



FARFARIELLO:

King of Comedians on the Italian-American stage.
But, who remembers?

by Emelise Aleandri

Alma Migliaccio beams at you and glows with enthusiasm when you ask her questions about her legendary father, Eduardo Migliaccio, better known as Farfariello, the king of comedians on the Italian-American stage. Alma is a little lady in her sprightly eternal middle age and she will remember details for you about her famous sire sufficient to write a book. She pulls out a weather-beaten cardboard box full of sepia photographs of the characters Farfariello created on the stage and repeats in dialect the jokes and punch lines at the core of each characterization. She will tell you what “a sweet, good man” her father was and how he made wigs for her dolls when she was a little girl.

Alma remembers. And so does her sister Flavia who used to dance, and their brother Edmundo who used to play comic roles, and their aunt Esterina Grimaldi, now 92 years old, who used to create Farfariello's costumes and do all the intricate embroidery. But the composer and pianist brother Ernesto, and another brother Teodorico, who would assist Farfariello with the quick costume changes, and the many other family members who participated in Migliaccio's entertainments have all passed on. And there are so few people left who remember, and even fewer who know about the Italian-American theatre that spawned him.

If you talk to the old men who sit on the benches in Father Demo Square in the summer, and the old-timers who run the shops on Mulberry Street and Bleecker Street, and Dominic Longobardi, the unofficial mayor of the Italian West Village (now part of SoHo), they will recall the comic artist and female impersonator of the early 20th century. But most of our parents' generation don't

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remember. The few who do can recall being taken by the hand as small children to a music hall but those of our own generation unfortunately remain ignorant of the dramatic artists who used to entertain our immigrant ancestors in the concert halls and cafes of Little Italy.

In order to really appreciate Eduardo Migliaccio and the genius of the art form he invented as Farfariello, it's necessary to recreate the *milieu* that produced him—the *caffè-concerto*.

Concurrent with theatrical activity developing in theatres, halls, assembly rooms and other types of houses, Italian-American theatre was progressing in a special direction and format among the various cafes—*caffè-chantants*, *caffè-concertos*, Italian restaurants, bars and smaller music halls located in Manhattan, Brooklyn and West Hoboken. At least a dozen sprang up in New York's Little Italy during the period 1895 to 1903.

The *caffè-chantant* was simply a coffee-house, or cafe-bar where, as in Italy, alcoholic beverages were also served in addition to *caffè* (coffee) and where the working-class Italian immigrants convened usually on Sunday, their only leisure time. As with the theatre, the *caffè-chantant* similarly proved to be very much a social affair and a sociological phenomenon.

In addition to friends and refreshments, a singing guitarist performing well-known Italian folk songs and romantic ballads served to lessen the traumas of living in a big city in a strange country. On Sundays such entertainment was advertised under the name “sacred concert” to avoid difficulty with the civil authorities.

The following reminiscence in the words of a contemporary writer, Giuseppe Cautela, gives us a poignant, though apocryphal, description of the origins of this particular form of Italian-American theatre.

“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 *caffè* 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.”

Eventually regular performances became the custom.

The most popular of these coffee-houses which became places of entertainment, was the Villa Vittorio Emanuele III, located at 109 Mulberry Street near Canal Street and named for the then King of Italy. The Villa Vittorio Emanuele III operated successfully from about 1892 on. This cafe was the first to have a regular stage. Giuseppe Cautela recalled:

“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 take 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."

During the performances, *Ciccio 'o Spagnulo* (Ciccio the Spaniard), would sell seafood prepared in authentically Neapolitan style, the first to do so. He had a picturesque counter, carrying the inscription "*Allo Scoglio di Frisio*" ("On the Rocks of Frisio"), located near the entrance to the bar. As the singing and music progressed, the audiences would shout their sea food orders out to him in the Neapolitan dialect:

"*Ciccio, purtate nu piatto 'e cozzeche ca pummarola; Ciccio, Ciccio, na dozzina d'ostreghe.*"

This was "the golden age of the *café-chantant*." The musical entertainment continued with the additional accompaniment of small orchestra, usually preceded by vocal concerts with a potpourri of Neapolitan folk songs.

