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# Performing High, Performing Low: Enrico Caruso and Eduardo Migliaccio

Esther Romeyn

It is an evening during World War I. In a little theater on Mulberry Street, the heart of New York's Little Italy, the public awaits the appearance of the Italian American clown Eduardo Migliaccio, better known under his stage name "Farfariello," who will perform in a tribute to the Italian war effort. The evening, according to the journalist covering the festivities, "promises to be an enormous success, not only on the artistic level, but also as an affirmation of Italianness."<sup>1</sup> With a sense of pathos appropriate to the occasion, his account portrays the unfolding of events:

It was an evening in honor of Farfariello, an evening benefitting the Italian patriotic cause. In a box in the front, Enrico Caruso was present as well. The stage was all adorned with Italian flags. Then Farfariello made his appearance. The thunderous and moving

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applause for a moment stopped him. Farfariello performed "The Italian at the Cooperative." Everyone's eyes filled up with tears when Caruso, who applauded fervorously, could no longer restrain himself; abandoning his seat he dashed on the stage to press the artist, his admired son, to his heart.<sup>2</sup>

Narratively staged almost as if it were an historic tableau, the embrace of Eduardo Migliaccio and Enrico Caruso, clearly represents the culmination of the evening's celebration of "Italianness." In their professional lives, however, the stars of this patriotic event were each other's mirror image.

Enrico Caruso, "Il Divo" for his Italian and Italian American admirers, during the first two decades of this century, achieved legendary fame as one of history's great tenors, a reputation that has persisted until this day. During the same period, Eduardo Migliaccio established himself as "Il Re dei Macchiettisti," King of the Character Clowns. While Caruso performed for members of the social and cultural elites in the famous opera houses of Berlin, London, Paris, Milan and New York, Farfariello entertained his working-class, Italian immigrant audiences in the small variety theaters of Mulberry Street and of other Little Italies around the country.

But if, professionally, Caruso and Migliaccio operated in the separate domains of 'high art' and 'popular culture,' the fact that they are enlisted, in the previous journalistic account, to jointly perform and represent "Italianità," does suggest an affinity that extends beyond their shared Neapolitan origin. Indeed, during the heydays of their careers, Caruso and Migliaccio rivaled each other in their popularity with Italian immigrant audiences. While Caruso, according to one of his biographers, "was a popular tenor in the true sense of the word, one with whom the people who filled the upper balconies of the opera house could identify," the American journalist Carl van Vechten doubted "if there [was] a single Italian in New York [. . .] who would not genuflect before the name [Farfariello]"<sup>3</sup> (Greenfeld: 92). Both performers, in different ways, appealed deeply to the sensibilities of this immigrant community caught between two worlds, struggling to adjust to a new life and a new cultural environment. They represented two focal points, two beacons on the emotional map of immigrant hopes and fears, ambitions and anxieties. For these immigrants, engaged in the difficult process of constructing a new, Italian American ethnic identity in the New World, the staged embrace of Caruso and Farfariello, "Il Divo" and "Il Re dei Macchiettisti,"

was infused with symbolic significance.

In a review of a performance of the opera *Tosca* at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1906 we read:

Caruso frequently indulged in the 'voix blanche' dear to the Italians but disagreeable to the Americans. He achieved some fine climaxes, however, especially in the early part of the third act, and so worked up the feelings of the Italian contingent in the audience that he was forced to repeat a whole passage, greatly to the detriment of the dramatic integrity of the scene. The applause continued even after this concession to popular feeling and it was several minutes before the orchestra could be heard. (Greenfeld: 90)

Enrico Caruso, today, is remembered mainly for his voice. Characterized as 'golden' by his critics, it is his voice, preserved for posterity in numerous recordings, which has earned him a place in the annals of music history. For his Italian audiences at the beginning of this century however, Caruso "was far more than a voice." Italian Americans, according to one of Caruso's many biographers, "identified fiercely, patriotically, with the chubby little man who had escaped from a Neapolitan slum to win story book success on alien soil but still spoke broken English and remained as Italian as macaroni" (Jackson: 208). Caruso was not only an internationally renowned tenor. He was truly a 'pop star,' in the modern sense of the word. Actively promoted by major record companies such as Victor and Columbia, who by the beginning of the century had realized the profitability of catering to the nostalgia of ethnic groups, Caruso was one of the first performers to explore and benefit from the newly emergent recording industry. Marketed at low prices, recordings of Caruso singing opera arias ("Vesti La Giubba," by the end of 1903, had sold over a million copies) or Neapolitan street songs like "Addio Napoli," quickly became a staple of Italian American homes. The enthusiasm of Italian Americans for Caruso, however, was not limited to his recordings, which became a major source of home entertainment (Greene: 73; Cohen: 105). Whenever Caruso appeared in a production at the Metropolitan Opera, he would be greeted by a contingent of Italian Americans who filled the cheap seats of the upper balconies to applaud and cheer their hero.

