Giuliana Muscio

A Transcultural Perspective on the Casting of *The Rose Tattoo*

A transcultural perspective on the film *The Rose Tattoo* (Daniel Mann, 1955), written by Tennessee Williams, is motivated by its setting in an Italian-American community (specifically Sicilian) in Louisiana, and by its cast, which includes relevant Italian participation. A re-examination of its production and textuality illuminates not only Williams' work but also the cultural interactions between Italy and the U.S. On the background, the popularity and critical appreciation of neorealist cinema.[1]

The production of the film *The Rose Tattoo* has a complicated history, which is worth recalling, in order to capture its peculiar transcultural implications in Williams' own work, moving from some biographical elements. In the late 1940s Tennessee Williams was often traveling in Italy, and visited Sicily, invited by Luchino Visconti (who had directed *The Glass Managerie* in Rome, in 1946) for the shooting of *La terra trema* (1948), where he went with his partner Frank Merlo, an occasional actor of Sicilian origins (Williams, *Notebooks* 472). Thus his Italian experiences involved both his professional life, putting him in touch with the lively world of Italian postwar theater and film, and his affections, with new encounters and new friends. In the early 1950s Williams wrote *The Rose Tattoo* as a play for Anna Magnani, protagonist of the neorealist masterpiece *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). However, the Italian actress was not yet comfortable with acting in English and therefore the American stage version (1951) starred Maureen Stapleton instead and Method actor Eli Wallach. The Broadway production of *The Rose Tattoo* won the 1951 Tony Award, and both Stapleton and Wallach won the Tony for Best actress/actor. The interaction between Actors' studio and neorealism around Magnani and in Williams' work in these years is an interesting relation – a carefree waltz with interchangeable partners.

In fact, according to press clippings, a project to adapt the play for the screen had already started in 1952, and neorealist director Vittorio De Sica was supposed to direct it; but nothing came of it. The film version of *The Rose Tattoo* was directed by a Hollywood "actress' director" like Daniel Mann and released in late 1955. It cast Anna Magnani, together with Burt Lancaster. It is generally believed that this was Magnani's first English-speaking role, while actually it comes after her experience in *Vulcano* (by William Dieterle, 1949), a Sicilian-American film production, shot in a double version, in English and Italian. It had started as a Rossellini project with Magnani as a protagonist, but became an international co-production when the neorealist filmmaker opted instead for making *Stromboli* with Ingrid Bergman, who had left a brilliant Hollywood career for the love of the Italian director's work.[2] These American film productions (or co-productions) in Italy and the presence in Italy of Hollywood actors and filmmakers at the peak of neorealism's critical success represent a cultural and productive interaction between Italian (and American) performers and filmmakers, which has not yet received enough critical attention.

As in a neorealist film, the exterior scenes involving the Italian community of *The Rose Tattoo* were filmed on location in Key West – actually some images in Williams' own house, where he used to live with Merlo. In the scene at the Mardi Gras club, Williams, Merlo and producer Hal Wallis appear in the background, confirming also the special involvement of the writer with this project.

The Rose Tatoo received several Academy Awards nominations, among which young Marisa Pavan's (Annamaria Pierangeli's sister), and earning Magnani an Oscar for her performance, together with James Wong Howe for black and white photography; two Oscars went also to decor and art direction: the apparently simple costumes were created by famous costume designer Edith Head. The Academy Awards thus honored both the neorealist performance by Magnani and the Hollywood crafts of the *mise en scène*.

Tennessee Williams must have been particularly happy with the artistic (as well as commercial) results of *The Rose Tattoo* if he soon wrote *Orpheus Descending* (1957), with Magnani and Actors' studio star Marlon Brando in mind. The two actors did not play on the Broadway stage, but appeared

in the film, *The Fugitive Kind*, directed by Actors' studio graduate Sidney Lumet (1959). However, set in the South and ripe with sensuality and despair, the film is more in line with the rest of Williams's *oeuvre* (and his identification with the Actors' studio), than innovative and transcultural *The Rose Tattoo*. Indeed, it totally concentrates on Brando and his character, contended by three women, Lady Torrance (Magnani with a Hollywood hair-do), Carol (Joanne Woodward) and Vee (Maureen Stapleton).

The film *The Rose Tattoo* as a transcultural experience

The film *The Rose Tatoo* constitutes a transcultural experience, both in the narrative, since it is set within an Italian-American community, and in the performance style, because of the import of neorealist actress Anna Magnani, and of an emerging personality of Italian cinema such as Marisa Pavan, surrounded by performers coming from the (Italian) immigrant stage: Sandro Giglio (father De Leo), Mimì Aguglia (Assunta), Rossanna San Marco and Augusta Merighi (two actresses from the Broadway cast, who play the old women "chorus"). The presence of these actors, in addition to recovering the history of the immigrant stage, allows us to reconsider the impact of the Italian performance style in Hollywood cinema and compare two "realist" approaches: the American one, at that time strongly affected by Lee Strasberg's Method acting (Actors' Studio), and the neorealist approach.

In terms of narrative, the film explores the stereotype of the (Southern) Italian in Anglo-Saxon culture, and the excess (in behaviors, themes, and style) often associated with Italian characters.[3] The protagonist is Serafina Delle Rose (Anna Magnani), a seamstress of Italian birth, living in the Gulf of Mexico with Rosa, her young daughter (Marisa Pavan). She idolizes her husband Rosario, a truck driver who is actually having an affair with the blonde Estelle (Virginia Grey). When she learns that her husband died in an accident, while he was attempting to escape the police, Serafina has a miscarriage, and then totally devotes herself to mourning. After three years her daughter introduces her to her boyfriend, Jack (Ben Cooper), a blond sailor, on the very day in which she has learned of her husband's betrayal.

