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Italian Canadian theatre in the spotlight of multiculturalism:

*La Storia dell’Emigrante*, a case study

Anticipating Section 36 of the Constitution Act of 1982 on “Equalization and Equal Opportunity”, the Federal Ministry for Multiculturalism, from 1973 to 1981, organised a system of payments to be distributed to the provinces of Canada, which were encouraged to invest these funds in ‘efforts to promote cultural difference’ (CTE 2006). Subsidizing the costs of producing original work in and outside the national cultural discourse was an institutional sign that Canada was finally acknowledging the contribution of ethnic minorities to the making of Canada; it also meant that minority groups could be granted sufficient funds to sponsor a variety of culturally related projects, including theatre. Cultural agencies, which had long been working independently on cultural projects for their immigrant communities, were offered arts funding to sustain themselves and to extend patronage to generations of young artists willing to embark on projects highlighting ‘cultural difference’ (CTE 2006). Within the Italian Canadian communities, and ready to seize this opportunity, the Italian associations in Montreal and Toronto stood out for investing in a wide range of theatrical activities, in an effort to promote Italian language and Italian culture outside their communities while reflecting on their roles within the Canadian contexts in which they operated. This process was being facilitated by a new generation of Italian Canadian intelligentsia. Most had arrived in Canada as infants or were born in the country. Having graduated from Canadian universities and having acquired ‘the tools’ (Loriggio, 2003:34) with which to express themselves in three different languages – English, French and Italian – they could easily negotiate their place in the diverse Canadian cultural scene. In the 1980s this new group of intellectuals became known as ‘the Montreal-Toronto corridor generation’ (Pivato 1994:25) for much of their time was spent and invested in travelling between the two cities. Tony Nardi belonged to this generation of individuals. An actor, a journalist, a prolific writer of practically everything from newspaper fillers to award-winning plays, Nardi, throughout his life and whatever his occupation, demonstrated a constant passion for theatre. As an active theatre practitioner in the Italian Canadian associations in Toronto and Montreal, he took advantage of the newly-established multicultural policy to bring his work into commercial theatres in Canada.

Tony Nardi was born in a little village in southern Italy; his family and he immigrated to Toronto when he was five, in 1956. His first appearance on stage came even before he began school and, when his formal education ended, his first choice of career was acting. He briefly turned to journalism to please his Italian parents, who were not really keen on his first choice. Yet he would always use his spare time to write and direct plays for the local Italian social clubs. His first play, which was staged at the Italian Cultural Institute in Toronto in 1973, was about the daily life of an Italian Canadian family in Toronto under the siege of an authoritative patriarch; the play anticipated an interest in self-reflexive history which would later constitute one of the main themes of *La Storia dell’Emigrante*. Nardi managed to reach the commercial theatre scene in Toronto only after his breakthrough as an actor in Montreal. While his fame as an actor surpassed his reputation as a playwright, he continued to write plays and hoped that one day the success of his acting would attract more attention to his plays. His wish came true in 1979 with *La Storia dell’Emigrante*, which became chronologically the first theatrical work to be acknowledged officially by a Canadian institution.

Before going into more detail about the implications of this change for Italian Canadian theatre, I need to present the play. Set in Woodbridge (Toronto), in the late 1960s, the action of *La Storia dell’Emigrante* unfolds within the Testa family home, ‘a typical Italian Canadian household’ (Kaplan 1980:43). The play begins with Raffaele Testa’s announcement to his wife Filomena that, in the construction factory where he works, the Italians and “the others”, the Anglo-Canadians, have gone on strike for better wages. Raffaele, a modest...
construction worker outside and a commanding patriarch inside, supports the strike. Yet his solidarity with his Anglo-Canadian co-workers ends there, since he is strongly opposed to any kind of social interaction between Italians and Canadians outside the workplace. His eldest son, Sal, on the other hand, is not only on friendly terms with Michael, a Canadian and fervent socialist, but is also (unknown to Raffaele) in love with Polly, a local Canadian girl. Despite Raffaele’s distrust of the Canadians, he is persuaded by Sal and Michael’s argument that the employers will try to sow division between the striking workers by playing “the foreign card” and by insinuating that the strike will come to an end as soon as the Italians will be threatened with losing their jobs. Knowing that, as a respected and loyal member of the Italian Little Italy in Toronto, Raffaele will have more influence with his coreligionists than they will, Sal and Michael manage to convince him to urge the Italian workers to keep solidarity with their Canadians comrades and to resist the employers’ attempts to divide them by stoking ethnic stereotypes. Initially, the strategy works well. Enjoying the sense of power he experiences as a guarantor of working-class solidarity and relishing the fact that the Italian workers listen to him, Raffaele gives himself over to his new task with enthusiasm. The crisis of the play is precipitated, however, when he accidentally overhears that Sal and Polly are engaged and that, at Filomena’s prompting, they had been planning to keep the engagement secret until the success of the strike was assured, for fear this might cause Raffaele to change his mind about advocating solidarity between the Italians and the Canadians. Horrified at the prospect of his eldest son’s marrying an Anglo-Canadian and convinced that he is being used to undermine the wider interests of his own community, Raffaele declares that he will boycott the strike unless Sal and Polly agree to break off their engagement. When Sal and Polly refuse, the scene explodes into a brawl between father and son; Raffaele becomes increasingly hysterical and wrecks his tomato patch. Only Filomena’s calls for reason and moderation manage to calm him down, along with the discovery that he will soon become a “nonno” – a granddad. Raffaele, dazed and ‘as if in a dream’ (R, scene 10), still maintains that his outburst was right, while echoes from off-stage declare the success of the strike.