The Villa Vittorio Emanuele III did a lively business with the Italian working class crowds. The "*quarto potere*," the Fourth Estate of the Italian-American community, was also represented at these events in the personages of Bernardino Ciambelli, the well-known playwright and actor, Ercole Cantelmo, Riccardo Cordiferro (whose name translates as Richard the Ironhearted) and the playwright Eduardo Pecoraro, all of whom would exchange their opinions over the latest issues reported in the journal, *Bollettino della Sera*, over their coffee or liqueurs.

In the evenings and on Sundays in the afternoons, men and women socialized. The fact that a performance was in progress failed to diminish the din raised by their continual chattering, the exchange of greetings between balcony and orchestra and the barking of Ciccio the seafood vendor as he made the rounds of tables with plates full of "*cozzechche 'e Taranto, ostriche e biscotti*" (mussels *a la Taranto*, oysters and crackers).

The Villa Vittorio Emanuele III introduced to Italian-American audiences the famous impressionist Eduardo Migliaccio, one of the most popular individuals in the history of the Italian-American theatre in New York City. The twentieth century was the period of his greatest activity and popularity. But his origins and first attempts began in the *caffè-concertos* of nineteenth century Little Italy.

Eduardo Migliaccio was born April 15, 1882 at Cava Dei Terreni, in the province of Salerno, Italy. He studied in Naples where he attended the *Teatro Nuovo* and observed the Neapolitan *macchiettista*, Nicolo Maldacea, who served as his model. Among the Migliaccio papers and memorabilia now on deposit in the archives of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota are two books with collections of the monologues and character sketches of Maldacea, the Neapolitan comedian.

In 1897, Migliaccio emigrated to the United States. He first worked for several years in the *Banca Sandolo*, of which his father was president, in Hazleton, Pennsylvania. But the family lost all their money in a fraudulent mine venture. Then in the Italian community of New York City, Migliaccio worked at the Avallone Bank on Mulberry Street and resided at 57 Kenmare Street. At the bank, he was accustomed to writing letters for the uneducated Italian immigrants to their relatives back home in Italy. This task served him well for it introduced him to the great variety of Italian-American colonial types. But equipped with a pleasant singing voice, he soon rejected banking for the stage.

In an article Migliaccio wrote in 1923 for the *Corriere d'America*, he reminisced how he had approached the proprietor of the Italian marionette theatre in New York city with this idea:

"*Prima della rappresentazione di Rinaldo perché non mettete dei numeri di varietà.*"

Rinaldo di Montalbano was one of the paladin heroes of the Torquato Tasso classic that was dramatized nightly on the marionette stages. Migliaccio sourly recalled how his rival Rinaldo was more popular at times than he, even to the point where one of the spectators threw a bottle of soda water at him, narrowly missing

him and hitting instead the head of the poor piano player. Needless to say, that was the last night of Migliaccio's engagement at the marionette theatre.

By the turn of the century the youthful Migliaccio was making his first appearances at the Villa Vittorio Emanuele III, singing popular melodies of Naples. A 19th century contemporary Italian-American actor, Guglielmo Ricciardi, remembers him this way:

"One day I saw three troubadours playing mandolin and guitar in one of the downtown halls. With them was a youngster in short trousers. He sang Neapolitan comic songs and then passed his hat around for pennies. He was well liked by the laborers who drank beer and laughed over his songs. . . His first appearance as a concert hall artist netted him less than eight dollars."

Ricciardi recalls in particular the song, "*A morte d'e femmene*" (The Death of Women). The song almost became Migliaccio's trademark and in 1919 he was still opening his act with it. The American journalist Carl Van Vechten called it "*Femmene-Fe*", a trifle about women, with a pretty refrain which he sings with a pleasant baritone voice."

Ricciardi attributes to this song the derivation of Migliaccio's stage name, "Farfariello." The "pretty refrain" went as follows:

"*Oi Farfarie' nficchette illa' Nficchete, nficche, e falla crepa. . .*"

In this fashion, Migliaccio's stage identity became associated with the name of the character in the song, "*Farfariello*," which means "Little Butterfly."