She is suspicious of Jack's intentions, but when he promises to the Virgin Mary that he will respect Rosa's innocence, she relaxes. While trying to confront Estelle, she meets Alvaro Mangiacavallo (Burt Lancaster), born in Sicily and a truck driver (as Rosario), who starts courting her in a clumsy way. To imitate Rosario, he goes to have a rose tattooed on his chest, but Serafina still rejects him. Through him she meets Estelle at the club where she works, but when the rival shows her the rose she has tattooed on her chest, she runs home horrified and smashes the urn with Rosario's ashes. That night, Serafina and Alvaro are supposed to meet secretly, but he gets drunk and passes out. Waking up in the morning, still confused, he stares at Rosa sleeping and she screams. Thinking he wanted to rape her daughter, Serafina throws him out. Rosa exposes her mother's hypocrisy, but Serafina surprises everybody giving the young couple her blessing, and welcoming Alvaro back.

According to the PCA (the institution administrating self-censorship in Hollywood) the play was full of "objectionable material" (see Jacobs). The office rejected the script at first, stating that the story was absorbed with "lust and gross sex," and confused religion with superstition. Producer Hal Wallis insisted with Williams that he temper the sexual aspects and attribute superstitions to Serafina herself not to Roman Catholicism. With these changes the film was finally made. Regarding censorship, however, we should recall an important precedent involving Magnani and an analogous explosive mixture of sex and religion. In the (short) film *The Miracle*, directed by Rossellini in 1948 but distributed in the U.S. in 1950 (when Williams was writing *The Rose Tattoo*), Magnani interpreted a poor superstitious as well as religious woman, who meets a shepherd that she believes to be Saint Joseph (played by a young Federico Fellini, author of the script), and becomes pregnant, thinking of herself as the Virgin Mary (thus the "miracle" of the title). The film is one of Magnani's most interesting roles under Rossellini's guidance and was quite famous in the U.S.: it won the New York film critics award but was boycotted by American Catholics to the point of being banned. It thus raised key censorship issues, which brought about nothing less than the reform of film censorship in the U.S., causing an important decision of the Supreme Court (Burstyn v. Wilson, 1951), which attributed to film the First Amendment protection

of freedom of expression, as for the press (see Wittern-Keller). Thus the objectionable mixture sex/religion/myth had been already associated with (Southern) Italian culture, and with Magnani, in 1951.

Critics have emphasized the autobiographical elements, which went into the creation of the play: Williams' discovery of Italy and of Italians in real life, in particular his experience of Sicily with his partner, the ex-truck driver (and sailor) Frank Merlo, to whom the play *The Rose Tattoo* is actually dedicated, "in return for Sicily," and whose nickname, "little horse," is slyly mimicked in Alvaro's last name, Mangiacavallo. This play constitutes a turning point in Williams' career. The plot exhibits a scandalous interaction of sex with mourning, religion, and superstition, which goes beyond Williams' usual theme of sexual disturbances in the patriarchal family and self-destructiveness. The representational structure of the text is quite unexpected – almost experimental – in its sudden changes of mood and style, moving from a sensual tension to a naïve prayer, from an acrobatic farce involving Alvaro, to a sociological exploration of generational conflict between (immigrant) mother and daughter and an examination of catholic values. While there were stylistic concerns on Williams' part to justify the play's continuous instability, the (Southern) Italian culture of the characters – or its stereotypical representation – facilitated the writer's project. There are sudden changes from laughter to tears, from rage to affection, which are incomprehensible, in cultural terms, and recall the early stereotype of Anglo-Saxon literature and early cinema, presenting Italians as emotionally primitive beings. But the author added a theoretical justification to this approach. In the introduction to the play, "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*," Williams starts out saying that the play celebrates "the Dionysian element in human life" (Williams, 1978 55). He specifies that the Dionysian experience can be "lyric" as well as "bacchantic," and that it "must not be confused with mere sexuality" because its spirit can be represented by the flight of birds, as in Alvaro's singing *Rondinella felice,* and by children playing. This premise encouraged critics to insist on the Dionysian celebration of sexuality, which seems to reverse the desire-death pattern of Williams' previous works, and define *The Rose Tattoo* as a comedy, in consideration also of its happy ending. In my opinion, however, the film is so excessive in the "bacchantic" aspects that elements of tragedy,

and of the incomprehensible, keep lurking under the surface. And yet the Dionysian element constitutes a deeper cultural motivation for Williams' experimental stylistic, when related to the author's experience of Sicily in its solar vitality as well as in its roots in Mediterranean culture, both Greek and African – an unsolvable cultural dialectic, which the film explores.

The play also shows the possibility of a livelier, happier approach to sexuality, seldom (or never) present in Williams' work, which could be an effect of another transcultural factor: the increased distribution of European films (neorealist first, and Scandinavian and French later), within the restricted culture of cold war America, dealing with sex and desire on a lighter tone or with a more mature approach.

Style: Between Dionysian and Bacchantic

From a stylistic point of view, *The Rose Tattoo* is at the same time fragmentary and spiraling. In the essay "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*" Williams wrote: "I prefer a play to be not a noose but a net, with fairly wide meshes. So many of its instants of revelation are wayward flashes, not part of the plans of the author but struck accidentally off." The narrative does maintain the uneasy feeling of an emotional rollercoaster without time or hooks for reflection and elaboration. Its peculiar mixture of drama and farce, and its farcical extremes, do signal an exceptional presence of Chance, but, more than a loose net, the text evokes a spider web. This impression is reinforced by the use of repetitions: many things seem to occur at least twice in the film. There is a parallelism between Serafina and her daughter's love affair; she asks the Madonna for signs twice; the goat invades her yard twice; Rosa and Jack return to the house at night twice. The rose is in itself a strong poetic image, from Shakespeare to Stein, and also an obvious sexual metaphor. However its presence is so excessive in the film to become redundant, to the point of baroque. Roses are present in the décor (in the tapestry and on the dinner table, elegantly prepared by Serafina when Estelle arrives), in the garden, as a tattoo, in the name of the characters (Rosa, Rosario, and Delle Rose).[4] Rosa sings "Come le rose" when she meets Jack, who brings a bunch of roses when they first go

out, which are given instead to her mother. Serafina puts roses in her hair, and Alvaro has rose oil on his hair. In the dialogue, Serafina at times calls Rosario "the rose" and says that his skin was as smooth as a rose petal.