La Storia – as the title of the play is commonly shortened (Mazza 1990:C9) – encountered overwhelming success when it was first staged at the George Vanier Auditorium in Montreal, a historically important platform for Italian Canadian community-based theatre before the implementation of the multicultural policy. ‘Weeks of pre-sold performances, people clamouring for over-booked seats, and scalpers selling tickets for fifty and 100 dollars apiece’ (Mazza 1990:C9) helped La Storia gain critical attention from both the English and the French and language media. The success of the play led to re-stagings in the annual multicultural festivals in Montreal (1980), and in Toronto (1982), marking de facto the debut of Italian Canadian plays in commercial theatres. When it was awarded the 1982 Ontario Multicultural Theatre Festival as Best Original Canadian Play, La Storia became the first Italian Canadian play to win an institutionally recognised prize. Hence, the story of Tony Nardi, playwright, and his work became part of a larger story of the growth of Italian Canadian theatre outside community-based theatre practices.

What made Nardi’s play so special? The significance of the subject matter of the play and historical contingencies have to be taken into consideration. Nardi chose a controversial way of negotiating his field of action: by foregrounding mutual prejudice as the main motive triggering the action of La Storia dell’Emigrante. In the play, prejudice splits Italians and Canadians and prevents them from communicating with one another; prejudice also operates in both directions, against the Italian / Italian Canadian minority, as well as the majority. Concurrently, Nardi chose to frame La Storia in the context of an easily accessible historical event: the illegal strikes of construction workers that hit Toronto in the 1960s. The events surrounding the strikes of 1960 and 1961 exposed elements of mistrust within the Canadian organized labour movement of the immediate post-war era towards the Italians, though this also helped pave the way for an early alliance between Italian immigrants and Canadian workers in the Toronto construction trades and evoked varied responses from Torontonians.
Although history suggests that Italian Canadians were not fundamentally opposed to Canada, the subject matter of Nardi’s play may seem explicitly political, with the vulnerability of labour politics to ethnic divisions and the wider contest between Italian immigrants and Canadians providing the play with its essential themes. These political issues, which are usually associated with the public sphere, are mediated exclusively here through the private sphere, the Testa living room in which the play is set. The action elsewhere – Raffaele’s addresses to the Italian community in Toronto, Sal and Michael’s meetings, and various diatribes against the commitment of the Italians to the strike – is merely reported. Since these public spaces are not actually staged, everything that happens in the play happens “inside.” Nardi’s choice of the illegal strikes of construction workers in Toronto as a backdrop does not imply the playwright’s exclusive interest in exploring the dynamics of history, nor does it suggest his partisan approval of the actions of the strikers. Rather, it has the dual function of legitimating Italian prejudiced attitudes towards social change and, at the same time, reframing the representation of Italians produced by the dominant culture. It is not by direct analysis of the causes of the strike that Nardi seeks to find any resolution to the situation; indeed, no one directly involved in the strike even appears onstage. This backdrop seems to throw into relief the very different process unfolding within the walls of the house, in a manner typical of domestic tragedy (cf. Godin 1999:142).

