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CENTRO  ALTREITALIE

i propri figli, permettendo loro di portare avanti la formazione musicale e di affermarsi in un campo tradizionalmente ‘incerto’ come quello artistico. Emblematico in questo senso il caso di Benny Belluardi, cresciuto a Brooklyn e attivo perlopiù a New York tra la fine degli anni trenta e quaranta. Nato da madre sarta e padre intonacatore partiti dal ragusano, Belluardi ottenne il diploma di ingegnere alla scuola politecnica e nel 1933, a 23 anni, ricevette un’offerta di impiego dalla General Electric, rifiutata per proseguire una brillante carriera di trombettista che lo portò a esibirsi con i più grandi interpreti del suo tempo; simile parabola quella di un altro virtuoso dello stesso strumento, Nick Buono, sostenuto nel suo amore per la musica da una famiglia barese trapiantata in California e inseritosi poi in alcune delle maggiori orchestre degli anni d’oro del jazz, autrice di importanti colonne sonore per Hollywood.

Scorrendo le voci, giungono nitidi gli echi di quel rapporto privilegiato che si instaurò tra il jazz e la sua natia New Orleans e gli immigrati siciliani, qui giunti a partire dalla seconda metà dell’Ottocento e vissuti a stretto contatto con la minoranza afroamericana che è madre riconosciuta di questo genere. Se per ragioni alfabetiche non è presentato il *main character* Nick La Rocca, anima della celeberrima Dixieland Jazz Band, possiamo fare la conoscenza di personaggi come il cantante, improvvisatore e direttore d’orchestra Sharkey Bonanno, che con lui collaborò a lungo, e con la ‘dinastia’ degli Assunto, panteschi che in Louisiana si guadagnarono considerevole notorietà.

Tuttavia, ci sono anche traiettorie leggermente divergenti, che conducono in Francia, Germania, Svezia, Brasile. Comuni denominatori di ognuna di esse sono il talento per la musica, l’ambizione di coltivarlo, l’impronta lasciata nella storia di quella straordinaria e composita espressione della cultura popolare che è il jazz.

Francesca Puliga

Jo Ann Cavallo

The Sicilian Puppet Theater of Agrippino Manteo (1884-1947): The Paladins of France in America

London/New York, Anthem Press, 2023, pp. 328, £80/\$110.

Jo Ann Cavallo’s *The Sicilian Puppet Theater of Agrippino Manteo (1884-1947)* is a reclamation of the immigrant theater impresario and puppet maestro Agrippino Manteo and his transnational and diasporic manifestations in the Americas. Cavallo’s historical reconstruction of Manteo’s education in the Catanese school of puppetry, his establishment of a theater company – first in Mendoza, Argentina, and finally in Little Italy, Manhattan – and the continuation of his

legacy by his descendants is an invaluable contribution to our understanding and appreciation of Italian American artistry and vernacular culture. Cavallo achieves this feat not by merely presenting a chronological biography based on family history and published accounts (which is significant in its own right) but also by relying on her own vast knowledge of

Italian Renaissance epic literature and its performative renderings. With these tools she undertakes a close reading of Manteo's handwritten script notebooks and provides a rigorous textual analysis comparing his manuscripts with the published antecedents and source material. Throughout this revelatory and incisive study, the author demonstrates time and time again that this Sicilian immigrant was not a passive puppeteer who thoughtlessly went through the motions but instead a creative and active interpreter of literary sources and theatrical performance in accordance with «his own artistic vision and understanding of the narrative» (p. 187).

The original itinerant street theater consisted of full-body rod puppets carved out of wood and outfitted in paladin armor or in exquisite gowns. As Cavallo describes them, the puppets from Sicily's eastern city stood four to five feet tall and weighed approximately a hundred pounds apiece, making them larger and heavier than those of the island's capital. The chivalric plays, which would also be performed in permanent venues, depicted political intrigue, romantic love and infatuation, warfare, and the fantastic in performance cycles that lasted well over a year. In the book's first part, Cavallo deftly situates Manteo, who was born in Grammichele, in the world of marionette theater popular among Sicily's working class as it developed in and around Catania during the early nineteenth century, tracing his artistic lineage to Giuseppe Crimi, whose father Gaetano was the founder of the Catanese school of Sicilian puppetry.