Caruso's popularity with his fellow countrymen, and particularly their vocal manifestations of support, deeply disturbed many genteel opera lovers and critics, for whom the Metropolitan Opera represented a shrine to 'high culture' and a symbol of America's cultural "Coming of Age."<sup>4</sup>

While Caruso himself initially was considered too "plebeian" and too "vulgar" to make a convincing aristocratic hero, he was frequently criticized for allowing 'popular taste' to make incursions onto the sacred terrain of the Met, or, more seriously, for actively catering to the unsophisticated aesthetic faculties of his fellow countrymen (Ybarra: 115). His performances, tainted, according to his critics, by "exaggerated effects of pathos" and other "deplorable errors of taste," seemed to blur the boundaries between "art" and popular culture, which an earlier generation had worked so diligently to erect (Scott: 89, 72).

Caruso's Italian American audiences, moreover, continuously defied cultural etiquette by turning his performances into what one critic described as "shouting matches," to the horror of those accustomed to savor high art in silent admiration (Ybarra: 115).<sup>5</sup>

Deploping these infringements onto the sacred terrain of the Opera, some critics did not hesitate to protest against the "excessive" use of Caruso (Kolodin: 162). For the Metropolitan Opera however, for which Caruso was the leading attraction, economic considerations prevailed. Consequently, as one critic commented, with Caruso starring in at least forty performances during one season "the Italian population could scarcely be condemned for regarding the Metropolitan as created for their benefit" (Kolodin: 123). The appropriation of Caruso by Italian Americans was consolidated by the many 'Caruso anecdotes' that daily circulated in Italian neighborhoods. These anecdotes, which were recounted in Italian American newspapers and on the Italian American vaudeville stage, were the single most important vehicle for the articulation of Caruso as a meaningful symbol of Italian ethnicity. Generally, these anecdotes valorized in Caruso what genteel critics and audiences deplored. They constructed Caruso as 'quintessentially Italian.' In these stories, Caruso was imbued with the heightened sensuality, blatant sexuality, and excess of utterance that are stereotypical of the genre of opera as well as of Italian masculinity. At the same time, Caruso was essentially a man of simple needs and pleasures, a prototypical 'Neapolitan son.' His Italianness was demonstrated by his passionate relation with Italian food and with members of the opposite sex, indulgences which were the subject of many anecdotes.<sup>6</sup> By far the most favorite topic for stories however were the practical jokes Caruso frequently played on his costarring divas and other members of the Anglo-Saxon elite he frequently socialized with. These pranks would, for instance, consist of sewing up the sleeves of an

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overcoat one of his costars was to put on during a scene. Caruso, according to legend, was also reputed for parodying the texts of the operas he was performing, frequently causing an uproar among the Italians in his audience. The image of Caruso as a clown, demonstrating what some called "his native taste for opera buffa," was reinforced by the fact that Caruso was a master caricaturist, who habitually reduced presidents and celebrities to grinning teeth and big noses (Jackson: 116). Tremendously popular, these caricatures were published weekly by *La Follia di New York*, an Italian-language newspaper. The fact that Caruso, who interacted on a daily basis with the high and mighty, would make his caricatures of them available for popular consumption, was what endeared him to his Italian American audiences.