For some reviewers, La Storia is best read as a social critique of prejudice leading to ethnic excess (Contento 1990:4A; Wagner 1990:B12). On this reading, Raffaele is the villain or moral culprit of the play. It is his inability to overcome his personal prejudice against the Canadians that destroys the strike and reduces to ashes the hope for a brave new world beyond Italian and Canadian incomprehension which the love between Polly and Sal symbolically prefigures:

Immigrants... immigrants. What immigrants? These people [the Canadians] need their houses built, who do they call? An Italian? You need a bricklayer, he’s Italian. (...) You need to teach these people how to cook and eat, who are they going to call? An Italian! What are they... savages? (R, scene 3)

However, while the play can support such a reading, it is ultimately more complex than this; Raffaele’s support for the strike is, after all, represented as principled and sincere. When he discovers Sal’s engagement to Polly and decides, after some irresolution, that he can no longer maintain his support for the strike, it is not simply (or at least not only), as Crew puts it, that ‘atavistic fanaticism reasserts itself’ (Crew 1979:C9). Although this may well be how the other characters in the play see things, from Raffaele’s own perspective the proposed union between Sal and Polly is objectionable not only because it violates the “social apartheid” between Italians and Canadians that he upholds, but also because it intimates a wider threat: assimilation. The crux which binds him, in other words, is that he is willing to support the working-class alliance, but only on condition that its purpose does not go beyond the improvement of their economic lot. But what the alliance between Sal and Polly brings home to him, so to speak, is that the development of common economic interests between Italian and Canadian workers cannot be divorced from wider social consequences. Hence what starts out as cross-community economic solidarity may lead sooner or later to other forms of social unity as well, eventually even undermining the commitment to Raffaele’s traditions and beliefs, which are obviously so dear to him.

La Storia should be understood, then, not simply as a play that offers an ethical or moral critique of ethnic excess and prejudice, but as a more complex work in which Raffaele’s dilemma ultimately takes on mutually compromising commitments. This conception of Raffaele’s situation reflects, I would argue, a social and historical truth of a more significant order than any critique of parochialism could make. A moral critique would conceive of Raffaele’s attitude essentially in terms of personal limitation: divisions persist, that is, because unenlightened individuals fail to overcome their atavistic and irrational prejudices. However, the construction of Raffaele’s character as an inflexible one stemming from irreconcilable commitments works towards a more materialist diagnosis by allowing that mutual suspicion and segregation persist not simply because of personal
weakness or moral vice, but also because Raffaele is exposed to the threat of identity loss. The construction of Raffaele’s dilemma is one in which his willingness to work to improve the shared economic interests of Canadian and Italian workers comes into irresolvable conflict with his desire to maintain what he believes to be the basis of Italian identity:

They [the Italians] had come to Canada believing it was the land of opportunity, but it also seemed to be a land devoid of tradition and morals. They found Canadian customs strange, especially the holiday celebrated with turkey instead of saints! Mannaggia all’America [to hell with America or Damn America – my translation]! (R, scene 3)

When Canada fails to live up to his expectations, he curses the fate that has forced him to forsake his beloved homeland and seek his fortune in an alien land. Hence, in the face of this alienation and isolation, he feels he has to cling to his traditional way of life as the "Canadian way" is not acceptable. However, the final scene of the play shows Raffaele wrecking his tomato patch. This can clearly work as an allegory of the state of his personal identity, which now seems ready to be refashioned from its own ruins.

La Storia, like most Italian Canadian plays of the 1980s, did not offer any definitive statement on the Italian Canadian communities in Canada, but represented direct dialogue with Canada and with a group of people who had not had anything about their lives represented on the outside of their Italian Canadian communities: the ‘lost generation’ (2004:32), as Loriggio defined the Italian Canadian communities prior to the establishment of the Ministry for Multiculturalism. According to the Toronto Star’s theatre reviewer Wagner, ‘the Italians who had immigrated to urban centres like Toronto and Montreal or to other provinces during the 1950s and 1960s simply did not exist for theatre goers in Toronto and Montreal’ (Wagner B12). Therefore, what Nardi and other Italian Canadian playwrights of the 1980s did was showing these Italian Canadian communities to the Canadians and to the Italian Canadian communities whose cultural agencies invested in theatrical projects. These plays and their characters were representative of the communities, the Little Italies, the Italian Canadian playwrights of the period knew because they grew up in these communities. These elements, combined with their knowledge of realities in the old country, Italy, which they all left when they were very little, and with their knowledge of the Canadian reality, in which they had been living, formed the core of a self-reflective history which engaged both playwrights and their audiences in the difficult negotiations of an Italian Canadian identity. The staging of this identity articulated what Habermas called a ‘subject-in-process,’ fashioned in relation to ‘a network of signifying practices and structural experiences imbricated in the historical and cultural shifting of the making of ethnic communities’ (Habermas 1998:18; my emphasis). Staging the nature of their Italian Canadian communities was integral to their consideration of a broad range of subjects-in-progress: the changing core values, beliefs and traditions that affected all aspects of their lives and those of their communities in Canada. The negotiation of this value system, termed la via vecchia, “the old ways”, age-old customs that were known to work, helped them to survive centuries of man-made and natural disasters in Italy and ensured continuity before immigration. Its main components were a strong attachment to the family, a strict code of honour, a belief in destiny (or fate) and reliance on old rituals. However, for both the playwrights and the Italian Canadian communities it was now time to reflect on the negotiation of this value system and to reflect on its survival or disappearance in Canada which, through the multicultural policy, seemed to be opening up to its ethnic communities. That la via vecchia could show prejudiced or bigoted Italian Canadians had little to no importance to both the playwrights and their Italian Canadian communities. In fact, in the 1980s, the self-reflexive historical focus of Italian Canadian playwrights like Nardi was rarely on a reification or validation of their Italian Canadian communities; these playwrights were not compelled to dramatize their