The migration histories of Manteo and his family illustrate the transatlantic links between Italy, Argentina, and the United States. Sometime after 1905 he migrated to Mendoza, followed by his wife Caterina and their firstborn child, and there he started a bakery and a puppet theater. He returned to Italy to serve in the Italian army during World War I, leaving behind his wife and four children, as well as close to three hundred marionettes he had crafted in Argentina. After the war, he migrated to New York City and was joined by his family, who brought with them approximately eighty of the puppets. Working as an electrician by day, in the evenings Manteo wrote his scripts and restocked his retinue of characters (in part by purchasing puppets from Sicilian theaters that were closing), eventually owning some five hundred marionettes. In 1923 he opened his first theater at 76 Catherine Street in Manhattan, moving five years later to a new space at 109 Mulberry Street. Cavallo illustrates how the family theater operated: Manteo voiced multiple male characters' parts; Caterina collected the entrance fee and sewed costumes; their sons manipulated the mari-

onettes; and their daughter sewed, painted the backdrops, and also voiced the female characters. The youngest son sold nuts and drinks during intermission. This close-knit working relationship instilled in the family members an intense love for and commitment to *l'opera dei pupi* for the next two generations and prompted their preserving both the puppets and the scripts.

Cavallo laments the fact that there were no ethnographies of the Italian American audience as exist for their counterparts in Italy. But drawing from various newspaper accounts, she conveys the enthusiasm audiences had for the theater, their knowledge of the varied plot twists and turns, and their emotional investment in the characters' plights and exploits. The Manteos' theater also attracted slummers like actor Dorothy Gish and film producer Irving Thalberg, as well as puppet aficionados Bil Baird, Remo Bufano, and Tony Sarg. The latter group appreciated the importance of the Manteos' staging and would invite them to perform at puppet festivals, uptown theaters, and academic institutions. The success and accolades from within and without the Italian immigrant world ended abruptly when the youngest son, eighteen-year-old Johnny, died from tuberculosis in 1939, leaving a grieving Manteo devastated. The maestro closed the theater and died himself eight years later.

Cavallo offers a sympathetic reading of the Manteo theater after World War II when the family struggled to continue under the leadership of the oldest son, Miguel/Mike. Social conditions were in flux, with predominantly English-speaking second- and third-generation Italian Americans more inclined to consume entertainment at the movies and on television, at the same time as they were moving out of immigrant neighborhoods. To compensate for these changes, the theater took the year-long cycle that they had performed before the war, edited the scripts down, introduced new characters, and staged them anew, for schoolchildren, at a Brooklyn theater, and even at the New York World's Fair (1964-1965). Cavallo does not frame these performances, as listed in programs and other printed sources, as a diminished «static reenactment of inherited tradition, but rather a living elaboration of that tradition to the present» (p. 34). The theater would go on to be discovered again during the 1970s and 1980s by puppet aficionados and folklorists (I was one of them). In 1983 the National Endowment for the Arts recognized Mike Manteo as a National Heritage Fellow for his efforts to keep *l'opera dei pupi* alive in the United States.

The Manteo puppets are now immobile and silent, but as Cavallo writes, the handwritten scripts offer «an extraordinary window into the intricate, authentic, and frenzied narrative world of the Paladins of France» (p. 37) as staged in New York City. At the end of one script, Mike wrote a note to his son Pino: «Take them. If you show them to the right people – they could be priceless. You're the only one in the U.S.A. with these documents» (p. 61). In the second half

of the book, the author turns her attention to organizing, dating, and analyzing the unique and precious documents of these 265 plays.

