

ANNA MAGNANI  
(1908-1973)

*Last month's essay on Grazia Deledda and this month's essay on Anna Magnani celebrate the lives and achievements of two women who were masters of their careers and received international recognition for the level of perfection they achieved. Deledda was the first and only Italian woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1926). Magnani was the first Italian to win an Academy Award (Best Actress, 1955, in The Rose Tattoo). I wrote both of these essays to celebrate the inclusion of women as members of Il Cenacolo in its 90th year. I am pleased to welcome our new women members to our organization, and I look forward to many years of shared stories and camaraderie with them. Benvenuto!!!*



Anna Magnani was born in Rome, Italy (not in Egypt, as some biographies claim), on March 7, 1908. She was the illegitimate child of Marina Magnani, a seamstress, and an unknown father, often said to be from Alexandria, Egypt, but whom Anna herself claimed was from the Calabria region of Italy, although she never knew his name. After her mother deserted her, she was raised in poverty in the ancient quarter of Rome by her maternal grandmother. At the age of seven, she was enrolled in a French convent school in Rome where she learned to speak French, to play the piano and guitar, and to sing. She also developed a passion for acting from watching and participating in plays that the nuns staged, especially Christmas plays. This period of formal education lasted until she was 14 years old.

In her late teens, she continued to pursue her love of acting by enrolling in the Eleonora Duse Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in Rome for several years. She supported herself and worked her way through the Academy by singing risqué songs in cabarets and nightclubs; she also performed in vaudeville. She was so well received that she was billed as the “Italian Edith Piaf.”

She left the Academy in 1926 to take a job in a theater company that toured Italy and then, in 1927, Argentina. In these early years on the stage, she played bit parts, such as ladies' maids. For this work, she earned 25 lire a day, the equivalent of less than one dollar. In 1929, one of the troupe's leading ladies left the group, and this gave Anna her first big break. She was cast to play a dramatic, emotional scene for which she earned rousing applause from the audience. She earlier had made an inauspicious film debut in 1927, playing a bit part in the silent film *Scampolo (The Remnant)*. But in the late '20s, films were not her main career focus; she continued to sing in cabarets and act on the stage.



She returned to films in 1934, for what some consider her film debut, in *La Cieca di Sorrento* (*The Blind Woman of Sorrento*). The director of this film was Goffredo Alessandrini, who had seen one of her fiery stage performances in an experimental theater role in 1933. In 1935, they were married and she went into semi-retirement, initially devoting herself to the marriage, but she couldn't stay away and soon returned to the stage. (The marriage was ultimately unsuccessful, and the couple went through a long period of separation starting in 1942. It finally ended with an annulment in

1950). Alessandrini discouraged her interest in film and advised her to continue to work on the stage where her natural talent was appreciated.

However, even though Alessandrini did not consider her a strong film actress, he gave her a supporting role in his 1936 film *Cavalleria* (*Cavalry*). In the movie, she is just glimpsed very briefly singing in long shot. Nothing spectacular!

The rest of her movie roles in the 1930s were similarly inconsequential until she got a good but small role in Vittorio De Sica's *Teresa Venerdì* (1941). The film is a comedy of errors in which the sweetly incompetent Dr. Pietro Vignali (Vittorio De Sica) has been forced deeply into debt by his girlfriend, Loletta Prima (Magnani). After his creditors threaten to sell his belongings, he takes a job as an orphanage health inspector to pay his debts and ends up engaged to wealthy Lilli, daughter of a mattress tycoon, and chased after by the orphan Teresa Venerdì, while trying to keep his life in order.

Playing stage star Loletta Prima, Magnani is very funny when she is making indifferent movements during rehearsal for a tacky musical. Though she's barely in the movie, she manages to steal her scenes anyway, displaying admirable technique as she moves through the scenes and getting comic mileage out of the way the low-class Loletta puts on airs.

Following this start, for several years she played minor roles in films that received very little critical notice. To all of these second-rate roles, however, she brought her smoldering wit and tumultuous temperament, enlivening what was otherwise dreary wartime entertainment.