In the film there are other objects loaded with symbolic significance or emphasizing recurrence: the goat, the birds, the watch, and the pink silk shirt. The crazy goat breaks into the courtyard when Estelle orders a pink silk shirt for her lover who, unknown to Serafina, is Rosario himself, the day in which he dies, and again when Serafina decides to accept Alvaro's courtship. The wristwatch that Serafina has bought for her daughter and twice forgets (another doubling) obviously symbolizes the passing of time. The birds are symbols of freedom, but they include the obnoxious parrot in the house, as well as the "rondinella felice," the happy bird Alvaro is, and would like Serafina to become. And the recurring symbols and doublings in the text produce a structure not unlike that of a rose.

The Rose Tattoo is rich also in animal imagery. The list is as long as the rose's occurrences: the goat, the parrot, the birds, *rondinella*, Mangia/*cavallo*, Serafina calling Rosa "scimmia," or comparing herself to a horse in the grocery store, the dog barking when Alvaro tries to climb in Serafina's garden and overturns a poultry-pen. Alvaro himself moves like a dog, when he wakes up in the morning and stares at Rosa sleeping, in addition to associating himself with birds. Actually animal symbols seem more powerful than the serene botanical image of the rose; the film seems to rely more on instinct and whim than on beauty and harmony – a fastidious connection to the Italian stereotype of primitive instincts, sensuality, incomprehensible emotions, which characterize the representation of Italians within WASP mentality. It is the bacchantic, with its smell of wine and disorderly and childish conduct, which prevails in the most lively moments of the film: Alvaro crying because Serafina is crying and their liberating laughter, the *spumante* popping up, the "bull fight" with the goat, celebrated by the children, Alvaro singing "rondinella felice." Alvaro builds an entire theory about Serafina and the rose, which moves from the botanical into the animal, or better the aerial: "The rose is the heart of the world, as the heart is the heart of the body. But you put your heart in that marble urn until the day your heart is a happy bird."

A Sicilian play

To investigate the numerous narrative elements referring to Sicilian culture in the film would require an extensive analysis, necessarily drawing on other American literary and filmic titles representing Italian Americans, and it would raise the complex issue of the stereotypical representation of Italians in Hollywood, with its racial connotations.[5] But a few hints are evocative of the Southerner representational strategy of *The Rose Tattoo*. The goat owned by the "strega"(the witch), and the consequent "malocchio" (evil eye, bad fortune) evoke the superstitions attributed to Southern Italians, as in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon literature (often directly connected to Catholicism, or "papism"). However, the very coincidence of these signs of *malocchio* with Estelle's arrival on the scene and Rosario's accident make the "bad fortune" actually happen in the narrative itself, in a way confirming the belief. In the other instance the goat's arrival is instead a sign of the Dyonisian power held by Alvaro, because he "tames" the goat, in an ironic evocation of similar mythological acts, involving less domestic animals, thus transforming this "heroic" gesture into a performance, into a bull fight, culminating with a circus parade, and with Serafina applauding. But it is through this symbolic act – a true *clownerie* – that Alvaro tranquilizes the widow: he is strong but he is a child, and this combination of traits conquers him also the trust of the community of women, who end up approving his relationship with Serafina. The chorus-like presence of the women serves multiple functions: it announces the death of Rosario, comments on the widow's jealousy, becomes antagonistic in occasion of the school dance (which exposes Rosa's and Serafina's awakening to sexual desire) and finally contributes to the happy ending. This chorus – often expressing female solidarity – emphasizes the importance of community life (and of "what people'd say"), in the Sicilian community. But a chorus inevitably recalls also the traditions of ancient Greek theater, in association with Sicily as a Greek colony.

The Southerner representational strategy of the film is also entrusted to language and dialogue. When Rosa wants to teach Jack the word "bacio" (kiss) her "lecture" is a very physical one, as words could become immediately body language in Italian. Serafina says: "We are Sicilians. We

don't leave the girls with the boys they are not engaged to," and when Jack replicates: "But this is the U.S." she says, "I know. But we are Sicilians, we are not cold blooded." She then insists on her daughter's "innocence" and when Jack claims that he is innocent too, she asks him if he is a catholic ("You don't look catholic to me.") And as he states that they are in love, she comments in Italian "Cretini tutti e due" because she often uses her native language to make her most personal comments. Also the fights among Italians, mostly among Italian women, are in Italian: an old lady, playing cards, says: "Silenzio, sta zitto" and her husband warns her "Speak English!"

Serafina often reacts by speaking Italian – the mother tongue – or with her body: she pushes Rosa at the first irruption of the goat, and she even slaps her when the daughter blames her for thinking of herself as a baroness, but she also hugs her, with animalesque tenderness, and embarrassment. In one way Serafina is presented as a typical woman of the first generation of immigrants: she keeps her traditions, speaks Italian, goes to church, and does not trust modernity and America. This feeling is expressed in the fight she has with her daughter about going to school, or actually, to the school dance. She is so mad about losing control of Rosa that she screams: "Scuola maledetta!" because she associates the school (and the school dance) with the possibility of Rosa losing her innocence. But she is not against school as learning and as a form of social mobility: she is so proud of the diploma that she tells Rosa to put it alongside her father's clothes. In this respect Williams depicts one of the most interesting and recurring family conflicts among Italian immigrants: going to school, considered as especially problematic for girls. Another instance of the juxtaposition Sicilians/Americans is revealed in the conversation between Serafina and Jack, which explicitly addresses cultural diversities, in terms of blood temperature and men's behavior.