Cavallo's deep textual analysis elucidates the ways in which Manteo reworked Giusto Lodico's prose account *Storia dei paladini di Francia* (1858-1860) by way of Giuseppe Leggio's expanded edition (1895-1896), along with Matteo Maria Boiardo's Renaissance epic poem *Orlando Innamorato* (1482-1483), as well as Francesco Berni's sixteenth-century version of the latter. She analyzes eight plays, providing first the synopsis and the cast of characters, followed by excerpts of the script itself in English translation, and concluding with a comparative analysis that notes the changes that were made through the various texts to highlight the individual authors' preference for enhancing various themes, such as chivalry or loyalty. One example – «The Arrival of Angelica of Cathay in Paris» – illustrates Cavallo's close reading of the manuscript, with bolded typography signifying text not in Boiardo's poem or Berni's rewriting, italicized words where Berni's wording is different from Boiardo's, and underlined passages corresponding to Boiardo's work:

And so that I make manifest to you,
As briefly as possible, the reason
That **compelled me** to witness your celebration,
Know that this is Uberto of the Lion,
Of noble birth and heroic deeds,
Banished from his kingdom without reason. (p. 78)

Cavallo's rendering helps to illuminate Manteo's adaptations – the structural changes he made, the inclusion of his own poetry in ottava rima, and the various ways he heightened dramatic moments – to craft engaging theatrical presentations for his immigrant audiences. As she notes, «Since transformation is an integral part of the process of retelling epic stories throughout the centuries, of interest is not the variation per se but rather the ways in which the change affects the meaning conveyed» (p. 67).

In an exceptional treatise such as this one, whose focus is undeniably the written scripts, it is lamentable that the photographs of the various puppet characters are of such poor quality. They are snapshots taken on a diagonal for cataloguing purposes credited to the Staten Island Museum, which once housed part of the Manteo collection. As such, they are a disservice to the Manteos' outstanding craftsmanship of these exquisite folk-art objects and also, in a sense, to the characters themselves – Orlando, Marfisa, Gano, and others – who are the stars of the show. Both the artisans and characters deserve better.

In the homes of Italian Americans, especially those with Sicilian roots, one occasionally finds miniature marionettes of these armored knights. These com-

mercial souvenirs and emblems of regional pride are vestiges of a once vibrant vernacular art form, as Cavallo astutely reveals, one with a critical diasporic component. Her invaluable study makes manifest temporal and spatial connections between literature and theater, the Renaissance and the past two centuries, and the migrant triangulation of Italy, Argentina, and the United States. Cavallo thoroughly and discerningly analyzes these historical and artistic linkages in an accessible style. Thanks to this richly documented study we now have a vivid portrait of this exhilarating and resourceful migrant puppet theater that Agripino Manteo and his family established in their new-world environs.

Joseph Sciorra

Francesco Vietti

Semuren

Roma, Castelvevchi, 2024, pp. 209, € 17,50.

Francesco Vietti, docente di antropologia culturale presso l'Università di Torino e scrittore con un interesse peculiare per le relazioni tra la fantascienza e l'etnologia, nel suo romanzo *Semuren* esamina le vicende dei migranti italiani in Cina in un futuro distopico, segnato dagli irreversibili mutamenti climatici e dal declino degli Stati Uniti e dell'Europa occidentale, soppiantati dall'ascesa delle potenze asiatiche.

L'interesse dell'autore per le vicende relative alle migrazioni e alle conseguenti commistioni culturali costituisce il sostrato comune delle vicissitudini dei personaggi principali del romanzo. La narrazione è strutturata in tre parti – significativamente intitolate «Città», «Viaggio» e «Rivoluzione» – nelle quali le traversie dei protagonisti, le ragioni della loro migrazione e le ripercussioni delle loro decisioni sono illustrate dall'autore mediante un uso sapiente dei differenti piani temporali, senza alterare l'unità d'insieme del racconto.

Vietti intreccia la storia reale delle relazioni tra la Cina e l'Occidente intercorse nel passato con il racconto distopico del loro futuro attraverso una serie di parallelismi; ad esempio, la rivolta xenofoba dei Boxer (1899-1901) è richiamata dalle tensioni dei residenti cinesi contro le comunità di migranti europei, mentre la storia della Concessione italiana di Tianjin diventa il fulcro del racconto biografico dei protagonisti e della loro identità in costante evoluzione.

Mediante un sapiente amalgama che intreccia tra loro le biografie immaginarie dei protagonisti e le unisce con le vicende politiche del mondo futuro, l'autore ha confezionato un romanzo che offre numerosi spunti di riflessione sulla situazione sociale e politica attuale, sulle condizioni di vita dei migranti e sulle società che prosperano grazie al loro sfruttamento, sulla sostenibilità