Her breakthrough film was Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) (aka *Open City*), generally regarded as the first commercially successful Italian Neorealist film of the postwar

years and the one that won her an international reputation. The movie was about Italy's final days under German occupation during World War II where Anna gave a "brilliant performance" as Pina, a woman who dies fighting to protect her husband, who is an underground fighter against the Nazis. Her harrowing death scene remains one of cinema's most devastating moments: As the pregnant Pina, she is shot down by German soldiers 56 minutes into the film. "Francesco!" she cries, running toward her fiancée after the Nazis have arrested him. When she is shot, her body lies still in the street, her skirt above her knees so that the tops of her stockings are visible. ([One-minute clip.](#))



She was the perfect actress for this emerging film style that led the world to admire Italian cinema. Neorealism, considered the "Golden Age of Italian Cinema," was a sign of cultural change and social progress in Italy. The films presented contemporary stories and ideas that involved the lives of the poor and the working class. They were often shot in the streets and other outdoor locations. They frequently incorporated non-professional actors. The themes that Neorealist films explored were the difficult economic and moral conditions of post-World War II Italy, emphasizing changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life, including poverty, oppression, injustice, and desperation.



The term "Neorealism" was first used in describing Luchino Visconti's 1943 film, *Osessione* (*Obsession*). Anna had been scheduled to play the lead in this historic film, but she missed the opportunity due to pregnancy and she chose to have her son Luca even though it was not Alessandrini's baby. Luca was the result of an affair she had with actor Massimo Serato while she was separated from her husband. He was born on October 29, 1942 in Rome, and came down with crippling polio at only 18 months of age. He never regained use of his legs. As a result, she spent most of her early earnings for specialists and hospitals, and she remained close to him for the rest of her life.

In 1948, Rossellini, who had become her lover, offered her a showcase called *L'Amore* (*The Love*), which was comprised of two short films, *The Human Voice*, a Jean Cocteau play where

Magnani played a ruined and passive-aggressive lady speaking to her lover on the phone for the last time, and *The Miracle*, where she played a half-mad goat herder who is convinced she is carrying another Christ child after an encounter with a sly wanderer (a young Federico Fellini, who also wrote the story).

Magnani is intensely emotional and touching in both of these shorts and in very different ways: tightly wound and desperately sophisticated yet primal in *The Human Voice*, and then poignantly simple-minded yet understanding in *The Miracle*. This latter ran into a lot of trouble with American censors. Anna reaches a religious peak of emotion and insight in *The Miracle* when a jeering crowd crashes a large bowl on her head and she quietly says, “God forgive them, for they know not what they do.”



The highly publicized affair between Magnani and Rossellini was seldom calm. She liked to stay up all night and sleep all day, and she liked dogs because unlike people, she would say, dogs never betray you. The tensions between the two lovers grew as the affair became more openly known. She was usually jumpy, tired, excitable, and cranky. He was married to another woman; he had children. She had her child, an invalid, in great need of care and attention. The day finally came when rumors were feeding Magnani’s foreboding instincts. For a while she had been goading Rossellini: was there something he needed to tell her? Finally, when he had denied it repeatedly, she knew by this that he was lying to her, Magnani dumped a plate of pasta over his head. Of course, with

this desecration of Italy’s national dish, the relationship was over, and Magnani would be replaced by the younger and more classically beautiful Ingrid Bergman.

The years from 1950 to 1962 saw her best movie work, and Magnani, in recovering from the embarrassment and rejection of Rossellini, was not the sort of person to welcome pity; she always reacted to setbacks with anger and defiance.

In 1951, she gave one of her greatest screen performances for director Luchino Visconti, playing a mother striving to get her plain daughter launched into movies. *Bellissima (Gorgeous)* was made during the “grim period” of Italy’s post-World War II recovery. In the movie, Magnani abandoned all restraints; she plays a woman we would gladly strangle, but



whose life force leaves us shocked. She plays Maddalena, a blustery, obstinate stage mother who drags her daughter to the Cinecittà Studios for the ‘Prettiest Girl in Rome’ contest, with dreams that her plain daughter will be a star. Her emotions in the film go from those of rage and humiliation to maternal love. Of course, it’s the mother who needs to act, and it was Visconti’s genius to uncover vulnerability in the mother’s excessiveness, which ultimately made the picture an international success.