Most of the film stays with Serafina and Rosa, and within the Italian community, but there are two moments in which American female characters break into in this world, disrupting it: when Estelle visits the house to ask Serafina to make a shirt for Rosario, perhaps to reveal their affair, and then when the two women, going to a convention in New Orleans, insist with the seamstress that she finishes the (sexy) shirt one of

them wants to wear. In both cases the American characters act arrogantly towards the Sicilian woman, to the point that the garrulous ladies threaten to report her to the authorities, to make her stop practicing her job, and they flirt with some drunk men in front of the house. In both cases these women express a sexual drive, which is not legal or proper: Estelle towards somebody's else husband, the two women with their loose behavior. On the contrary Serafina is loyal to her husband to the point of mourning him for three years and denying his affair. Rosa accuses her to be a hypocrite about Alvaro's presence in the house, and in part she is right; but the woman is so childish in her lies, and still insecure about the childish Alvaro, that she waits for a sign from the Madonna and for the approval of the community (the chorus of the women) to accept him. Therefore Sicilians appear to be primitive and passionate but honest human beings, while American women are sexually aggressive blondes.

On the other hand, the sudden turns from impending drama to comic resolution, lacking psychological motivations, end up undermining the apparent optimism of the happy ending in favor of an exuberance closer to drunkenness than to religious ecstasy. The unbalanced, almost contradictory narrative turns are presented as the manifestation of an alien culture (i.e., Southern Italian). This "otherness" of the represented culture maintains a trace of the anti-Italian prejudice, which persists even when the text seems to celebrate Sicilian culture. Therefore from the narrative and structural points of view, *The Rose Tattoo* does not present an entirely favorable portrait of Italians, maybe because these are Sicilians living in America – they are immigrants. And American (better WASP) culture has a long history of love and hatred, towards Italy, which has created a stereotype stronger than historical evidence, most of all in relation to immigrants, for obvious socio-cultural reasons. A stereotype is a mediated representation, informed by prejudice and common sense, veiling or excluding the complex and unique features of "real" people. The more stereotypical a representation is and stays, the farther away is the possibility to access and know the represented element. *The Rose Tattoo* is at the same time stereotypical and affectionate, or at least animated by a desire to know the Sicilians, but in the end it gives up understanding them.

Sicilian culture connects in a more profound way to another important

theme of the play – time, actually a passing of time outside history, that is, myth. Time is symbolized by the watch Serafina would like to donate to Rosa, but she never accomplishes this "passing on" of the lapse of time. Serafina in fact lives in an eternal present, refusing to accept Rosario's death to the point of accepting Alvaro because he has so much in common with her dead husband. Williams went a step further in theorizing time in the play. In the introduction to the published play, "The Timeless World of a Play," he proposes two concepts. The first is the argument that art tries to impose stasis on the inexorable flux of time, because "Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence." The second is Williams's proposed use of "the grotesque": "The diminishing influence of life's destroyer, time, must somehow be worked into the context of [the] play. Perhaps it is a certain foolery, a certain distortion towards the grotesque which will solve the problem." In an essay entitled "*The Rose Tattoo* as Comedy of the Grotesque," Brian Parker explains Williams' approach in terms of "teatro del grottesco," thus applying an Italian critical definition usually associated with Pirandello, to this author's work. He analyzes the play with a rich repertoire of possible biographical and literary influences, trying to keep together the realism and the farce of the text through the definition of "grottesco."

> More likely as a literary influence on this specific play are Giovanni Verga's sardonic "verismo" novels and stories about Sicilian village life, since one of Williams's great literary idols, D. H. Lawrence, published translations of many of the stories and wrote several essays in Verga's praise. These stories depict an elemental, close-to-nature world of irrational, explosive passion, of spying and malignant neighborhood gossip, of violent law breaking, and of a prurient attitude to sex that combines paganism with the most rigid and superstitious Catholicism – a combination that is very like that of Williams's 'village populated mostly by Sicilians somewhere along the Gulf coast' (269), which is so different from his other southern locales. … Pirandello wrote many specifically Sicilian plays as well as Verga-like short stories, including one actually called 'The Rose' about the social and sexual desperation of a young widow in a prurient Sicilian village, whose attitudes are symbolized by its dogs in much the same way that the Strega's goat functions in *The Rose Tattoo* (Pirandello, *Short Stories* 197-213). The parallels are not detailed enough

> for this to be considered a 'source,' but I think Pirandello's direct influence is clearly evident in the ideas of 'The Timeless World of a Play.' (Parker 19)

This claim inscribing *The Rose Tattoo* within a Pirandellian world is worth scrutiny, even if the tragic sense of the Sicilian author's *grottesco* is, in my opinion, absent here. Equally different is the relationship reality/performance Williams often institutes in his plays, which here never really questions the sense of identity: Serafina is no Blanche DuBois, and her perception of her own identity as Rosario's wife and as a *baronessa* can be distorted by unconscious negations or childish pride, but in the end she recognizes having lived in a world of illusion and embraces the tattooed chest of lively Alvaro, for whom she really is a *baronessa*.

Even though the *grottesco* forces both the tragic and the comic registers, it has its roots in realism: in *verismo* for Pirandello and in poetic realism for Williams. These realistic roots emerge in the film through the neorealist acting of the cast as a whole, but they are deeply questioned by the bacchantic irruptions of wine, sexual desire, and tragic death. In my view, this dialectic is embodied in the film by the contrast between the two protagonists' performance styles: Magnani is a literal embodiment of neorealism here in an exceptionally "natural" performance, compared with clownesque Lancaster – originally an acrobat – performing a performer, a singer, a bullfighter, an acrobat. While Williams often constructs his plays in such a way as to create "a powerful and fruitful tension between performers" (Clericuzio 50), in the case of the filmed version of *The Rose Tattoo* this tension, however, is unbalanced by the impact of Magnani's naturalistic performance, which makes her partner's *grottesco* acting style at times artificial, and implausible.

Between neorealism and the Actors' studio: the casting

In one of the early drafts of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams wrote that the play should be produced on stage "not with mere realism but with that poetically expressive treatment of realistic detail which has been called the 'New Realism' as it is portrayed in the Italian films of Di Sica [*sic*] and

Rossellini" (Parker 7). Citing this intention, Parker's article continues: "It was this element that was emphasized in the original production by a company drawn almost entirely from the New York Actors' Studio, with its emphasis on Lee Strasberg's "Method" realism." Such a simplistic merging of two radically different schools of realistic performance style is quite problematic and requires further investigation, taking into account both the casting and the acting style with regard to the film, which differs from the stage version. The film has very little to do with the Method, even though one of its most important representatives, Elia Kazan, was the main candidate for its direction, which was finally given to Daniel Mann. All other references to the Actors' studio, which will emerge while considering the careers of some members of the cast, are only tangential. Thus, while on stage the play was interpreted by Method actors, in film the dominant performance style is Italian naturalism, if not neorealism.

