

John Turturro: The Sound of Naples

Stanislao G. Pugliese* (June 29, 2011)



Naples is a tricky subject for any artist. How is one to balance the two competing and contradictory images of the city? “See Naples and die!” was the cultural imperative of the Grand Tour and the age of Romanticism. Chaos, Camorra and trash are the flip image. Naples is a “city painted in sound,” Turturro notes, and, like many poor places in the world, “music is a form of emotional and spiritual transportation . . . a form of prayer.”

Screenplay by John Turturro and Federico Vacalebri; based on an idea by Carlo Macchitella; sound by Antonio Barba (A.I.T.S.); editing by Simona Paggi (A.M.C.); costume design by Alessandra Gaudio; cinematography by Marco Pontecorvo (A.I.C.); produced by Alessandra Acciai, Carlo Macchitella and Giorgio Magliulo.

“Passione” was presented out of competition at the Venice Film Festival and at the Toronto Film festival. It opened Wednesday, June 22 at the Film Forum on West Houston Street in New York City and travels the United States: Washington, D.C. (July 1); Seattle and Miami (July 15), Portland (July 16), Ithaca (July 28), Philadelphia (August 5), Houston (September 2). (see: www.passionefilm.com [2])

Actor, writer, director John Turturro has crafted a body of eclectic work: from Spike Lee, Adam



Sandler, the Coen brothers and Transformers films to small, finely-cut jewels such as “Mac,” “The Truce” and now, “Passione.” If, in “Mac,” Turturro was a working-class Italian American struggling with the conflicting demands of Italian traditions and American capitalism (winner of the Camera d’Oro at the Cannes Film Festival); and in “The Truce” he was the sympathetic Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi, in “Passione” Turturro is our Virgil as he escorts us through the streets of Naples, guiding us on a tour of the city’s astonishing musical legacy.

“Passione” is a film that manages to be wildly entertaining as well as a work of history and cultural anthropology, plumbing the depths of Napolitanità. To his credit, Turturro refuses to be seduced by the tourist industry images of Naples. His film is shot in the gritty districts of the Forcella, the Sanità the Quartieri Spagnoli.

Turturro is no stranger to Naples. Some years ago, he performed Eduardo De Filippo’s “Questi Fantasmi” in New York and Naples. Francesco Rosi (a native of Naples) was the director of “The Truce” and introduced Turturro to the theater of De Filippo and the culture of the city. For some time, Turturro has been thinking of adapting Norman Lewis’s memoir Naples ’44 for the screen. With a father from Puglia and a mother from Sicily, Turturro has triangulated his familial legacy and arrived at the historical and cultural capital of the Mezzogiorno, Naples.





“Carmela,” written by Salvatore Palomba and Sergio Bruni, is sung by Mina. The images are both familiar and provocative: a fresco of the Christ child with fingers to his lips is immediately followed by a black and white photograph of a scugnizzo con sigaretta in bocca, emphasizing the constant mix of the sacred and profane on the streets of Naples. Like New York, Naples is a crossroads of cultures. In its dialect, the faces of its people, the architecture and music, faint (and not so faint) traces of a dozen different civilizations engage in a creative mix. Where else in the world can one find people in the streets singing songs derived from Portuguese Fado, Spanish flamenco, Andalusia, Italian opera, jazz, soul, reggae, hip-hop as well as malouf or nuubaat from north Africa? Improvisation and re-invention — so critical to contemporary music — is central to the Neapolitan character. Improvisation is the art of the poor and downtrodden, the cultural armor of the defenseless, in music as in life.

“There are places you go to and once is enough,” Turturro says, “and then there’s Napoli.” The city is now in its third millennium, having survived not only earthquakes and volcanic eruptions but also man-made tremors, revolts and eruptions. The question to be asked: is it in spite of this calamitous history or because of it that Naples has produced a musical tradition second to no other city in Europe? The answer, Turturro argues, lies in the contradictions, paradoxes, and irony at the heart of Neapolitan culture. As the Esposito brothers argue amongst themselves over the relative merits of Enrico Caruso versus Fernando De Lucia, they also point out that music is in the DNA of the Neapolitans by forging a balance between those who write music and those who listen to it. Or, as Peppe Barra, another performer notes, the very language of the city, its much-maligned dialect, is music itself.

From the small monks’ cemetery of the Chiostro of the Certosa di San Miniato above the city, Monica Pinto of Spakka-Neapolis 55 sings what is both a love song and a curse to Vesuvio: the “disaster mountain” of “dancing flames.” “My life,” Pinto cries out, “depends on you,” acknowledging the city’s precarious relationship with the volcano that “trembles with death.”

In Naples after having screened an advanced copy of the film, this writer was struck by how the faces of statues in the city’s famous presepi reflect the faces in the film. One of those faces belongs to singer Peppe Servillo of Avion Travel who sings “Era di Maggio” as a smoldering duet with Misia before a Baroque church in a decaying courtyard near Santa Chiara. A facial gesture or a graceful turn of the hand here tells a tale of love and longing. As always, the lyrics are double entendres: “the water in the fountain never dries out and the wounds of love never heal;” or, in proper Neapolitan: “Ll’acqua, llá dinto, nun se sécca maje, e ferita d’ammore nun se sana.”

