

A Community on Stage: Italiense in Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract: Since the 19th Century, there were three great Italian immigration waves, culminating with the great immigration wave of the 50s and 60s. Italian immigrants were faced with having to overcome great issues of cultural adaptation and integration. This process of adaptation involved many aspects of their lives, and probably the most challenging question: language and communication. Faced with the insurmountable difficulty of not being able to communicate with the outside world, Italian-Canadians resorted, most likely unknowingly, to the creation of a new language which scholars have called “Italiense”. This paper intends to examine Italian-Canadian plays written and staged in the last 20 years in Canada, and to analyze the use of Italiense in these plays and its humoristic essence.

Key Words: Italiense; humor; emigration; cultural assimilation; multiculturalism; cultural adaptation; Sudbury Italian community; Italian-Canadian; Luigi Pirandello

Résumé : Il y eut trois grandes vagues d’immigration italienne depuis le 19^e siècle, atteignant leur apogée dans les années 1950 et 1960. Les immigrants italiens ont connu de grandes difficultés d’adaptation culturelle et d’intégration. Ce processus d’adaptation, qui a touché tous les aspects de la vie, a surtout marqué la langue et la communication. En faisant face à la difficulté de communiquer avec le monde extérieur, les Italo-Canadiens ont, sans le savoir, créé une nouvelle langue que les chercheurs ont qualifié d’*italiense*. Cet article se propose d’examiner les œuvres écrites dans cette langue et mises en scène pendant les vingt dernières années au Canada et d’y analyser l’usage de l’*italiense* et son essence humoristique.

Mots-clés : italiense; humour; émigration; acculturation; multiculturalisme; adaptation culturelle; communauté italienne de Sudbury; Italo-Canadien; Luigi Pirandello

Italian emigration to North America is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Thousands of Italians arrived in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century. This was followed by a diaspora of Italians in the following century, culminating with the great wave of immigration during the fifties and sixties, which also coincided with Italy's post-World War II great economic recovery and with the industrialization of the country, predominantly concentrated in the North. Southern Italy, on the other hand, did not benefit as much from these years of economic prosperity, leaving its inhabitants to emigrate to Northern Italy or to cross the oceans and settle in South America, Australia and North America (mostly in Canada, as immigration laws were a lot more flexible than in the United States). It is estimated that today there are about 500,000 first and second generation Italians living in the Greater Toronto Area alone and about 25,000 living in the Greater Sudbury Area¹.

As with any other diasporic experience, after having arrived in a new country, Italian immigrants had to overcome social marginality and begin a process of cultural adaptation and integration, which was rendered easier in Canada, compared to other countries, by its history of biculturalism and bilingualism, and by Pierre Trudeau's implementation of the Multiculturalism Act, Bill C-93 in 1971², which attempted to dismantle cultural hierarchies. This process of adaptation, which was not necessarily one of assimilation, as assimilation may implicate a loss of one's own ethnicity and cultural identities, involved many aspects of the immigrants' lives, including environments, food and social relations. Probably the most challenging aspect of this cultural adaptation was learning to communicate with the dominant Anglophone

¹ Diana Iuele-Colilli, *Images of the Italian Community of Sudbury*, Welland, Éditions Soleil, 2000.

² Pierre Trudeau, "Federal Multiculturalism Policy", *House of Commons Debates*, Hansard, October 8, 1971, p. 8545-8548.

population. Faced with insurmountable linguistic and communicational barriers, Italian-Canadians resorted, most likely unknowingly, to the creation of a new language which scholars like Marcel Danesi and Gian Renzo Clivio have called “Italiense”. During the eighties, these linguists from the University of Toronto have done extensive research on the linguistic characteristics of Italiense in articles such as “*Su alcune caratteristiche dell’Italiense di Toronto*”³ and “*Italo-Canadian: A Case in point for Loanword Studies*”⁴ and a book by Danesi by the title *Loanwords and Phonological Methodology*⁵. More recently, Giovanni Scarola, has published on the linguistic evolution of Italiense in *L’Italiense in Canada: Considerazioni sul lessico*⁶.