It was at the Villa Vittorio Emanuele III that Farfariello began performing his *macchiette*, the comic impersonations which earned him the titles, "*il re dei macchiettisti*" ("the king of comedians"), "*il re della macchietta coloniale*" ("the king of the colonial comic sketch"); and "the king of Italian vaudeville entertainers in New York."

Macchietta is the Italian term for caricature, character sketch or comic impersonation. A fuller description of *macchietta* is provided by Cautela:

"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."

Migliaccio's fame lies with his perfection of the *macchietta* genre. His special sociological significance derives from his original creation of the *macchietta coloniale*, called "really the only original form of art that the Italian prose theatre in New York has had."

The *macchietta coloniale* refers to a type of social satire derivative of the Italian immigrant experience in America, and most pertinently New York City. At first Migliaccio just performed *macchiette* of the type done in Naples and other places in Italy. Gradually he seized on the opportunity to satirize Italian-Americans. The character sketch he created, "*Farfariello*," was according to Cautela, the typical Italian immigrant with all his eccentricities, foibles, speech patterns, mannerisms and hand gestures:

"When the *macchietta coloniale* of Farfariello first appeared on the stage, it took the Italian 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."

In addition to the entertainment value of these impersonations, Joseph Tigani, a present day chronicler, suggests, "the audience realized he was trying to awaken Italians from their gullible and simple faith that made them victims of unscrupulous promoters."

The Italian-American amateur theatre clubs frequently shared their spaces at the Germania Assembly Rooms with the Italian rifle guards and other Italian military organizations and marching bands. These military clubs, says Cautela, were a source of inspiration for the *macchietta coloniale* of Farfariello:

"Many Americans remember the sorry spectacle that many Italian immigrants used to make in those times. Still cherishing 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 draping under their heels and carrying the sabres as so many broomsticks on their shoulders, it is due to the castigating *macchietta* tha Farfariello drew of them."

Farfariello poked his satire not only at the officers of the military lodges but also at street cleaners, undertakers, firemen, bankers, singers, dancers, policemen, icemen, and even young girls, sometimes creating as many as six in half an hour.

He created over 150 character sketches. Among them the most memorable were:

A Nutriccia (the wet nurse)
Enrico Caruso
the school *gherl*
Piddu Macca
the watchman
Donna Vicenza
Donna Rosa (the Sicilian woman)
il signor Colono
the Barese iceman
the cafone furbo (the shrewd boor)
the judge
Patsy
O' mastro e festa (the master of ceremonies)
lo spazzino di New York (the street-sweeper)
cresy gherl
la vedova triste (the mournful widow)
la suffragetta (the suffragette)
Luisa Tetrizzini
the Italian-American banker
the down and out Italian aristocrat
the Italian-American undertaker
the midwife
the drunk
the orchestra leader.

An eyewitness account by Carl Van Vechten recreates just such a performance by Farfariello in 1919:

"A deft but coatless stage attendant slips past the prescenum arch and changes the placard of the announcement on the easel. The new placard contains a single word:

FARFARIELLO

Violent applause sweeps over the playhouse and ... the orchestra strikes up a tripping tune and Farfariello appears in evening clothes. He walks up 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; ...

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 transformed 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 belly. 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 rouses 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 universal apprehension. We all know this man in some guise or other. Farfariello goes on, singing, acting, impersonating. Perhaps he is one of the Bersiglieri, perhaps a Spanish dancer, perhaps a funeral director, or a night-watchman, or an Italian nursegirl. 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 iceboxes 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."

The distinctly Italian-American quality that Migliaccio infused into his *macchietta coloniale* is undoubtedly the basis for his great success among his fellow Italian-Americans. Part of this special quality rests with the subject matter: Italian immigrants undergoing a rough and incomplete process of Americanization; another part rests with the new type of speech that was evolving: the Italian-American dialect.

The overpopulation in the south of Italy was an immigration factor that established a definite character to the Italian-American mode of expression

of this period. The speech patterns of the Italians in America were more than just southern dialects. In America, these dialects having strayed one step farther from their source, became a curious eclectic mixture of Italo-Americanese, a jargon more Italian than American English.

