

QUI RIDO IO *The King of Laughter*

- Historical Notes / No Spoilers -

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first years of the 1900's, much like Paris, Berlin and London, Naples is a capital of modernity, a place where creativity seems to reign undisputed. In those years, the city is the meeting place of **Gabriele D'Annunzio** - poet, writer, absolute protagonist of the political and cultural life of the time, the greatest exponent of Italian *Decadentismo* and fervent nationalist (though D'Annunzio preached Italian ultranationalism and never called himself a fascist, he has been accused of partially inventing Italian fascism as both his ideas and aesthetics were an influence upon Benito Mussolini) – and **Benedetto Croce**, the most authoritative Italian philosopher and historian and a staunch anti-fascist, but also for a large group of poets and playwrights including **Salvatore Di Giacomo**, **Ferdinando Russo**, **Roberto Bracco**, **Raffaele Viviani**. Oscar Wilde also found refuge in Naples and Capri after his prison sentence in Reading, just like Maksim Gorki and Lenin did. The “historic” Gran Caffè Gambrinus is where so many of these intellectuals would gather daily.

During these memorable, lively, courageous years, **Eduardo Scarpetta (1853 – 1925) stands out as the most famous and successful theatrical author and actor**. Born into a middle-class Neapolitan family, after the early death of his parents Scarpetta is forced to leave his studies and work: at fourteen years of age, he starts his career in the theater. His big break comes in 1870, when he finds great personal success with the farce *Feliciello mariuolo de'na pizza*, where he plays a character that will remain inextricably tied to his fame and to so many of his future plays: Felice Sciosciammocca (Happy Sciosciammocca). From there, Scarpetta begins an actual reform of popular Neapolitan theater, introducing a written script, the care for costumes and sets, basically, the anticipation of modern theater direction. This leads him to abolish subject acting and masks – above all Neapolitans' beloved mask of *Pulcinella* - and to pour care and devotion into acting, make-up, and staging. Scarpetta understands that “people want to laugh”, but in a different way, so he starts writing brilliant comedies inspired by *vaudeville* and the French *pochade*. These are not mere translations, but actual re-writings. He's the first to realize that, in addition to the “low people” represented by *Pulcinella*, there's a middle class, a bourgeoisie that, trying to mock the actual noble and failing to do so, can become the comic subject of the stage representation. Felice Sciosciammocca and his mask without a mask, embodies all of this, *the “mama's boy, petty bourgeois, a bit dull, with ladylike quirks and bumbling speech... in his skimpy checkered suit, ballet shoes and narrow-brimmed sheath dress”*.

It's in this context that, from the pages of the city newspapers, a heated debate arises, questioning the value of Scarpetta's dramaturgy. A controversy that will last for years, and that in the first years of the twentieth century still sees Salvatore Di Giacomo and the group of writers of the Art Theater clamoring for the abandonment of farce in order to attempt a profound renewal of

Neapolitan dialect theater, on that should bring to a “nobler”, “higher”, more realistic and socially engaged form of theater (this rivalry is embodied in *Qui Rido Io* by the staging of Salvatore Di Giacomo’s *Assunta Spina*, to direct and star in which Scarpetta’s mentee and company actor Gennaro Pantalena “betrays” him).

So, in 1904, when Scarpetta was brought to court and trialed for plagiarism and forgery after his parody of D’Annunzio’s drama *La figlia di Iorio*, Di Giacomo (a proud fascist himself) takes the side of the prosecution as an expert. Scarpetta finds himself isolated from the whole Neapolitan cultural world, with the only remarkable exception of Benedetto Croce who, in turn, agrees to appear as a defense expert, thus also opposing D’Annunzio from whom he’s separated by an irreconcilable ideological distance. The trial lasted from 1904 to 1908, becoming the first historic copyright suit in Italy and a reference for every law student in Italy to this day.

Scarpetta was the father, among others, of Eduardo, Titina and Peppino De Filippo. Unrecognized, illegitimate children of Scarpetta and Luisa de Filippo (herself a niece to Scarpetta and a seamstress and costumier in his company), the children “lived” on stage near their uncle/father since they were born and continued his legacy becoming three of the most important and influential figures of Italian theater and cinema of all times. Eduardo became an actor, playwright and screenwriter and is considered one of the most important Italian artists of the 20th century. Peppino became a successful and beloved actor with a remarkable body of work in theater, television and film (most notably next to Italian icon Totò). Titina acted all her life next to her two brothers both in theater and film.

The character of Felice Sciosciammocca was given its most famous interpretation and one that will continue to be a reference for Italian generations to come by Totò, in the 1954 film version of Scarpetta’s *Miseria e Nobiltà* starring Totò and Sophia Loren.