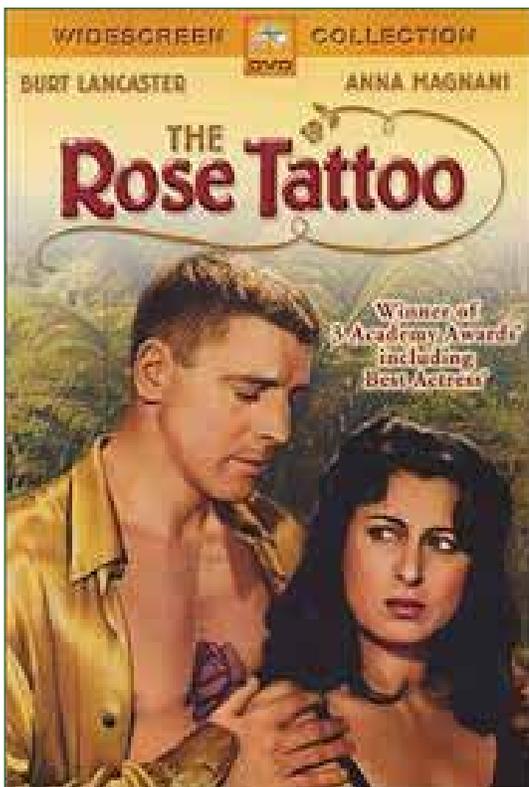
This was followed in 1953, by what many critics consider her most ideally balanced film, Jean Renoir’s *The Golden Coach* (sometimes known by its French title, *Le Carrosse D’Or*). Magnani is filmed in color and she proved once again, as she had in *L’Amore*, that she is someone to make a film for and about. This is Renoir’s exquisite paean to actors, especially about both the loneliness and the glory of the life of an actor, and the fullness of an actor’s response to life. Laughter and anger always overtake Magnani on screen, and so watching her laugh or get angry is like listening to a singer with a voice that goes the highest up and the furthest down, like a Maria Callas living by her wits.

She plays Camille (stage name Columbine), an actress in a touring *commedia dell’arte* stage troupe. While traveling through 18th-century Peru, she finds herself receiving romantic advances from three men: a faithful Spanish soldier (George Higgins), a dashing bull-fighter (Riccardo Rioli), and a wealthy Viceroy (Duncan Lamont), who possesses the dazzling Golden Carriage of the title, which he presents to Camille and then is forced to take it back under pressure from the aristocratic class. Renoir’s real interest, though, is in the “show



must go on” magic of the stage, the mysterious art of acting, and the interplay between fantasy and reality. The movie combines superb acting (especially by Magnani), elegant comedy, gorgeous color cinematography, and exquisite art direction. Renoir called Magnani “the greatest actress I have ever worked with”. Although she had never appeared in an English-speaking film, Magnani acted in English for this Renoir masterpiece that was very favorably received in the United States.

During this period, American fascination with Magnani accelerated, while her popularity in Italy began to decline. In Italy, her emotional film performances were an uncomfortable reminder of the harsh post-war years. Italian moviegoers in the more prosperous fifties were interested in flirtatious comedies featuring a provocative younger generation of female stars. Directors failed to find roles for Magnani; parts that might otherwise have been hers were given to rising actresses like Sophia Loren.



*Bellissima* (1951) was her last Italian film to achieve commercial success. She was becoming a cult celebrity in America. So much so, that Tennessee Williams created the role of Serafina Delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo* expressly for her American stage debut. However, she declined the part, fearing her English was too weak for a stage production.

Having no professional reasons to stay in Italy, she went to Hollywood in 1955 to make the screen version of *The Rose Tattoo*, directed by Daniel Mann and also starring Burt Lancaster. Her American debut turned out to be one of her most famous movies and one of her greatest roles.

In *The Rose Tattoo*, she plays Serafina Delle Rose, who retreats from the world when her beloved husband dies and she is left with raising a teenage daughter. But Serafina reawakens to life’s joys when she meets

Alvaro (Burt Lancaster), a happy-go-lucky and lusty truck driver who has the same sunny openness her husband had, even the same occupation. And on his chest is the same symbol of love, The Rose Tattoo.