Not directly associable either with neorealism or with the Method, but unexpectedly tangentially related to both, is Burt Lancaster. Before acting he was a circus artist and a singing waiter; he started performing in WWII and actually participated as an entertainer in the Italian campaign with the Fifth Army. Lancaster is an interesting personality, who founded his own independent production company in the 1950s, was careful in choosing his roles, and quite original in producing his films. In 1948 he had interpreted the filmed version of *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, directed by Elia Kazan entering in the orbit of the Actors' studio, but never attending it as an *alumnus*. He was one of the main characters in *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953), in which Sinatra played an Italian-American character, Maggio, and won an Oscar for his performance – actually being the first Italian (American) to win an Oscar. In 1955, which was the same year in which he played Alvaro, Lancaster was among the producers of *Marty* (1955), another "neorealist" American film, dealing with Italian-American characters (directed by the other Mann, Delbert, and casting several performers from the Italian immigrant stage.) The coincidence is even more interesting if we consider that the Academy Award of 1956 for Best Picture went to his *Marty*, the one for Best Actress to Magnani, and the one for Best Actor to Italian-American Ernest Borgnine, playing Marty. Indeed

in 1956 the Oscars honored Italian and Italian-American performers and themes in a major way.[6]

Undoubtedly, in terms of narrative and casting, the film is built around Anna Magnani, dominant in the project, from its composition to the making of the film, and in the acting style. In appreciating her performance in the film, in his *Memoirs*, Williams cannot but associate Magnani's immediacy and honesty to her own personality:

> Anna Magnani was magnificent as Serafina in the movie version of *Tattoo* … She was as unconventional a woman as I have known in or out of my professional world, and if you understand me at all, you must know that in this statement I am making my personal estimate of her honesty, which I feel was complete. She never exhibited any lack of self-assurance, any timidity in her relations with that society outside of whose conventions she quite publicly existed... [s]he looked absolutely straight into the eyes of whomever she confronted and during that golden time in which we were dear friends, I never heard a false word from her mouth. (Williams, *Memoirs* 162)

In fact, it was in Rome that she had become a friend of Williams' and often had him as a guest. In this sense Magnani represents also the interaction of Americans with Italian cinema at the times of the American productions in Cinecittà, the so-called "Hollywood sul Tevere," the high season of the Dolce Vita, in which Williams played an important role (see Knox).

By the 1950s transatlantic travel went in both directions: from Hollywood to Rome and from Italy to the U.S. This is the case of Sardinian actress Marisa Pavan, twin sister of Anna Maria Pierangeli – a very interesting pair of Italian siblings in Hollywood, whose filmographies cross Italian and American cinema, and specifically both the neorealist experience and the Actors' studio. It was Anna Maria Pierangeli (known in America as Pier Angeli) who was supposed to play the role of Rosa, but she could not do it, because she was pregnant. In Italy Marisa Pavan had already appeared in *Ho scelto l'amore* (Mario Zampi, with Renato Rascel, 1952), but soon afterwards she joined her sister in Hollywood and appeared in *What Price Glory?* (John Ford, 1952) and in *Drum Beat* (Delmer Daves, 1954), before playing Rosa in the *The Rose Tattoo.* Her fresh and vibrant

performance in the film gained her a nomination to the Academy award. She lost to Jo Van Fleet, who won the prize for *East of Eden*, with James Dean – interestingly enough, her sister's boyfriend and the star of the Actors' studio. However, Pavan did win the Golden Globe for her performance of Rosa and accepted the Academy Award on behalf of Magnani, who did not attend the ceremony. *The Rose Tattoo* seems to have been the high point of Pavan's career.[7] In the 50s she often worked in live anthology dramas and TV dramas, where the Method acting was the dominant approach. Given the tight connection – both professional and affective – with her sister, and given the fact that it was Pier Angeli who was supposed to play Rosa, a brief examination of her career is necessary as well as relevant to a discourse about acting experiences. Pierangeli had acted in Italy in French co-productions such as *Domani è troppo tardi* (1949) and *Domani è un altro giorno* (1951) both directed by Leonide Moguy; in the first title she played along Vittorio De Sica, in a drama on adolescent troubles with sex and love, predating Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). After these two experiences in Italy, she appeared in *Teresa* (Fred Zinnemann, 1951) shot in Italy and in New York, in which she played an Italian war bride, married to a disturbed war veteran. This film has often been described as influenced by neorealism, in that it was shot in the real locations of the war, it starred unknown actors, used a realistic landscape and a sober tone. In addition the script of *Teresa* was co-written by Alfred Hayes, one of the co-writers of *Paisan* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), who wrote also the English titles for *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). However, interestingly enough, *Teresa* was signed by Zinnemann, who had directed the debut of Actors' studio performers such as Marlon Brando in *The Men* (another war veteran film) and Montgomery Clift in *The Search*. Pier Angeli won the Golden Globe for her performance as Teresa, and Hayes (and screenwriter Stewart Stern) had a nomination to the Academy Awards for the script: the interaction neorealism/Method is evident, with the Italian approach prevailing. Pier Angeli continued her acting career in America but probably she was more famous in Hollywood for her affairs with Kirk Douglas first and most of all with James Dean. Another key role of hers was *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (Robert Wise, 1956) about the life of boxing legend Rocki Graziano, who was supposed to be played by

James Dean, and was acted instead by Paul Newman, in his first starring role. Again Pier Angeli not only is associated with Italians in America, but also with the stars of the Actors' studio, contributing to the blurring of the distinction between neorealism and Method in the American spectators' and critics' perception.