\[1\] Mannaggia literally means ‘male ne abbia’ – ‘let ill-fortune fall upon you’. The Italians are actually giving the evil eye to America.
distinctiveness, although their family and community histories informed the complex moral and cultural dynamics of their works.

Through a network of commercial theatres in the Canadian provinces, Nardi and the Italian Canadian playwrights of the 1980s ‘collectively engaged in the development of Italian Canadian plays destined for commercial theatre’ (Contento 1979:4A). For the length of this implied mandate, their work remained subject to expectations and projections from the immediate as well as the mainstream culture that posed a very real dilemma for the artist:

If you are from inside the community you want the best possible image presented (la bella figura) and plays like La Storia dell’Emigrante remain subject to the expectations and projections of the Italian Canadian communities. Concurrently, if you are from the outside you want things that are easily recognizable by the mainstream culture at large’ (Contento 1979:4A).

The main dilemma for Tony Nardi and the playwrights who followed him was how to represent a community that was fragmented and separated from Canada. They wanted to start from what they knew, but they also wanted to stage stories that were easily accessible. Furthermore, theatre practitioners like Nardi also felt that their communities should have the most accurate image available, whether this was for better or for worse. This has been defined by as a ‘predominantly self-reflexive approach to history in the Italian Canadian plays of the 1980s’ (cf. Godin 1999:142). Self-reflexive plays were to Italian Canadian theatre of the 1980s what Grassroots theatre was to Anglo-Canadian theatre in the 1960s. Grassroots theatre was needed by the Anglo-Canadian playwrights to challenge the professionalized institution of English Canadian theatre, which was unduly deferential towards European models. To the Italian Canadian playwrights of the 1980s, writing self-reflexive plays was de rigueur because, for the first time, they had been given the chance to present their stories, their communities and their histories, beyond Italian clubs and local churches, to mainstream audiences that often had confused and controversial ideas of what an Italian Canadian and/or Italian immigrant was.

While Italian Canadian theatre of the 1980s worked as a catalyst for some, it was regarded as mere folkloric display by others. Detractors accused Italian Canadian plays of functioning within a narrow statist framework and pointed an accusatory finger at playwrights they saw as being responsible for the fetishization of cultural differences that peddled easily identifiable in notions of history, tradition, and authenticity in order to accumulate cultural capital for ‘disenfranchised groups’ (Hade 1997:43). As Gareth Griffiths has warned, productions such as these set their own traps for they could ‘overwrite and overdetermine the full range of representations’ through which community identities were articulated (1994:72), and could thus disavow possibilities of moving beyond those circumscribed identities (1994:76). Likewise, Smaru Kamboureli (2000) cautions that the notion of ‘community’ privileged in official multicultural discourse can lead to oversimplified narratives of origins, and that plays produced under these terms tend to subscribe the ‘marketing and fetishization of communities to be displayed and consumed’ (2000:65). Daniel Hade (1997), meanwhile, uses the term ‘boutique multiculturalism’ to refer to this phenomenon, a term which, for some, perhaps best approximates the incorporation of state multiculturalism into ethnically oriented Canadian community theatre in the 1980s in Canada. Multiculturalism served as the preferred way for Italian cultural centres, notably in Montreal and Toronto, to obtain public recognition. In this context, the productions of La Storia fitted within this model of “special interest” topics and events.

Plays like La Storia were certainly the effect of a state-determined cultural management and a grassroots response to the “lived reality” of its ethnic communities. However, plays as such tended by and large to avoid folklorization, instead questioning a selective past and allowing for a different present and a new future to be fashioned. It is true that past, present and future were not generally put in conversation with one another. Yet, before suggesting a mode of interaction, plays like La Storia needed to present ‘a model of performance and observation [of] object/subject’ (Crew 1979:4A), i.e., to show who Italian Canadians were beyond their
immediate communities. Hence, it could be said that, at the time, multiculturalism provided one of the most effective challenges to the canons of knowledge as they were originally formulated in Canada. The newly-established multicultural policy allowed Italian Canadian theatre practitioners to incorporate their underrepresented histories and cultural traditions into institutionalised discourses in order to reflect the nation’s diversity more accurately.
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