In their research, these scholars examined the linguistic resourcefulness of native Italians: not being able to pronounce all the sounds of the English language, they have taken English nouns and transformed them into Italian sounding words by adding vowels, and sometimes entire syllables at the end of the morphemes, for example the word “garbage” in Italiense became “*garbiccio*” (the standard Italian word is “*secchio della spazzatura*”), “mortgage” became “*morgheggio*” (the standard Italian word is “*mutuo*”), “check” became “*checa*” (in Italian “*assegno*”), and so on. Nouns were not the only elements in the sentence to be altered. English verbs followed the same process, becoming all regular first conjugation Italian verbs. For example: “to cash” became “*chesciare*” (*scambiare*), “to slice” became “*slaissare*” (*affettare*), “to drive” became “*draivare*” (*guidare*), etc.

³ Gianrenzo P. Clivio, “Su alcune caratteristiche dell’Italiense di Toronto”, *Il Veltro*, 29 maggio-agosto 1985, p. 483-492.

⁴ Marcel Danesi, “Italo-Canadian: A Case in point for Loanword Studies”, *Geolinguistics*, 10, 1984, p. 79-90.

⁵ Marcel Danesi, *Loanwords and Phonological Methodology*, Ottawa, Didier, 1985.

⁶ Giovanni Scarola, *L’Italiense in Canada: Considerazioni sul lessico*, Vaughan, G.F Graphics, 2007.

This paper thus intends to examine the use of Italian in Italian-Canadian plays written and staged in the last 20 years in Canada, bringing to light the true humoristic essence of this hybrid language, in which the comical is only the first step towards a much deeper reflection that leads us to the true dramatic nature of this theatre and its characters.

Theatre, more than any other artistic form, assumes the very important role of expressing the trials and tribulations of a community. In this case, the struggles of the Italian community with issues of displacement and abandonment from the homeland are embodied by the characters on stage. According to Aristotle, all art, is a form of imitation. In *The Poetics of Aristotle* one can read: “Since those (*writers*) who imitate choose as objects of imitation men in action and since those in action must be either good or bad characters, they portray their characters as either better, or worse, or such as we are⁷”. Aristotle goes on to specify that it is man’s desire to imitate that “enables him to gain his earliest knowledge through imitation, and universal enjoyment through imitations. [...] As they (*men*) contemplate reproductions of objects, they find themselves gaining knowledge as they try to reason out what each thing is⁸”. Theatre then becomes a means for the spectator to reflect and to create the necessary distance between himself and his actions in order to better understand his true nature.

It is then essential to analyze the response of the audience to the *mise en scène*. As the audience identifies with these characters through a mirroring effect, the humoristic split takes place and the spectator is able to see himself live. According to Luigi Pirandello, one of Italy’s most influential philosophers, thinkers, novelists and playwrights of

⁷ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. by Preston H. Epps, Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 1942, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century (best known in North America for his play *Six Character's in Search of an Author*⁹), this mirroring effect is the necessary condition for true humor, as stated in his essay *On Humor (L'umorismo)*¹⁰, published in 1908.

Pirandello makes a clear distinction between comedy and humor: while the first is a superficial perception of the opposite, the latter is a feeling of the opposite. In his essay, the Sicilian playwright states that comedy inspires laughter in the audience as the spectator perceives that something is the opposite of what it should be. Humor, though, has a deeper effect on the spectator as it involves a much more profound and spontaneous reflection, enabling him to feel a deeper connection with the character on stage and turning his laughter into tears. The true nature of the character's tragedy is thus revealed to the spectator and, through the mirroring effect previously mentioned, the spectator is faced with coming to terms with his own personal tragedy. For both, Pirandello and Aristotle, art is an imitation of life and a moment for the viewer to reflect on the true nature of his or her existence.

We will start with an analysis of Lina Riccobene's play, *Io non mi marito per procura (I will not get married by proxy)*¹¹, which details the hardships of a Sicilian family during the fifties and sixties in Toronto. After having left his little Sicilian village of Delia in search of a better life and in order to feed his family, 'Ntoniu's only concern is that his son Calogero (Charlie) marry a good Italian girl from his home town by proxy, a common practice at the time. Calogero, though,

⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. by Edward Storer, New York, Dutton, 1922.