Magnani won the Best Actress Oscar for her bravura portrayal in this drama (the first Italian to win an Oscar). The picture also received eight Academy Award nominations (including Best Picture) and won three. She won other Best Actress awards for her role, including the BAFTA Film Award, Golden Globes Award, National Board of Review, and the New York Film Critics Circle Awards. Convinced that she would never win the Oscar for *The Rose Tattoo*, she didn't attend the ceremony. The reporter who phoned and woke her out of a sound sleep in Rome to give her the news had a difficult time convincing her he wasn't kidding. "You're lying," Magnani supposedly said. "If this is a joke, I'll kill you!"

Magnani worked with Tennessee Williams again for the 1960 film, *The Fugitive Kind* (originally titled, *Orpheus Descending*) directed by Sidney Lumet, in which she played Lady Torrance and starred with Marlon Brando. Noted co-stars in the film were Joanne Woodward and Maureen Stapleton. The plot centers on Valentine "Snakeskin" Xavier (Brando), a guitar-playing drifter, who flees New Orleans in order to avoid arrest. He finds work in a small-town five-and-dime owned by an embittered older woman known as Lady Torrance (Magnani), whose vicious husband Jabe (Victor Jory) lies on his deathbed in their apartment above the store. Both alcoholic nymphomaniac Carol Cutrere (Woodward) and simple housewife Vee Talbott (Stapleton) set their sights on the newcomer, but Val succumbs to the charms of Lady Torrance, who plans to set him up with a refreshment bar. Sheriff Talbott (R.G. Armstrong), a friend of Jabe, threatens to kill Val if he remains in town, but Val chooses to stay when he discovers Lady is pregnant. His decision sparks Jabe's jealousy and leads to tragic consequences.



Brando demanded and got an unheard-of million-dollar contract, but the film's producers expected a smash hit, considering all of the talent assembled for a work by the very popular Williams. But *The Fugitive Kind* failed to live up to expectations, with the trouble beginning even before the filming started. Brando and Magnani's working relationship became strained during rehearsals and further deteriorated when filming began. Magnani was over 50 and Brando was 17-years younger. Brando later wrote that Magnani attacked him physically. Building on a wild kiss, she put a bite on the actor. She was drawing him towards bed and he escaped only by pinching her nose until she freed him. Essentially, two massive egos collided. As for the film, the final results were odd, and both audiences and critics were turned off.



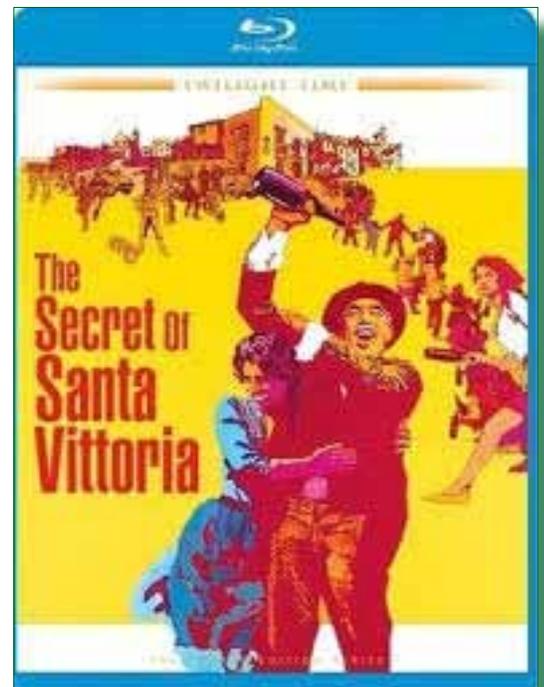
Following that film, but not as a result of its poor critical reception, Magnani's screen activity shrank even more. Her age was probably more responsible than anything for her diminished activity: In 1960, she was fifty-two years old, and acting opportunities for women in that age bracket were limited, especially for a singular performer like Magnani.

In Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962), she is both a mother and a whore, playing an irrepressible prostitute determined to give her teenage son a respectable middle-class life. She appeared in several very long tracking shots, ending one of them with an indelible line that she directs to Jesus up in the sky: "Explain to me why I'm a nobody and you're the king of kings?"

*Mamma Roma*, while one of Magnani's critically acclaimed films, was not released in the United States until 1995 because it was deemed too controversial in 1962. By this time she had become frustrated at being typecast in the roles of poor women. In 1963 she commented "I'm bored stiff with these everlasting parts as a hysterical, loud, working-class woman."