It seems only appropriate that Caruso, "Il Divo dei Divi," who satirized the conventions of the social elite and of 'high art,' would himself be subjected to the levelling humor of Farfariello, "Re dei Macchiettisti." In *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, Sunday, June 14, 1942, we read:

Farfariello did not gather his subjects only in popular environments. Sometimes he found them in the salons of the rich, sometimes at the Olympus of the gods of the theater. One who did not mind being the object of (more or less benign) caricatures was Enrico Caruso. At the peak of his singing career and of his metropolitan and international popularity, a courteous but spirited caricaturist himself, his name, weaknesses, and adventures were frequently the subject of more or less brilliant satires in the world of the theater, vaudeville, and cabarets of New York. And Farfariello portrayed him as well, in a good-natured caricatural spirit, in a sketch in which the star of stars reads through his daily mail, abundant with hyperbolic declarations, of admiration, of sympathy, of love, and sometimes requests for money and threats of blackmail as well [ . . . ]. Farfariello disguised himself very successfully as Caruso. And for this imitation the same Caruso, who went to hear and applaud him, congratulated him with Neapolitan cordiality.<sup>7</sup>

"Farfariello" was the creation of Eduardo Migliaccio, who, in 1897, had arrived in the United States as a young immigrant from Salerno, armed with a college degree and some schooling in comic theater. After a brief intermezzo, in which he joined his father's banking business in a Pennsylvania mining town, Migliaccio moved to New York, where he worked, as did so many immigrants, in a sweatshop on the Lower East Side. It was there,

on the streets and in the cafes chantants of Little Italy, that Migliaccio started his acting career, impersonating various immigrant 'types,' the prototypes of which he encountered in his immediate environment (Greene: 98).

In the course of a long and successful career, which spanned the first four decades of the century, Migliaccio made a theatrical inventory of this immigrant community in transition. He developed a continuously expanding repertoire of Italian immigrant 'types,' which, at the end of his career in the early 1940s, consisted of more than 400 stock characters drawn from all walks and ranks of life. In skits such as "Rosa Spaghetti," "Il Cafone Patriota" ("The Patriotic *Cafone*") or the "Iceman" (who entertains his customers with Neapolitan street songs), Migliaccio parodied typical 'greenhorns' and working-class immigrants. He spoofed Italian American *prominenti*, bankers, doctors, or presidents of benevolent societies in skits with titles such as "L'Ondertecco" (The Undertaker) and "Il Presidente del Club," which features the President of an Americanization Club. And a celebrity such as Caruso was ridiculed in "Caruso a San Francisco," a skit in which "Il Divo" is all but smothered by a heavy-set female admirer.

The comic characters created by Migliaccio were inspired by a native Italian clown tradition. In the spirit of 'campanilismo,' the extreme regionalism or localism that has characterized Italian culture for centuries, Italian regions or villages used to have not only their particular saint, but their distinct clown types as well. Vernacular clowns such as the Florentine Stenterello, the Neapolitan Pulcinella, the Milanese Meneghino or the Venetian Zacometto spoke local dialects and were dressed up in characteristic costumes. Traditionally, these clowns had a cultural license to mock local personalities, satirize political or social events, or make vulgar remarks (Gumina: 26-36; Estevan: 24-25). By assimilating these clowns to a new social and cultural environment, Migliaccio was able to interpret a wide range of Italian immigrant experiences. In his performances, he captured, in the words of one reviewer, "la storia viva della nostra emigrazione" (the living history of our emigration).<sup>8</sup> Farfariello, in his acts, juxtaposes the Old World and the New. His characters, grotesque in physiognomy, dress and mannerisms, are unmoored from Old World cultural, social and moral structures. Some continue to interpret the New World through Old World lenses. Others consider themselves completely "Americanized," but, having not quite mastered all the new cultural codes, appear thoroughly Italian to all but them-