¹⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor*, trans. by Antonio Illiano and Daniel P. Testa, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1974.

¹¹ Lina Riccobene, *Io non mi marito per procura*, Print, [Manuscript version].

refuses to marry someone he hasn't met, and decides to make the voyage back to the homeland to see Maria, his promised bride, with his own eyes.

'Ntoniu's obsession with finding "*una picciotta di lu paisi*" (a girl from the hometown) for his son to marry instead of "*una gherla di lu Cannatà*" (a girl from Canada), is symptomatic of a desire to maintain ties with the traditions and customs of his homeland. After Charlie's initial refusal to marry a woman from Delia, his father reprimands him by saying "*Ma tu che vuoi mettere una gherla canatisa con una picciotta deliana?*"¹² (There is no comparison between a Canadian girl and an Italian one). If we stop to analyze the linguistic variations of 'Ntoniu's speech, we notice that they are the result of a cultural divide as well: 'Ntoniu uses the term "*picciotta*" (*picciotta deliana*) (which means "young woman" in Sicilian dialect) to refer to an Italian young woman from his hometown, and the term "*gherla*" (*gherla canatisa*) (the Italian word for "girl"), to refer to a Canadian young woman. The choice of the two separate terms used to designate the young girls, is emblematic of what these two women represent for 'Ntoniu. While the "*picciotta*" embodies the Italian culture with its customs and traditions, the "*gherla*" embodies the Canadian culture with everything that is new and frightening to him and his family. 'Ntoniu's desire to marry his son to an Italian woman is commensurate with his desperate attempt to hold on to the traditions and values that make up his own cultural identity.

In this case, the function of Italian is not simply to communicate with the outside world, as 'Ntoniu, like many Italian-Canadians, makes use of it also while talking to his family. His code-switching from the Sicilian dialect to Italian takes place when the speaker needs to convey the meaning of something that is alien to his native Sicilian

¹² *Ibid.*, Act 1, p. 1.

culture. This is the reason why Italian-Canadians have become very selective in the choice of which words they borrow from the English language and which words they keep in their native tongue. For example, most Italian-Canadians have adopted the term “*basamento*” (basement) instead of using the Italian term “*scantinato*”, because in their homes in Italy the “*scantinato*” was a damp space used for storage and not for living. There was no need to create a distinct Italian term for “water”, in Italian “*acqua*”, as the two words have the same exact connotation in the two languages. Other words that were borrowed from the English were terms that Italian immigrants were not very familiar with at the time of emigration. For example the words “*morgheggio*” (mortgage) and “*mutuo*”, have the same connotation in the two languages, but during the 50s only wealthier Italians were able to obtain “*mutui*”, making it a foreign term to most.

While attempting to resist assimilation into the Canadian Anglophone culture, ‘Ntoniu, and the rest of his family, do not realize that the language of the other, that is English, has unconsciously made its way in their everyday vocabulary, not only in the exchanges with the outside world but in the family as well. During a phone call to his uncle Nofrio (‘Ntoniu’s brother) in Italy Charlie says:

CHARLIE: *Vi dico che voglio una gherla-frenda naisa* (I’m telling you that I want a nice girlfriend).

NOFRIO: *Che è che vuoi? (What do you want?)*.

CHARLIE: *Una gherla-frenda, naisa però!* (A girlfriend, a nice one, though).

NOFRIO: *E per questo può mancare? Ora lo dico a tua zia e ci dico che prepara un pacchetto e te lo passo: te ne basta un chilo?* (Oh, we have lots of that here. I’ll tell your aunt now and I’ll tell her to prepare a package and I’ll mail it to you: is one kilogram enough?)¹³.

¹³ *Ibid.* (my translation).