Eduardo Migliaccio found the method of capitalizing on the new manners of speech. He included the new jargon into his *macchiette*. He was a product of the southern Italian immigrant population himself, wherein lies a key to his overwhelming success. For instance, the *macchietta* created by Farfariello for which he wrote the verses to the song "Iammo a Cunailando" ("Let's go to Coney Island") contains the following examples of Italo-Americanese:

Cunailando — Coney Island

scioppa — shop

baschetta — basket

stretto — street

sciaina — shine

sciu'-mecco — shoemaker

uisco — whiskey

Broklino — Brooklyn

chente — candy

sprinche-cik — spring chicken

A Sicilian just off the boat wouldn't know what to make of this song. The Italianized pronunciation of English words appears in neither official nor dialect Italian. Furthermore, as in the case of "sciu'-mecco," you will note that the Italian speaker has imitated the typical New York City regional speech pattern of dropping the final *r*, which comes out phonetically as "shu-mayka."

In addition to the abovementioned observation and imitation of speech patterns and personality traits, Eduardo Migliaccio designed and constructed special costumes dictated by the quick changes of character, composed his own songs that accompanied these impersonations, and made his own wigs. He specifically learned to make wigs by apprenticing himself to a wig maker, because he was unable to afford the price of a different wig for each different *macchietta*. Thus he worked at the wig maker's by day and sang in the music halls of the Bowery saloons and the *caffè-concertos* by night.

The 19th century *caffè-concerto* provided Migliaccio with the first training ground for his special style. The impresario Antonio Maiori had

him cast in his production of *Hamlet* on April 26, 1900 as Marcello, an official, and as a guard in the production of *La Jena del Cimitero* on April 30, 1900. Eduardo Migliaccio was probably a member of the Maiori-Rapone troupe at least temporarily, but the cast list for the next recorded production on May 24, 1900 finds him lacking. This seems to have ended his try at serious dramatic acting.



Eventually, Eduardo Migliaccio as Farfariello began to permeate the rest of Italian America. He organized a little theatre company to work with him, which included many of his family, and under various titles (the Eduardo Migliaccio Vaudeville Company; the *Compagnia Farfariello*; the Italian Comic Opera Company) performed everywhere: at Sirignano Hall on Grand Street; at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; in

Torrington, Connecticut; at Boston's Palace Theatre; in Philadelphia; in San Francisco's Liberty Theatre, in Chicago and Paterson; Los Angeles, San Pedro, Santa Barbara, Fresno, and Venice, California; Stockton, Mass.; a picture show theatre on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx; Maiori's Royal Theatre on the Bowery; Providence and Waterbury; the 14th Street Italian Theatre and the Fugazy Theatre on Houston Street; and even in Canada. In 1916, Migliaccio signed a contract with the Victor Talking Machine Company for his vocal recordings. In 1917 he entered into a contract with the Italian Book Company to publish his *macchiette* and songs. *La Follia*, the Italian newspaper edited by the well known Italian-American playwright Riccardo Cordiferro, also published Farfariello's *macchiette*. By 1923, he was contributing articles to the *Corriere d'America*. He wrote comic radio skits and performed on WAAT, one of the first radio programs in the Italian language. In 1936 he toured Italy and in 1940 King Victor Emanuel III named him a *Cavaliere dell'ordine della Corona d'Italia*.

Eduardo Migliaccio died Wednesday March 27, 1946 and with him died Farfariello, never to be seen again on the Italian-American stage, although other comedians were still performing. Like Chaplin's Tramp, with whom Farfariello has often been compared, the inimitable characterization could not exist outside its creator.

Eduardo Migliaccio's *macchietta coloniale* was a direct response to the process of Americanization undergone by the Italian immigrant in New York City. The type of entertainment he originated was a sociological phenomenon that can never be repeated in quite the same way. Contemporary ethnic theatre responds to totally different social stimuli, and the Italian-American theatre is all but gone today.

But Alma remembers, and Flavia, and Edmundo and the rest of the Migliaccio clan. It seems such a pity that we who inherit Italian culture today cannot experience first hand the humor of the smiling man behind the big noses and funny costumes and crazy wigs who found such an endearing way to make his compatriots, strangers in a strange land, feel at home.