

A 'Casa' that Makes New York Ever More Italian

Stefano Albertini (April 22, 2014)



From concerts to art exhibits, from academic lectures to conversations with writers, directors, actors, and singers, from film screenings to theatrical performances, the Casa's calendar is studded with treats for people of all generations and backgrounds. From the outset, the Casa has promoted Italian culture in the broadest sense of the term. Its decision to focus on contemporary Italy is prompted by the desire to present New Yorkers with a country that is not an outdoor museum but rather a modern, complex place that remains pivotal to the international scene, whatever its shortcomings.

For almost 25 years, [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [2] has helped make New York more Italian. Thousands of people each year cross the threshold of the elegant Anglo-Italianate building – once the residence of legendary 19th century [General Winfield Scott](#) [3] – to participate in one of the 100 events the Casa offers every year.

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Of course, you could argue that there are several other institutions in New York with a similar mission and a comparable program of events. But I think there are a few features that make the Casa and its style unique.

Una casa! First and foremost we take pride in the name and the vision that inspired its founder, [Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò](#) [4]. What makes us a casa, a home, besides the fact that the building was conceived of as a residence in the mid-19th century, is the desire to provide students, guests, and friends with a beautiful warm Italian home in the Village.

From the Italian marble and oversized family portraits in the grand hall to [Sarah's Garden](#) [5] (the green gem is probably the most beloved space of the building) to the furnishings from the Baroness' own homes that give each room a particular personality, every detail adds to the feeling that ours is a cozy, family place. A casa, a home, whose doors and windows are open.

From the outset, the Casa has promoted Italian culture in the broadest sense of the term. Its decision to focus on contemporary Italy was prompted by the desire to present New Yorkers with a country that, while boasting the highest number of UNESCO sites of any nation, is not an outdoor museum but rather a modern, complex place that remains pivotal to the international scene, whatever its shortcomings.

Over the years we have paid a great deal of attention to the canonical fields of Italian studies, Italian American culture (especially thanks to the [Tiro a Segno Visiting Professorship](#) [6]) and Jewish Italian studies (in collaboration with the [Centro Primo Levi](#) [7] in NY). The latter two fields of Italian studies are often underrepresented in American academia.

But anyone with a remote interest in Italian culture familiar with the Casa's programs should know that we do not just host events. Our events are not even the most important thing we do. The image of the Casa as a vetrina, or showcase of Italian culture and art tells only part of the story. I prefer to think of the Casa as a workshop, a Renaissance bottega where we make art as much as we display it.

Obviously the Department of Italian Studies at NYU plays the most prominent role. Housed in the Casa from its foundation, the Department is now the largest of its kind in the US and often ranked the best as well. During the day, well before the events begin, the Casa is animated by classes, seminars, lectures, and discussions led by an accomplished interdisciplinary faculty that includes scholars of literature, cinema, history, and the visual arts. Theses, research projects, and dissertations that will shape the future of Italian studies are conceived and created at the Casa every day.

In the last few years the Casa has also made a home for opera ([underworldprod.com](#) [8]) and theater companies ([kitheater.com](#) [9]) that have quickly become integral to the bottega. The talented young people the companies attract bring their ideas and dreams to life in our auditorium, travel throughout the city, and, sometimes, the entire country. Recent noteworthy productions include Donizetti's Don Pasquale (fully staged!) and Scarlatti's only opera buffa, Il trionfo dell'onore (never before staged in the US) for UPO and Machiavelli's La Mandragola and an adaptation of three novellas from Boccaccio's Decameron, both in contemporary English translations, for KIT.

Rounding out the picture is our Italian Book Club (for more information contact: glmontesi@gmail.com), Contemporary Italian Auteur Cinema Film Club (contact: aldobozzi@gmail.com), and Youth Club (contact: circoloitalianogiovaniny@gmail.com).

Even though I am the director of the Casa (and I couldn't think of a more exciting, challenging, multifarious job), I'm far from being its leading voice. Remember, the Casa is a bottega, populated by an assortment of people with various interests and passions who come together to engage in a lively and vibrant cultural dialogue between Italy and the US.



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