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Gaetana Marrone

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VARIETY THEATER

The theatrical genre of popular entertainment between musical and operetta, variety theater consisted of many different and successive acts. At first it came out of the official theater institution; then it became an overlapping mixture of different comics grounded on the mobile stage, which continued to change, depending on the audience's needs and requests.

Starting from the last decade of the nineteenth century until 1960, variety theater chiefly sprang out of the rich and luxurious French *café-chantant*, called taproom concerts (*caffé-concerto*), with something in common with the comic tradition of Neapolitan popular plays (*pulcinellate*, or farces). At the same time it entered the more prestigious revue theater signed by playwrights, poets, and writers, and then the *Avanspettacolo*, as *sceneggiata* performed at the cinema halls between film screenings. Compared to other European countries, the Italian cabaret developed later and slowly, “not only because of historical and political reasons, but also due to the poor attitude towards such a non conformist genre” (Alberto Jona, “Lo spettacolo di intrattenimento,” 1997). The variety was one of its main models (especially in the German-speaking countries), because they were both trying to create an informal dramaturgy starting from the “little forms” typical of the sketch. In the taprooms, where the song was the protagonist, among dance bands (or piano) and singers, amateur comics and character actors showed up with their popular repertoires. Some of them did not attend any theater schools, but they all looked for a break and often collected the *chetta* by begging among the tables. At the turn of the last century, the theater critic Jarro reported, not without prejudice, on this difficult situation in over-crowded halls: “A cabaret singer told me: ‘You know, I earn one thousand liras per night.’ When? ‘Maybe after the show?’” (*Viaggio umoristico nei teatri*, 1903).

The first theater welcoming this kind of performance was the *Salone Margherita* in Naples, which opened officially in 1890 in the *Galleria Toledo*. Then in Rome, in 1909, the *Teatro Jovinelli* was established by Neapolitan playwright and poet Raffaele Viviani; and shortly after, in 1912, the variety actor and playwright Ettore Petrolini launched

the *Sala Umberto*. Besides the traditional acts of comic entertainment with dancers and singers (La bella Otero and Lina Cavalieri were mythical stars), the show included different genres: circus attractions, illusionist effects, short films, and, after 1910, farces and melodramas. Some great foreign comics (such as Charlie Chaplin) also performed in Italy. At this time, the national cinema industry was expanding, and while comic films were produced in Turin, dramatic plays were shot in Naples. The cinema soon became a direct competitor of variety theaters to the point of jeopardizing their very survival.

Among the traditional mask characters, the most genuine keeper of the commedia dell'arte was Antonio Petito (1822–1876), who at age nine was a success on stage at the San Carlino theater in Naples. He transformed old stock characters like Pulcinella (the English Punch) into burlesque middle-class types. Such characters were also included in the repertoire of the highly popular actor-dramatist Edoardo Scarpetta. This kind of theatrical genre, rich with dialect features (language and attitude), fitted well to entertain troops and veterans during World War I, becoming, as Nicola Fano reminded us, “the only real national show, the symbol of the unity of Italy” (“Varieta,” 1998).

Some of the most popular Italian performers of the early twentieth century took part in the variety, for example, Nicola Maldacea (1870–1945), a Neapolitan singer who invented the *macchietta* (literally “little spot”). *Macchietta* is a comic verse song (octosyllabic or hendecasyllabic) based on one character roughly sketched; the rhyme often suggests double meanings and satirical allusions. Famous poets, often anonymously, made a living writing spots for Maldacea. Among them were Salvatore Di Giacomo and Trilussa, whose repertoires comprised satires and mockeries of every social type (superman, communists, feminists, socialists).

Leopoldo Fregoli (1867–1936) and Gustavo De Marco (1883–1944) were also great protagonists of the variety theater. Fregoli began at Esedra in Rome in 1890. As a superb imitator, he was able to combine different stock characters and *macchiette* due to his exceptional comic skills as a mime.

His plastic physiognomy as well as his flexible, wide-ranging voice allowed him to sing as baritone, tenor, or soprano. Thus, he gave birth to a long gallery of male and female characters (*sciantose* and *cocotte*), which turned out to be a grotesque and distorted mirror of contemporary Italian society. Fregoli, along with Ettore Petrolini, could gather such worldwide success (including South America) that he was nicknamed *mangiapopoli*, or people eater.

As for De Marco, who was born in a theatrical family, his apprenticeship was in the summer tap-rooms along Naples promenade. He became one of the city's most beloved actors, the renowned master whose work was "raided" by his direct heirs: Totò and Nino Taranto. De Marco's most famous invention was the puppet-man or *comico-zumpo* (jumping acrobat comic).

Anna Fougez (1898–1966), the pseudonym of Anna Pappacena, was the Italian prodigy child who achieved a remarkable success in Paris at the age of nine. Thanks to her popularity as a singer and an actress, the variety gained a recognized place in the entertainment industry. Fougez's salary was exceptionally high for that time. In 1928, she founded a company with her husband, the French dancer and choreographer René Thano. During the reign of Umberto I, the variety introduced jazz and the Charleston, due also to the Russian-Italian dancer Lydia Johnson, who replaced the postwar image of the femme fatale soubrette (Fougez) with that of the English girl dressed up with a golden tail-coat and a glittering top hat.

A further change was implemented by Raffaele Viviani, who started out as a precocious actor in the Neapolitan popular theaters. He became a celebrated playwright, and his performances displayed acrobatic and mimetic skills along with a bitter melancholic vein. During the 1920s, Viviani wrote plays in which the *macchietta* developed into acts characterized by social and original patterns. However, in works such as *Eden Teatro* (1919), a comedy about the life of poor traveling actors, he still retained the variety act structure. Other prominent artists were the Genovese Gilberto Govi (1885–1966), the Catanese Angelo Musco (1872–1937), and the Triestine Angelo Cecchelin (1894–1964). In spite of their regional origins, these performers were able to bring on stage the mood of an entire country. For example, Angelo Cecchelin was known to be "the only comedian capable of showing a truly hostile attitude toward the Fascist government," because of which he was imprisoned (Nicola Fano, "Varietà," 1998).

In their 1913 manifesto entitled "Il Teatro di Varietà," the Futurists regarded the variety as the model for the avant-garde theater, since it departed from the mimetic patterns of traditional bourgeois comedy. They viewed it as a modern invention, just like electricity, which expressed the living language of the new sensitivity. Nevertheless, the Futurists produced nothing concrete for the variety theater. By the end of the 1930s, the luxurious variety shows, such as the ones staged by the Schwarz brothers (so-called *spettacoli di gran varietà*), increasingly focused on the appearance and the richness of the *mise-en-scène*, thwarting any traditional and political aspects of this genre.

The early 1950s marked the decline of the variety theater. At first the revue blended with drama theater (Petrolini and Viviani) and then with television shows by using different acts (comics, duets and sketches). In 1954, the cinema offered a grand tribute to this popular genre by producing *Gran Varietà*, directed by Domenico Paolella and featuring Vittorio De Sica, Renato Rascel, and Lea Padovani (as Anna Fougez), Alberto Sordi (as Fregoli). But perhaps the most touching cinematic homage is *Luci del Varietà* (Variety Lights, 1951), co-directed by Alberto Lattuada and Federico Fellini. Here a small group of touring music-hall performers, with their delusions of grandeur and their nostalgia for the open road, embody the real creative élan of the variety artistic tradition.

STEFANO TOMASSINI

See also: **Antonio Petito**

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