up in beauty what she lacked in art. Maiori married her. She died a few years ago. Unable to house his audiences any more in Spring street, Maiori took them over to Miner's Theatre in the Bowery. The Italian drama was becoming well established.

Not long after that Maiori and Rapone invaded the Bowery in real earnest. They leased the Windsor Theatre opposite the Thalia. That theatre does not exist any more now. Like so many other things in the Bowery, it went up in flames. At the Windsor, Maiori gave a drama concocted out of the life of Benvenuto Cellini. It had a stirring scene: the casting of the statue. Cellini was surrounded by his pupils, who, fired by the genius of the master, gave a tremendous movement and action to the scene. The shouts of approval burst through the vestibule doors of the theatre and were heard by an American reporter who happened to be passing by. This was in the days when reporters could not stay away from the Bowery. He went into the theatre; the next day he revealed to the American public that there was an Italian theatre in the Bowery. The then famous Four Hundred ordered their coachmen to take them down to see Maiori. For a while he was the fad of society people, who invited him to give performances in their homes. Afterwards, with the other actors who joined his company, he gave performances in every old theatre in the Bowery.

He, as well as the other famous Italian actors and actresses who visited this country later, derived their main support from

the poor laboring class and a few intellectuals. The well-to-do Italian bourgeoisie was content to stay at home and rest on their fat pocketbooks. The reason for their absence can be explained only by the sad ignorance and lack of culture prevailing among most of them. They complained that they could not take their families to dumps like the theatres in the Bowery. But that was not all of the truth. Ermete Novelli, the great Italian actor, came here and gave a classic répertoire in the Lyric Theatre, in Forty-second street. The house yawned of emptiness.

Up to the age of forty Novelli had been known as the foremost Italian comedian. When, suddenly, he announced that he would essay tragic rôles, his public did not take him seriously. What he, with that broad grin of his, play tragic parts? Imagine the handicap he had to overcome! Spectators went to see him play "La Morte Civile," by Giacometti, expecting to laugh; but they came away crying. But night after night he played to the phantoms of the theatre. A few years before Eleanora Duse had had the same experience. In the big Metropolitan Opera House she declaimed the tragedies of D'Annunzio before an American audience who knew her principally by her love affair with the poet. But her last visit was a triumph, due to well-organized publicity. Every time an Italian actor or actress has attempted to give better plays in a theatre uptown he has lost his shirt. Not only the poorer class has refused to leave its quarters and go to see them, but the *prominenti* have also stayed away.

## II

Mimi Aguglia and her Sicilian players came here after her London successes. I have never read such stupidities in my life as I read regarding these players in the English press. The naïveté of the Anglo-Saxon is stupendous. The papers said of these players that they were peasants without education, trained purposely in giving plays in their native tongue. Evidently

there was not one individual who knew that there existed a Sicilian Theatre, for which eminent dramatists like Giovanni Verga, Luigi Capuana and Nino Martoglio, to name only a few, wrote in the vernacular. They were also unaware that there existed, too, a Neapolitan Theatre, headed by Salvatore Di Giacomo, and Ernesto Murolo, and that Venice heard Carlo Goldoni's plays first in the vernacular.

Mimi Aguglia and her actors were not only actors, but great actors in the full meaning of the word. You have got to see the Russian players to find a comparison. They also, when they came here, tried the uptown theatres, but had to come down among the rabble to make a living. Those were glorious nights and afternoons; nothing of the sophisticated! It was plain murder after a quarrel over a woman, just as it happens in a Sicilian village. The mob howled on and off the stage. It was all one family. It saw its own naked soul being torn to shreds and felt satisfied. It was art so realistic that it was life itself. People left the theatre with new passion in their hearts, leaving all sham behind them. They saw, night after night, humanity in conflict with superstition, religion and the lower natural impulses.