selves. It is this cultural lag, caused by the experience of immigration, which creates a comic effect. The United States, in Farfariello's skits, stands for a world of transgression and transformation. In contrast to Italy, which is characterized by a rigid hierarchical social order, America represents social flux and the reversal of social hierarchies. In a sketch entitled "Il Barone Cameriere" ("The Baron Waiter"), for instance, an Italian *barone*, who keeps boasting about his noble descent and his family tree going back to the Strozzi family, in the United States is forced to make his living as a waiter. But if, in the reversible world of the United States as represented by Farfariello, high is turned into low, it is the *cafone*, the landless peasant, lowest in the traditional Italian social hierarchy, who, in the United States, rises to the top. In this inversion of social roles, both the *barone* as well as the *cafone* (which in Italian also carries the connotation of 'boor') are fundamentally inept to adjust to their new situation. Whether ascending or descending on the social ladder, they are marked by a complete lack of cultural know-how, a lack that is often compensated by an inflated sense of self. Operating in the interstices of two cultures, they are misfits in their new roles, and ridiculous as a result. The preoccupation, in Farfariello's acts, with social roles and status categories might be attributed to the ambivalence many immigrants felt toward their own ambitions, which had propelled them into a life of instability and insecurity. Their venture into new social and cultural roles, for which no cultural patterns had yet been established, not only stimulated a strong sense of alienation from an Old World culture and from an identity rooted in that culture. It also fostered a pronounced self-consciousness about the proper performance of new social and cultural roles.<sup>9</sup> It was this extreme self-awareness, which was often governed by feelings of clumsiness and incompetence, that was mirrored in Farfariello's impersonations. Farfariello's sense of the grotesque was rooted in the incongruities and discontinuities of immigrant life itself.

*Italian American Review*, 31 December 1921:

We have the great lyrical art, with its heroes, at the wonderful Metropolitan Opera. [. . .] And while music lovers, both Italian and non Italian, rush there, it is not accessible to all pocketbooks, nor does it satisfy the taste of those who cannot appreciate the refinement of the works of the great masters. And, in any case, even the refined lovers of music need to cheer up their spirits with theatrical



expressions that do not require any intensity of intellectual effort and that open the heart and the mind to the good humor of the comic. [. . .] A theater where one can enjoy the art of comedy and brilliant operetta [. . .] however does not yet exist in America; or, to be correct, did not exist until yesterday, because today, at 14th Street, Migliaccio attempts to realize this dream.<sup>10</sup>

"The great lyrical art" (*la grande arte lirica*) and "the art of comedy" (*l'arte comica*) refer, obviously, to the cultural categories of 'high' and 'low' culture, categories of distinction which, according to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), naturalize social differences on the basis of such supposedly 'transcendental' values as 'aesthetic taste.' For Italian American popular audiences, however, these cultural distinctions, personified by two of their cultural heroes, Enrico Caruso and Eduardo Migliaccio, contained a different meaning.

The historian John Higham has suggested that immigrants, because of their experience of alienation from a former self consolidated by established social and cultural patterns, and the pressures of assimilation, developed a "special capability for the arts of the theater: for playing a role, for transforming the self, for projecting an instant identity" (quoted in Weber: 326). It is this theatrical sense of self that might provide us with an explanation why Eduardo Migliaccio and Enrico Caruso were so particularly meaningful to Italian immigrants, and what their staged embrace might have represented to those present. Caruso and Migliaccio, on the stage and as public personae, were characters in a more comprehensive script: that of the hidden, ongoing drama of immigration. Within this collective drama, Migliaccio and Caruso emerged as contrapuntal metaphors for the most fundamental aspect of the immigrant experience: the transformation of the self.

Farfariello was the comic double of these immigrants, impersonating familiar types and personalities who did not really fit their new roles and became slightly ridiculous as a result. Resonating deeply with the fears and anxieties of Italian immigrants, Farfariello represented the transformation of everyman, the Italian immigrant, into a clown. If Farfariello symbolized the levelling aspects of immigration, the threat of being reduced to an object of ridicule, the transformation of 'high' into 'low,' Caruso represented its heroic dimension. Having "escaped from a Neapolitan slum to win storybook success on alien soil," he represented the potentiality of transforming the 'low' into 'high,' and functioned as a metaphor for the social and cultural ambitions of

these immigrants. This “quintessential Neapolitan son,” whose fame, fortune and reputation were rooted in Italian culture, represented the promise of not only material gain, but cultural prestige for Italian Americans as well.

The staged embrace of Caruso and Migliaccio, then, dramatized the union of two cultural heroes who, in their careers, had represented a counterpoint to each other, but who had always played over the same ground bass. The embrace of Caruso and Migliaccio did encapsulate the deep seated ambivalence within the Italian immigrant community itself toward the experience of immigration. In one figure, it contained the promise of grandeur and its inversion, the grotesque. In this “double vision,” this cultural tableau is characteristic of the cultural borderland of immigration.<sup>11</sup> And as the coupling of Opera and Opera Buffa, they could be interpreted as the quintessence of an imagined “Italianness,” *Italianità*, as well.