Clearly uncle Nofrio has no idea what Charlie really wants. Charlie's unconscious code-switching from Italian to Italiane is certain cause for laughter among the audience, but a deeper look into this scene will reveal the true dramatic nature of Charlie's condition of alienation from the only two cultures he knows, the Italian one and the Canadian one. As his subsequent visit to Delia, his hometown, demonstrates, Charlie is now seen as "*l'americano*", "the American" by the rest of his *paesani*. He is no longer one of them as he speaks a different language, dresses differently and has adopted different customs. The essence of this character is one of fragmentation and incomplete wholeness which, according to Pirandello, is the essence of all humanity, a theory that he fully develops in the novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (One, none and a hundred thousand)¹⁴.

While the use of Italiane has become for Charlie the only way to be able to function in his adoptive country, it is also what alienates him and all first generation Italian immigrants from the rest of Canadian society and at the same time what distances them from their native Italian culture.

The alienating powers of language are at the center of another play, *Ma che brava gente*¹⁵ (Oh what good people), written in Italiane by Professor Diana Iuele-Colilli and myself. The play is set in Sudbury and follows the lives of two Italian-Canadian families from the moment of their arrival in Canada during the sixties to the present day.

One of the first scenes, entitled *L'arrivo a Sudbury* (The arrival in Sudbury), recounts the Delfino family's arrival at the Capreol train station after a very long and exhausting train ride from Halifax. Unaware

¹⁴ Luigi Pirandello, *One, None and a Hundred Thousand*, trans. by William Weaver, New York, Marsilio Publishers, (1926), 1992.

¹⁵ Diana Iuele-Colilli and Christine Sansalone, *Ma che brava gente*, Welland, Soleil, 2009.

that Capreol is the train's final destination and that they will have to reach Sudbury by bus, the Delfino's refuse to get off the train, infuriating the ticket collector who screams at them: "CONTROLLORE: You need to get off the train now! These immigrants don't understand a thing. Now what do I do? (*pointing with his fingers*) YOU, YOU, YOU, and YOU, OFF THE TRAIN NOW. This is the end of the line. We need to clear the train. Understand?!?!¹⁶", to which Francesca Delfino timidly answers: "*No Capriola. Noi... scendere... a Suddiburi... no ... Capriola*" (Not Capreol, We have to get off in Sudbury)¹⁷.

The misunderstanding between the ticket collector and the Delfinos is a sure source of laughter, accentuated by the fact that Capriola in Italian also means "summersault". When *Ma che brava gente* was first performed in Sudbury at Thorneloe Theatre in February 2008, the reaction of the spectators to this scene was much deeper than simple laughter. (We must mention here that the vast majority of the audience was comprised of Italian-Canadians living in Sudbury). While one could hear an initial chuckle, what was most surprising was the "Woooo" sound that immediately after echoed in the crowd, demonstrating their dislike for the ticket collector and their total support for the Delfino family. The "Wooooo" though did not just indicate disapproval and support. It also carried a much deeper meaning of compassion and sharing in someone else's misfortunes and pain, as they too have experienced the sense of fear and discouragement of arriving in an unknown, unfamiliar country.

As Socrates himself stated: "The origin of happiness and sadness is one and the same: in an antithesis the first can only be known through the opposite, so that tragedy and comedy are made of the same stuff"¹⁸.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Enrico Nencioni, "L'umorismo e gli umoristi", *Nuova Antologia*, 73, 1884, p. 193-211.

According to Pirandello true humor is created when these two opposites, tragedy and comedy, meet¹⁹. While comedy is the simple perception of the opposite, the perception that something is the opposite or different from what it should be or of what we expect it to be, humor instead, through the use of reflection, takes that perception of the opposite and transforms it into a feeling of the opposite. In his essay *On Humor*²⁰ Pirandello gives us the example of the old lady with vibrantly dyed hair, wearing way too much make-up and dressed like a young girl. At first we might have the urge to laugh at her, but then, through reflection, we realize that maybe she is dressed like that because she is trying to hold the love of her much younger husband, and then our initial urge to laugh gives way to a much deeper feeling of pity and empathy for the old woman.