There were those in the Italian colony who criticized Mimi Aguglia and her players for presenting only the inferior traits of the Sicilian people. But they showed by their own talk how the theatre can correct the habits of a people. In "Malia" they saw how religion can become superstitious fury. In "Solfara," the rebellion against exploitation of labor. And then there was a wedding celebration that has never been surpassed on the stage, with its singing and dancing. "La Figlia di Iorio," translated into Sicilian and given by Mimi Aguglia in the old London Theatre, in the Bowery, never had better relief. The tragedy found its proper primitive expression in the vernacular. Totó Maiorana, her leading man, and Salvatore Loturco, another member of the troupe,

made of D'Annunzio's work a magnificent interpretation.

When Mimi Aguglia went back to Italy, Salvatore Loturco remained here; he tried with other actors to give performances in Sicilian, but he failed. Giovanni Grasso followed on the footsteps of Aguglia. A very powerful actor, he toured Europe with Aguglia; in fact, he discovered and made Aguglia what she was. He was well received, but somehow he did not seem to exercise the same attraction as his former partner. I have not spoken of the greatest Italian tragedian who ever visited this country. He came here before my time, and I speak only from record. Americans who saw Tommaso Salvini play Othello opposite the Iago of Edwin Booth say that he was one of the greatest of Shakespearean actors.

Among the established actors of the Italian theatre here, if one puts aside occasional flights into classical drama, the répertoire has remained exactly what it was twenty years ago. In a certain sense it marks the intellectual level of the Italian colony. Good actors like Emanuel Gatti have repeatedly attempted to do something new, but have had to give up for lack of public support. Just now Giuseppe Sterni, well known in Italy as an excellent artist, together with Emanuel Gatti and Elvira Caccia, have formed an Art Theatre; they are giving small weekly doses of it at the little Grove Street Theatre. Such is the present state of the Italian drama, or rather the Italian stage of New York. Antonio Maiori, after an absence of a few years passed in Italy, came back a couple of months ago, and had not my wife soothed me I would have fainted when I read an announcement that he was going to give again in the Bowery "The Iron-Master" of Georges Ohnet. I did not go to see him.

Once in a while a playwright of the Italian colony gets a new idea, writes a play, and then spends his last cent hiring a troupe of incompetents to slaughter it. But the indifference of the wealthier Ital-

ians has not succeeded in destroying the creative spark of two or three dramatists who have really written good plays. Armando Romano, for one, had to wait for the verdict of his native land before he could command the attention of the *prominenti*. The same discouraging experience had Ario Flamma. Consequently, it cannot be said that the Italian Colony has an Art Theatre like the Yiddish Art Theatre. The Jews, it seems, keep up the living tradition of their tongue by sheer force of intellect, whereas the Italians seem bent upon forgetting whatever culture they bring along.

This I say with a few reservations. I myself see one cause for it; the tremendous struggle for existence. The immigrant here has to face an economic problem which is not easily solved. And before he has solved it all his energy has been sapped by his daily frantic rushes. At night he is dead tired, his memories become dim, he watches his children study their American lessons, hoping only that some day they will not have to face the same handicaps, the same struggles. It is only after some comfort has been found that the thought comes for intellectual pleasure. But by then new modes of life have been established, traditions have died out, and a new speech has taken the place of the old one. Whatever remains alive of his Italianity he has to follow alone, and even it shows strongly the influence of his new surroundings. Hence the medium of expression is very often an Americanized Italian. It has been the new element in the life of the Italian Theatre in New York.

### III

The Italian American dialect was for the first time studied and realized as a new mode of speech about thirty years ago by a comedian, Edward Migliaccio,—Farfariello, as he is known on the stage. When he landed here the Italian Theatre consisted of the only *café chantant* in New York, the Villa Vittorio Emanuele in Mulberry street. The form of entertainment was

folk-songs and romantic ballads. But Migliaccio quickly noticed the new modes of expression, the changed manners; he boldly seized upon them and one of them created the *macchietta coloniale*.