But she would return to this type-cast character in the 1969 film *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*, starring Anthony Quinn as the mayor Italo Bombolini, and Magnani as his wife, Rosa. It was directed by Stanley Kramer, and it was selected as the opening-night film for the 13th Annual San Francisco International Film Festival in October, 1969.

The film is set during World War II in the summer of 1943, in the aftermath of the fall of Italy's Fascist government under Mussolini. The German army uses the ensuing political vacuum to occupy most of the country. The wine-making hill town of Santa Vittoria learns that the German occupation forces want to steal all of Santa Vittoria's wine and take it back to Germany. The townspeople organize under the inspiration of their mayor, Italo Bombolini (Anthony Quinn). They are able to hide a million bottles of wine by sealing them up in the galleries of



an ancient Roman cave before the arrival of a German army detachment under the command of Sepp von Prum (Hardy Krüger).

The Germans are given thousands of bottles of wine to appease them, but von Prum comes to suspect that there are many more hidden somewhere in Santa Vittoria. The two very different men engage in a battle of wits in the days to come. Von Prum orders every building and home searched, but his men find nothing. Finally, with time running out before the Germans must obey their orders and leave, a frustrated von Prum threatens to shoot mayor Bombolini in front of the assembled townspeople unless the hidden wine's location is given up. No one speaks up! Not being a Nazi fanatic, von Prum silently accepts defeat and leaves the hill town without harming the mayor. After the Germans leave Santa Vittoria, the townspeople, led by Bombolini, celebrate their victory by dancing in the streets.



Magnani and Quinn constantly feuded in private away from view of the cameras and their animosity spilled over into their scenes together. By the time the fight scene between the mayor and his wife was ready to shoot, the stars were warmed up raring to go at it. Magnani went for Quinn, throwing crockery at him and then dumping a bowl of pasta on his head. She also attacked him physically, beating him with a rolling pin, and finally kicking him with her foot. She kicked so hard that she broke a bone in her right foot. She also bit him in the neck. When Quinn protested: “That’s not in the script,” Magnani snarled back at him, “I’m supposed to win this fight, remember!”

Her work rate lessened after that, though she returned for a series of films for Italian TV in 1971 and then her final appearance on film with a cameo as herself in Federico Fellini’s *Roma* (1972). The director catches her after a night on the town and tells her that she is the very spirit of Rome. “Oh, you think so?” she asks lightly, laughing in his face before closing her door. Although not known at the time, ultimately this would become symbolic of closing the door on her career and her life.

When Magnani became ill, Rossellini got back in contact with her (they hadn't spoken in 13 years) and sent a note reading, "If you need me, call." She immediately contacted him, and when he saw her she said, "Spit on my hand, buddy. Sit down. Listen. I'm really sick, seriously sick, but dying pisses me off, so you have to stay here and stop me from dying." He told her, "OK, I'll stay here and I won't let you die." Rossellini stayed with Magnani for 45 days, and when the time came he said, "I accompanied her to the other side without her realizing she was dying."

She died of pancreatic cancer on September 26, 1973 at the age of 65. In addition to Rossellini, her son Luca was also at her bedside when she died.

At Magnani's funeral, 150,000 people came to pay tribute, and they applauded with a standing ovation as her casket was carried out of church. She was buried in Rossellini's family mausoleum.

No one had been more alive than Anna Magnani on the screen. She was renowned for her earthy, passionate, woman-of-the-soil roles, perfect for the Neorealism of post-war Italian cinema. In tribute to her acting ability, Rossellini said of her: "In two hours of Anna, there's everything—summer, winter, tenderness, fury, jealousy, fighting, break-up, goodbye, tears, repentance, pardon, ecstasy, and then, once again, suspicion, anger, blows." They called her "La Lupa," and a "living she-wolf symbol" of the cinema, and that fierceness is her legacy, that hope that still burned in her eyes no matter how many or how deep were her disappointments in her screen roles and in her life.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Callahan, Dan. "La Lupa: A Celebration of Anna Magnani." Balder & Dash website, May 16, 2016; Encyclopedia of World Biography website; IMDb website; MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) website; Film Society of Lincoln Center. "All-Celluloid Anna Magnani Retrospective," Film Link Daily website, April 5, 2016; and Wikipedia.*