The cast of *The Rose Tattoo* includes some Italian-speaking actors, who came from the lively world of the immigrant stage, which represented a reservoir for Italian and Latin types in Hollywood, given that there was never a relevant migration of Italian film actors in American cinema before neorealism. Contrary to what happened with German, French, or Nordic-European cinema, exporting Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Maurice Chevalier, and expressionist star Conrad Veidt, the emigration from the Italian film industry to Hollywood is almost irrelevant in silent cinema or in the 1930s – a historiographic mystery, which makes the post-WWII Hollywood invasion by Magnani, Loren, Lollobrigida, and others, even more impressive. The Italian actors in classic Hollywood came mostly from the immigrant stage, but even if they kept their last names ending with a vowel, they were not "recognized" in Italy because of their association with the "shame" of emigration, while they were particularly appreciated in the studios for their versatility, and interpreted all sorts of Latin types, thus blurring their cultural identity.[8]

The Rose Tattoo casts Sandro Giglio, who plays father De Leo, and Mimì Aguglia, who is Assunta. Sandro Giglio was the heir to a Neapolitan theatrical family, who owned Cinema Giglio, which was an important venue for show business in the Lower East Side. The Giglio theater had its own company, performing both the classics and Neapolitan material, in addition to screening films, imported from Naples. In the early 1930s, the Giglios ventured in filmmaking, for instance adding sound and a narrative sound frame to Elvira Notari's silent film *O festino la legge* for its American distribution. The Giglios were also crucial in Italian-American radio (WHOM, New York) as well as in the experiment with making films in the Italian language in New Jersey. In the early 1930s Sandro Giglio appeared also in Hollywood films, such as *Luigi la volpe*, which was the Italian version of *Men of the North* (Hal Roach, 1930). Later he was cast in *Saturday's Hero* (David Miller, 1951), an attempt at criticizing WASP

attitudes towards foreigners and immigrants, where he actually played a Polish character. Mimì Aguglia had a much higher profile: she toured the Americas with the same contract Eleonora Duse had, and was famous as a realist performer (on stage she has been a popular *Figlia di Jorio*). In 1914 and later in the 1930s she was the key personality of the Italian theater in San Francisco. In film she had a career in the Spanish versions of Hollywood films; in the lat 40s she appeared also in *The Outlaw (*Howard Hughes, 1943), *A Bell for Adano (*Henry King, 1945), *Unconquered (*Cecil De Mille, 1947), and *Captain from Castile* (Henry King, 1947), and as Mama Roma in the already mentioned *Cry of the City (*Robert Siodmak, 1948). Giglio and Aguglia represent two different entry points for Italian performers in the U.S.: the immigrant stage and the legitimate theater in Italian. Actually there was a weak distinction in the Americans' perception of the two typologies, as well as in the formation of the audiences experiencing them; and Hollywood's use of these actors confirms this. In *The Rose Tattoo* Giglio plays a much more relevant role, while Aguglia is often present on the scene, as Assunta, with her lowered shoulders, with the typical shawl and scarf characterizing a peasant Italian old woman in Hollywood movies, but does not have such a relevant speaking role.

As I mentioned above, the casting of actors from the immigrant stage was not new in Hollywood as if these performers could represent an English-speaking Italian surrogate, but their performing Italian or Italian-American characters seems to become a rule coinciding with the popularity of neorealist cinema. Performers from the Italian immigrant stage do seem to work particularly well alongside neorealist performers such as Magnani, not only in this occasion, but in *Vulcano* (in that case Eduardo Ciannelli), or in films set in the Italian-American community such as *Marty (*with the presence of Esther Minciotti and Augusta Ciolli), *House of Strangers (*Eshter Minciotti, Argentina Brunetti and Carlo Tricoli), *Full of Life* (Fante's script, with Esther and Silvio Minciotti), and *Cry of the City* (with Mimì Aguglia). It must have been the cultural impact of neorealism, its strong innovative character and deep humanistic impact that made Italian cinema triumphant all over the world, which helped imposing (or proposing) the naturalistic tradition of the Italian stage in the American cinema of the 1950s.

The body and acting

In the approach to performance, *The Rose Tattoo* intensified physicality: from costumes to physical types, from Lancaster's acrobatics to Magnani's looks and gestures, the body and its language are a crucial expressive as well as narrative instrument in the film. Italian Rosa and Serafina are dark, American Estelle and Jack blond. Lancaster's body is emphasized by his movements, but also by the way Magnani looks at him, when he appears in his vest, exhibiting his athletic shoulders and muscular chest. Interestingly enough, Lancaster had become popular as a sexy male hero for having appeared in a similar vest in *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), but while there the contrast between his strong figure and the desperate inactivity in which he was waiting for his killers made him a tragic hero, here he is just a simple-minded, dirty truck driver, whom Serafina "masquerades" with a pink shirt. This American actor plays a Sicilian character, strongly associated with primitive, childish, even animalesque traits: he "smells like a goat," he is a "happy bird," and when he wakes up after his drunken night and stares at Rosa sleeping, whispering "Che bella," he moves around on all fours. His funny acrobatics associate him with the children who like to watch him, more than impressing as a manifestation of physical ability: they are not spectacular or heroic acrobatics but those – as difficult and yet apparently simple – of a clown. Combined with his irresponsible behavior (he is fired for not delivering the bananas on time) and with his childish moments (which however communicate happiness) these traits make his explicit sexual desire towards Serafina more primitive, almost instinctual, as if the manly attributes he could offer to the widow were only the physical ones, though very vital.