The *macchietta* is a character sketch. If well done, the character with all its peculiarities is recognized as soon as the comedian appears on the stage. It can be satirical, ironic, tragicomic, or sentimentally ridiculous. As it is done by the majority of the *macchiettisti* it has usually a double sense, relying upon the spectator to catch a hidden pornographic meaning. The *macchietta* is mostly written in verse, with spoken passages of prose. The verses are put to music.

When the *macchietta coloniale* of Farfariello first appeared on the stage, it took the Italians by storm. It was a revelation. There they were, just as they saw themselves. They laughed themselves sick. And after they got through laughing it made them think. Farfariello had caught the soul of the immigrant and pathetically expressed it. It was not the usual Neapolitan *macchietta*, as they had seen it in Italy. It was a presentation of the tragicomic life they went through every day. Many Americans remember the sorry spectacle that many Italian immigrants used to make in those times. Still cherishing certain memories of their fatherland, they paraded through the streets of New York as caricatures of the Italian Army. Their honesty remains undisputed; but the result achieved in those uniforms was atrocious. If such well-meaning patriots have ceased parading with their gold laces dragging under their heels and carrying their terrible sabres as so many broomsticks on their shoulders, it is due to the castigating *macchietta* that Farfariello drew of them. This is really the only original form of art that the Italian prose theatre in New York has had.

Following Farfariello came many imitators. The academic ground where they used to meet their master was the famous Caffé Ronca, at the corner of Broome and

Mulberry streets, even today the meeting place of actors and near-actors. In Italian they are all recognized under the ineffable name of artist. To the Caffé Ronca Farfariello, living only ten feet away, used to pay his first morning visit. Unobtrusively sitting at a corner table, he would sip his black coffee with anisette. Taciturn and never smiling, he would listen patiently to any one of his admirers who approached and spoke to him. Thus he studied the types and characters that some days later had new life on the stage. In the Caffé Ronca a pale young man by the name of Ferrazzano begged him to read his first *macchietta*. Although it was badly written, Farfariello saw that Ferrazzano had the creative spark. He encouraged him to study, and Ferrazzano became one of his best imitators.

With the presentation of the *macchietta*, and of songs, dances and farces the Teatro Italiano di Varietà came into being in New York. It corresponds in a great degree to the American vaudeville. It is a form of entertainment that has met with success and it fills the theatres to capacity. Most of the spectacles are given on Saturdays and Sundays, and the people who frequent them are the laboring class. They go, taking along their wives and children. Only last Sunday I saw a young man trying to quiet his baby in the lobby of the Olympic Theatre, in Fourteenth street, while his wife was enjoying the latest *macchietta* by Farfariello. No less than fifteen theatres in New York and Brooklyn are giving every week such *variété* shows.

Several regions of Italy are represented by the actors with their different dialects. Puglia and Sicily, especially, have their *macchiettisti* and singers. Giovanni De Rosalia, a very able Sicilian actor and writer, has created the character of Nofrio, a half-wit, whom he introduces as protagonist in all his farces. His latest creation is "Millionaire Nofrio Marries Beautiful Peaches."

The Italian Operetta visited New York about ten years ago. Two good organizations, the Sarnella company and the Angelfni company, gave first-class per-

formances (especially in so far as the voices were concerned) in uptown theatres. But it was a flop. The same sad experience was encountered by the Bazzi company, which tried to give drama at the Manhattan Opera House, only to come downtown to the cheap theatres of Fourteenth street and the Bowery. Migliaccio organized also an operetta company, giving a fine répertoire of Italian, French and German operettas. He kept up the fight for three years until he went broke.