#### Notes

1. “Promette di riuscire splendidamente non solo dal lato artistico ma anche come affermazione di italianità.” *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, s.d., Collection Migliaccio, Box 1, IHRC. I would like to thank the staff of the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) in Minneapolis for their help in finding me invaluable sources.

2. “Era la sua serata d’onore [. . .], serata di beneficenza a scopo patriottico italiano. In un palco di prospetto, Enrico Caruso non era mancato. Il palcoscenico era tutto adorno di bandiere italiane. Sortì Farfariello. Gli applausi scroscianti, commoventi lo fermarono. Farfariello eseguì “L’Italiano al Cooperativo.” Gli occhi dell’incognito si riempirono di lacrime, quando Caruso, che applaudiva con frenesia, non sapeva trattenersi più; abbandonò il palco e scappò in palcoscenico a stringere sul suo cuore l’artista: il suo figlio adorato. (*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, s.d., IHRC, Collection Migliaccio, Box 1.)

3. Carl van Vechten, “A Night with Farfariello,” s.d., Collection Migliaccio, Box 1, IHRC

4. Opera, in the early decades of the 19th century, had been an integral part of American vernacular culture. Frequented by all strata of society, opera performances were usually rather loosely structured, and mixed with comic intermezzi, commentaries, and shouts of approval or disapproval on the part of the audience. By the end of the century, however, opera had been appropriated by a newly emergent upper middle class of ‘nouveaux riches,’ which dedicated itself to “rescuing the very integrity of opera as an art form” from its debasement by popular audiences (Levine: 103). See Levine (1988) for an historical analysis of the process of constructing the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture. See Bourdieu (1984) for a more general discussion of social hierarchies based on distinctions of ‘taste.’

5. The excessive use of melodramatic effects, the openness of script, and the absence of clear separations between audience and performers, are, according to Fiske (1983), characteristic of what he calls ‘popular taste.’

6. See Ybarra (1953) and Scott (1988) for examples.

7. Farfariello non pescava soggetti solamente negli ambienti popolari. Spesso si affacciava nei saloni dei ricchi, spesso nell'Olimpo dei divi del Teatro. Uno che non si doleva d'essere oggetto di caricature più o meno benigne era Enrico Caruso. Nell'apice della gloria canora e della popolarità metropolitana e internazionale, disegnatore e caricaturista garbato e spiritoso anche lui, il suo nome, le sue debolezze, le sue avventure furono spesso oggetto di battute satiriche più o meno brillanti nel mondo del teatro, del vaudeville, dei cabarets di New York. E anche Farfariello lo ritrasse con cordiale spirito caricaturale in una macchietta nella quale il divo dei divi sfoggiava la sua posta quotidiana ricca di ammirazione, di simpatia, di amore e anche qualche volta di bussate a quattrini, di minacce ricattatorie. [ . . . ] Farfariello si ritrasse felicemente da Caruso. E di questo somiglianza lo stesso Caruso—che andò a sentirlo ed applaudirlo—lo congratulò con napoletana cordialità.

8. *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, martedì 20 febbraio 1942.

9. Michael Fischer (1986) has characterized this composite of emotions as "ethnic anxiety."

10. "Abbiamo la grande arte lirica, con i suoi sommi, nel meraviglioso Metropolitan [ . . . ] Ed ad esse accorre la folla musicale italiana e straniera, ma non è accessibile a tutte le borse e non soddisfa i gusti di chi non può discernere le squisitezze dell'opere dei grandi maestri. Ma, ad ogni modo, anche i raffinati cultori della musica hanno bisogno di allietare lo spirito con manifestazioni teatrali che non richiedono intensità di sforzi intellettuali e che aprono il cuore e la mente al buon umore del comico. [ . . . ] Un teatro ove [ . . . ] si goda l'arte comica e l'operetta brillante non esista ancora in America; o per meglio dire, non esisteva fino a ieri, perchè oggi, alla quattordicesima strada, Migliaccio tenta di realizzare [questo] sogno." Collection Migliaccio, Box 1.

11. The notion of "double vision" or "double voicedness," first articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois, has been central in recent theories of minority discourse. See for example Baker (1987) and Anzaldúa (1987).

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