“Passione” presents not only professional singers but also the ordinary folk of Naples singing and dancing in the streets. Teenagers on the steps of a local church launch, accapella, into their versions of “Dicitencello vuie” and “Maruzzella.” A half dozen young women use the famed staircase of the Palazzo dello Spagnuolo designed by Ferdinando Sanfelice as a set to dance to “Comme facette mammata.”

One aspect of the genius of Naples is the city’s ability to constantly re-invent itself and its musical inheritance. Thus, Sergio Bruni’s 1950s rendition of “O Sole Mio” blends into a version by a young Massimo Ranieri in the 1960s, followed by a contemporary interpretation by the Tunisian singer M’Barka Ben Taleb sung in Arabic.

Angela Luce is sultry in a performance of Raffaele Viviani’s “Bammenella.” Raiz and Almamegretta (the dialect rendition of anima migrante or, wandering soul) blend world music, reggae and other traditions in “Non te scurdà,” with the imperative to remember because “there is no other reason to live” while Pietra Montecorvino, in the role of the local puttana, tells us that she is “the mirror you never want to use.” Raiz, aka Gennaro Della Volpe, muses on how living in Naples fosters a sense of being truly cosmopolitan, a world citizen: because of its history of invasions (Greek, Roman, Norman, Arabic, French, Spanish, Piedmontese, German and American), “belonging to this place means belonging to anywhere.” A citizen of Naples is at once “everybody and nobody.”

From nobody to somebody is, instead the story of James Senese, saxophonist and jazz great. Son of a black American soldier and a Neapolitan mother, “Jamesiello” or Little James as he was nicknamed by the locals, was befriended by a neighborhood girl, Sofia. But the color of his skin was a literal marker and he was taunted with shouts of “Nigger!” “I was lucky, I made something of myself . . . But how can you forget something like that?” His soulful version of “Passione,” performed with a



small ensemble at the Bluestone Jazz Club in the Santa Lucia district, is interspersed with wartime film of the bombing of Naples and the March 1944 eruption of Vesuvio. Mixed-race children of African-American soldiers and Neapolitan women eventually grew up and, in their 20s and 30s, opened jazz clubs in their city, cross-fertilizing two indigenous musical traditions. Those children are the subject of "Tammuriata Nera" which chronicles their appearance on the streets of Naples carry traditional names like *Ciro*, *Peppe*, *Gennaro*, but irrevocably marked by the color of their skin and the "sins" of their fathers.

The song of the *lavandaie* (washerwomen) of the Vomero is a haunting lullaby filmed in one of the many subterranean passages of the city, the *Piscina Mirabilis*, while "Catari," performed by guitarist *Fausto Cigliano* is recorded in the *Pio Monte della Misericordia* before *Caravaggio's* monumental "Seven Acts of Mercy."

Massimo Ranieri and *Lina Sastri* perform "Malafemmena" written by *Totò* (*Antonio De Curtis*), a figure who represents a twentieth-century version of *Pulcinella*, the truest incarnation of the Neapolitan psyche, while *Gennaro Parlato*, with streaking eyeliner, laments the whims of "Maruzzella." Exuberant and whimsical instead is the rendition of *Renato Carosone's* "Caravan Petrol" where *Fiorello* and guests, including *Turturro* and a wise donkey, dig for oil in the smoking and flaming *Campi Flegrei*, just west of the city. They may be digging for oil, but they are far more likely to find something altogether different, for the ancient Greeks thought these burning fields were the entranceway to hell and the Romans thought the place home to *Vulcan*, the god of fire.

There can be no singing without dancing and the choreography, by *Max Casella* (who joins *Barra* and *Ben Taleb* in "Tammuriata Nera") enlists the talents of professional dancers as well as folks plucked from the streets. The dancing can be joyous and sorrowful at the same time. Life in Naples is "beautiful but difficult," confesses a young woman with dark sunglasses with an air of melancholy.

The film concludes with *Enzo Avitabile* crying out to "Faccia Gialla" (a reference to the yellowed face of the bronze statue of *San Gennaro*) to liquefy his blood in the *Duomo*. The people of Naples don't meekly ask or pray: they engage in protracted negotiations with the city's patron saint and demand the miracle. The closing images of the music festival of *Piedigrotta*, together with photographs and film from the immediate postwar period as well as contemporary shots of Neapolitans singing and dancing in the streets, is accompanied by *Pino Daniele's* "Napule è"

Napule è mille culure

Napule è mille paure

Napule è a voce de' criature che

saglie chianu chianu

e tu sai ca' nun si sulo

Napule è nu sole amaro

Napule è addore e' mare

Napule è na' carta sporca e nisciuno

se ne importa e

ognuno aspetta a' sciorta

Napule è na' camminata

int' e viche mezo all'ate

Napule è tutto nu suonno



e a' sape tutto o' munno ma

nun sanno a' verità.

Napule è mille culure . . . Naples is a thousand colors

Naples is a thousand fears

Naples is the voice of a child

who silently rises

and you know you are not alone

Naples is a bitter sun

Naples is the scent of the sea

Naples is litter in the street

but no one is concerned

and everyone awaits his fate

Naples is a walk

among the alleys with others

Naples is all a dream

as the entire world knows

but they don't know the truth

Naples is a thousand colors . . .

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