Clothing is crucial in the film, considering also that Serafina is a seamstress. Obviously the pink silk shirt is more than a costume, starting with the color, because in Italian pink is *rosa*, but it is destined to so manly a man (Rosario) that its color does not appear ironic. The shirt – as smooth as the man's skin – is commissioned to Serafina by Rosario's lover, Estelle, but when the widow gives it to Alvaro, it is the sign that he is "becoming" Rosario, as she states in the dialogue, using a strong image of permutation: "a man with the body of my husband, the head of a clown and who smells

like a goat." The two Sicilian characters, Serafina and Alvaro, wear ragged or inappropriate clothes, while Jack wears a light color uniform, and Estelle a simple skirt and a sweater, actually more refined than some of the gaudy, old-styled clothes Serafina wears when she dresses up. When Serafina goes to look for father De Leo, she wears the stereotypical outfit of an older Italian woman in American cinema, that is a black shawl: a sign of mourning, but also a dress code to enter a church. In addition to wrapping up in a worn-out robe, the widow appears also in her underwear: a sexy black petticoat first, preparing for Rosario, and a white one, when she is in mourning and does not even comb her hair, or dress – but this was not a scandalous Hollywood presentation of the Italian actress. From the beginning, Italian neorealism had proposed a natural as well as liberated representation of sexuality[9] with a gallery of women in their petticoats – a piece of clothing that the Hays Code actually forbade to show on screen. Thus according to the self-censorship code, an American actress/character could not be seen in her petticoat, while this sexy presentation is allowed here, perhaps because Magnani had already been seen in a petticoat by American audiences in her Italian films, but also because she was an Italian, a racial discrimination worth some reflection.[10] The colors of clothing are symbolic too: Rosa wears white dresses, to confirm her innocence, while Serafina wears dark sexy dresses for Rosario, a worn-out grey robe when mourning, and only when she accepts Alvaro, she wears again a fancy though out of fashion dark dress. In the first scene, Rosa, supposedly twelve years old, wears jeans, overalls, and pigtails – an outfit much more American than in the later scenes, as if the problem of her Italian upbringing emerged only with her adolescence.

In the film body language is a strong expressive element, taking for granted that Italians are supposed to gesture exaggeratedly anyhow. Serafina is very physical in her remarks, usually accompanied by a telling gaze to muscles or parts of the body, as when, looking at Jack, she comments: "Why do they make them navy pants so tight?" Magnani's facial expressions and moves or Pavan's timid gestures accompany the dialogue very efficiently. Rosa's awakening to sexual desire is revealed when she dances with Jack, touching him, caressing his neck, while the other couples around them dance very soberly. On the boat, when she complains because after his vow

to the Madonna he is avoiding her, she plunges in cold waters as to calm her passion. Pavan is at times woody and her movements are not always so natural, but given her young age as a character, these traits combine with the dislocated moves of an adolescent without necessarily interfering with her acting.

The "chorus" in the film is constituted by three aged women: one tall and fat, and two with curly grey hair, all physiognomically "Italian," introduced at the beginning of the film at a grocery store, where they discuss the size of the eggs they are buying for their husbands – food and *machismo*. This chorus is usually accompanied or led by father De Leo with his grey hair, wearing a Catholic priest outfit, and closed by Assunta, a more refined old lady, as a wiser – less quarrelsome – component, all together representing a synthesis of the Italian community, reinforcing or challenging Serafina's values. When they walk to Delle Rose's to announce Rosario's death, the old women wear black shawls or scarfs on their heads – a traditional outfit for mourning, immediately communicating the implied news to Serafina, who does not need words.

Magnani's performance in the film is indeed outstanding. A perfect example is her first conversation with Jack, where she keeps changing mood from irony to severity, from innuendo to careful examination, from melancholy (when she is still thinking of what she has heard about Estelle) to the maternal permission she gives Jack after he promises to respect the girl, while also trying to keep Rosa out of the conversation (and out of the room). A perfectly theatrical scene – an authentic tour de force of choreography, entrances and exits, and dialogue (for non-English-speaking Magnani) – flows with the immediacy of the actress's neorealist performance, warm and natural, erasing the effective theatricality of Williams' scene with the (apparent) ease of naturalism.

Serafina has unexpected and uncomprehensible reactions, but Magnani's acting makes her character believable, authentic in her contradictions – a very well deserved Oscar. On the contrary Alvaro is at times too simple-minded, to the point that it is not clear why he falls in love with Serafina, and his acting is too childish if compared to the actress' maturity. The gap in the acting styles is already embedded in the text, which is a real challenge in terms of performance, with its emotional turns and

unexplained behaviors. Call it "teatro del grottesco," or use the Dionysian interpretative angle Williams himself proposed, *The Rose Tattoo* implies a complex mixture of melodrama and clowneries, a true tour de force of sudden emotional changes, of an imagined Sicilian culture which is even more exotic and sensual than the Southern world the dramatist usually presents. Anna Magnani *is* the element that keeps this complex aesthetic project together, through her incredible performance, in which all her abilities are at play: her earlier experiences in vaudeville, encouraging her spontaneity, her work with the neorealist masters, the strong female characters she was called to play in those years, her very womanhood (the special gift to be both a sloppy housewife and a seductive Southern Italian woman), most of all, her intensity. However, it must be recognized that the other Italian actors mix well with Magnani, especially the older women, who seem to come out from *L'onorevole Angelina* (Luigi Zampa, 1947) or any neorealist film. Magnani stands out for her intensity, but in terms of dress codes, gesturing and acting, the ensemble is harmonious, and all in the sign of naturalism. Given that these actors from the immigrant stage came from the same traditions of naturalism, versatility, and a mixture of high and low genres typical of the Italian theater, as practiced also by Magnani, it is not surprising that their performance style would harmonize as they shared the same background.

And thus could we define the acting style of *The Rose Tattoo* neorealist? Is there such a thing as American neorealism, which would include films like *Teresa*, *Marty*, or *House of Strangers*, where performers from the Italian immigrant stage also appear, which are shot in real locations, at times open air, dealing with everyday life and Italian characters? Though antithetic to Hollywood cinema, neorealism seems at times to aesthetically dominate the performance style in American films representing Italians or Italian-Americans, but it slowly gives way to the Method acting (for instance, in *Somebody Up There Likes Me).*

One compromising solution, which allows the keeping of neorealism and Method in their specifity and yet makes their interaction less problematic, is the recollection that there are common though distant roots between the two acting schools. The naturalistic (or modern) acting style comes from the Italian stage, in particular from Tommaso Salvini and Eleonora Duse.