The latest novelty in the Italian Theatre is the *sceneggiata*. It originated in Naples, and its value, as Farfariello has told me, is purely commercial, not artistic. It has met with quite a success due to its character of sentimentality, based usually on a story of seduction and punishment, and many times of sacrifice and forgiveness by the seduced girl. Its theme, however, is not always tragic, but may be comic, illustrating some aspect of life of the Italian settlement. The starting point of the *sceneggiata* is taken from a popular song. This song is made to fit the dramatization of a story that will give opportunity to the actors to sing the melody at an appropriate moment during the action. It is no more or less than the exploitation of a popular title, as is done in the movies. The people like it because they hear singing and see dancing, and find an outlet for their emotions.

#### IV

What the Italian prose theatre in New York could not realize in the higher forms of art has been achieved by the marionettes. It is due to the genius and virtue of one man that a new conception, a fresh vision of art, has been revealed in the Italian marionette theatre of New York. This man is Remo Bufano. Some years ago there were marionette theatres in Elizabeth and Mulberry streets. The theatre in Elizabeth street gave performances in the Sicilian dialect to Sicilian audiences, and the one in Mulberry street gave performances in the Neapolitan dialect to Neapolitan

audiences. Il Teatro Dei Piccoli of Rome came here also, giving a number of technically marvelous performances.

The puppets were exact reproductions of human characters. But the scrupulous and sometimes exaggerated attention to detail in dress and the human figure left the spectator cold. It did not awaken the imagination; it did not light up the phantasy. The puppet theatre was still done according to the old Italian tradition. The spectator applauded, got excited, and laughed because he saw performed the supernatural deeds of the Carolingian heroes. The austere and religious wars, having as prototype the *Chanson de Roland*, found an echo in his primitive heart. They also gave modern farces, with delightful situations drawn from Boccaccio. I remember assisting at a performance in the Elizabeth Street Theatre, where a man was pumelled and finally taken out by his friends because he could not stop laughing. The advent of the movies put those two theatres out of business.

It was left to Remo Bufano to give a soul to the marionettes. A serious student of the theatre, he tried and succeeded in giving them a reason for existing. He saw no justification in having a marionette look exactly like a human actor and do the same things that the actor did. He brought his theatre down to the most essential and simple expression. Here is an eloquent lesson for the modern expressionistic producer and playwright. Whereas they lose themselves in the labyrinth of details, he presents only one detail in order that the spectator, from the mere suggestion of a bit of scenery, and the particulars of a costume representing a certain period, may be able to visualize by himself the whole poetic conception of a play. I have never seen human beings on the stage give the spiritual feeling that Remo Bufano's marionettes do. This may sound exaggerated to some people, but human actors cannot play in Fairyland. They cannot realize the poetry that is to be found in the simple, sad mask of a puppet.



I shall never forget the visit I paid to Remo Bufano's studio in the little theatre at 28 MacDougal street, where he is giving now "Pinocchio" and "Festa Furiosa." "Festa Furiosa" is a spectacle adapted to grown children, that is, men and women, and recalls the *commedia dell'arte* of the Italian theatre. A band of strolling players boisterously enter a marionette theatre, and the action that follows is between the marionettes and the players themselves. Bufano likes to mingle the unreal with the real and the result is an amazing revelation of the action of the mind. You feel that a new dimension has been found, expressing the human soul, and all with the most elemental and simple means of art.

Bufano's greatest achievement was two years ago when he presented "Don Quixote" in the Town Hall in conjunction

with singers from the Metropolitan Opera House, with Mengelberg conducting. The life-size puppet of Don Quixote appeared in its true and fantastic essence—the frail figure with its ridiculous tin armor, and the gaunt features with the sunken, mad, sad eyes.

There he was, nothing but the sad caricature of a warrior, yet so intent, so human, so eloquent and so clear in his poses. One could not help feeling sympathy for him, more so than if he were there in flesh and bones. The secret was that one felt only the soul of him.

I saw him again the other night, stretched out on a trunk. I never saw a human being that could say as much when he had ceased to live. It was the highest dramatic realization of the Italian Theatre in New York.

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