Costantin Stanislavski proclaimed Salvini as "the finest representative" of his own approach to acting,[11] in developing the Method, which is the theoretical base of the Actors' studio, as diffused by the teaching of Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan in New York. Williams himself was convinced of the continuity of the two, if he considered *The Rose Tattoo* a neorealist text but thought of Kazan as the director of the film and cast Actors' studio alumni in the Broadway production.

However, the resulting film is predominantly neorealist in acting (if we do not consider Lancaster, but there is space even for his performance, if we think of Fellini's *La strada*, 1954). The sociocultural power of neorealism, attached to its most famous interpreter, Magnani, was so strong to permeate this film, because of the actress's performance but also because of how it was supported by the other Italian actors. If we compare *The Rose Tattoo* with *The Fugitive Kind*, we note that the grand duo Magnani/ Brando is balanced in terms of the intensity of the performance, but the Method totally occupies the scene, from the centrality of Brando and his mannerisms, to the collective performances including Joanne Woodward and Maureen Stapleton, to the claustrophobic and theatrical *mise en scène* by Sideny Lumet, whose background is again the Actors' studio. In a sense *The Rose Tattoo* feels less as an American film of the 50s, which adapts a Williams' play, because it was shot open air like a neorealist film, because of the absence of Method actors and of their stylized performance, and most of all, because of the naturalism of the Italian cast, which is able to incorporate, or assimilate, the emotional excesses and the farcical elements of the play within the cultural world of the Italian stereotype.

Notes

[1] On the roots and on the influence of neorealist cinema, see Giovacchini and Sklar.

[2] *Vulcano* was the rival production of Rossellini's *Stromboli*, which was supposed to cast Magnani, as narrated in Anile and Giannice.

[3] On the Italian stereotype, see Muscio and Spagnoletti.

[4] An interesting detail, which would easily escape attention, is the fact that Rose was actually one of the more common names for Italian female characters in American silent cinema. And Rose was also the name of Williams' schizophrenic sister. The film plays

around last names (Mangiacavallo, Hunter) as well as names, but while Rosa is an obvious choice, Serafina is not elaborated upon.

[5] On the complex issue of Italians' "whiteness" and race, see Guglielmo and Salerno.

[6] To confirm Lancaster's contiguity with Italy, immediately after his experience with Magnani in *The Rose Tattoo*, he played in *Trapeze* (Carol Reed, 1956) with Lollobrigida; later he appeared in Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963) and in Bertolucci's *Novecento (*1975), just to mention two very significant roles.

[7] Later on Pavan starred in *The Midnight Story* (John Pevney, 1957) about the killing of a priest set again in the Italian-American community, with Tony Curtis as a protagonist, and together with Argentina Brunetti, daughter of Mimì Aguglia. She appeared also in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson 1957, with Gregory Peck), in costume drama *Diane* (David Miller, 1956), in *John Paul Jones* (John Farrow, 1959), and in *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* (King Vidor, 1959) with Lollobrigida.

[8] On Giglio, Aguglia, and more generally on the Italian immigrant theater see Muscio 2004.

[9] Let's not forget that *Rome Open City* included lesbian love and an unwedded pregnancy.

[10] Censorship allowed to show naked breasts in the representation of (exotic) black women in travelogues; we might think that, in a similar way, an Italian star could appear in a petticoat, hinting to a racial as well as cultural issue. In order to justify the emergence of the imperceptible racism at times crawling beneath the surface of *The Rose Tattoo*, we should be reminded of the anti-Italian prejudice, which preexisted the big wave of emigration but was strongly reinforced by this social situation. In the play-film we are not in Sicily: these folks are Italians in America, therefore an easy target for prejudice. On this still active prejudice, see Connell and Gardaphé.

[11] In the text Stanislavski analyzes specifically Salvini performing *Othello* by Shakespeare in 1882 (19). The same text reveals how Stanislavski appreciated also "the effortless, emotive and clear playing of Ernesto Rossi," who had performed major Shakespearean tragic protagonists in Moscow in 1877 (17).

Works cited

Anile, Alberto, and M. Gabriella Giannice, *La guerra dei vulcani: Rossellini, Magnani, Bergman. Storia di cinema e d'amore*. Genoa: Le Mani, 2010.

Clericuzio, Alessandro. "Luchino Visconti's Williams: *The Glass Managerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* in Italy 1946-1951." *A Streetcar Named Desire. From Pen to Prop*. Ed. Liénard-Yeterian and A. Diaz-Kostakis. Paris: École Polytechnique, 2012: 115-23.

Connell, William J., and Fred Gardaphé, eds. *Anti-Italianism: Essays on a Prejudice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Giovacchini, Saverio, and Robert Sklar, eds. *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012.

Guglielmo, Jennifer, and Salvatore Salerno, eds. *Are Italians White: How Race is Made in America*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Gross, Robert F., ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook.* New York: Routledge, 2002.

Jacobs, Lea. *The Wages of Sin*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.

Knox, Mickey. *The Good, the Bad, and the Dolce Vita*. New York: Nation Books, 2004.

Leverich, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Muscio, Giuliana. *Piccole Italie, grandi schermi*. Rome: Bulzoni, 2004.

——, and Giovanni Spagnoletti, eds. *Quei bravi ragazzi. Il cinema italoamericano contemporaneo*. Venice: Marsilio, 2007.

Parker, Brian. "*The Rose Tattoo* as Comedy of the Grotesque." *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 6 (2003): 2-20.

Roudané, Hale, and Charles Matthew. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Spoto, Donald. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. New York: Da Capo P, 1997.

Stanislavski, Constantin. *An Actor's Work: A Student Diary*. 1938. Ed. and trans. Jean Benedetti. London: Routledge, 2008.

Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs.* Garden City: Doubleday, 1975.

——. *Notebooks*. Ed. Margaret Bradham Thornton. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.

——. *Where I Live: Selected Essays*. Ed. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods. Introd. Christine R. Day. New York: New Directions, 1978.

Wittern-Keller, Laura, and Raymond J. Haberski jr. *The Miracle Case: Film Censorship and the Supreme Court*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2008.