*Vita di tutti i giorni*²¹ (Everyday life) is another play written by Iuele Colilli and myself, and performed for the first time at Thorneloe Theatre in February 2010. The play is set in contemporary Sudbury and narrates the lives of two Italian-Canadian families. Giovanni Campino is a hard working miner at Inco (Vale) who after 25 years of service decides to “scam” the system and pretend he has hurt is back on the job so that he can get workman’s compensation and stay at home to “*relachisi*” (relax). Arriving at the doctor’s office with neck brace and cane in hand, accompanied by his daughter Vita, who must translate for him, Giovanni explains to the nurse: GIOVANNI: *Cara nursa* (dear nurse), *iessi, aima folla veri beddi a uorchi e nau aia veri veri sicchi. Capisci?* (yes, I had a very bad fall at work and now I am very sick)²². After visiting him, Dr. Sanders discovers that Giovanni

¹⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor*, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Diana Iuele-Colilli and Christine Sansalone, *Vita di tutti i giorni*, Welland, Soleil, 2010.

²² *Ibid.*, Act I, Scene 2.

really does have a slipped disk caused by the many years of hard labor, and needs an urgent operation to fix the problem. Giovanni reacts to the doctor's news with terror: "GIOVANNI: *Dottore, issa no possibile! Maia becca no nidda un'operesciona. Aia giusta nidda relachisi a casa!* (I just need to relax at home)²³".

Giovanni's visit to the doctor is filled with linguistic misunderstandings and cultural clashes like when Giovanni tries to bargain down the cost for each form to be filled out by the doctor, offering to pay "*chesci moni*" (cash money) for a better price. It is these elements that contribute to the audience's initial reaction to the play, which is one of laughter. As in the case of the old woman described by Pirandello, though, something else happens in the spectator: after a moment of reflection, the audience experiences the feeling of the opposite and is able to realize that Giovanni represents all of them, the thousands of hard working Italians who have come to Sudbury in the fifties and sixties in search of a better life for themselves and most of all for their families. They know firsthand the hardships of working in the mines, of saving each penny earned and the struggles to adapt to this new country, all along trying to hold on as much as possible to their own customs and traditions. They too have experienced the humiliation of having to use their children as translators in order to go to the doctor's office, to the bank, or to have any contact with the outside world. As Pirandello states, we have humor when "we feel like laughing but the laughter that comes to our lips is not natural and easy; we sense that something troubles and hampers it, and this something is a feeling of pity, of sorrow, and even, indeed, of admiration²⁴".

²³ *Ibid.*, Act I, Scene 2.

²⁴ Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

In order for true humor to arise, there needs to be a sense of identification between the writer and the character at the moment of creation and, subsequently, between the audience and the character. If this does not happen then what is created can only be irony, satire or purely comedy. It is for this reason that Giovanni Campino's attempt to "scam the system" does not transform him into a bad person in the eyes of the spectators, just as Don Abbondio's cowardly actions in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*)²⁵, Italy's first great novel, do not make him a hated character by the reader, who may condemn his actions, but who is able to feel pity for the man that he is and for the frailty of all humankind.

In conclusion, as a language made up of two different languages, Italianese is a fragmented idiom and is emblematic of the dichotomy present in each individual who speaks it, as it has the ability to convey the cultural fragmentation and the humoristic nature of its speakers.

Dominic Cusmano writes in his article "Coming Together Around the Idea of Italianness":

Italians have always loved to come together around the idea of 'Italianness', however one might define this. There is a vitality and wealth to having Italian roots that compels people to identify with it. There is also a solid tradition of organizing and coming together from the early years of the massive Italian immigration to Canada in the late 1800s until today²⁶.

Our hopes are that Italian-Canadian theatre, which is a unifying act in and of itself, will help foster these feelings of Italianness and of belonging while bringing together members of the community and celebrating their traditions, their customs and their language. As new

²⁵ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, trans. by Bruce Penman, New York, Penguin, (1825), 1972.

²⁶ Dominic Cusmano, "Coming Together Around the Idea of Italianness", *Accenti*, 19, Summer 2010, p. 5, <http://www.accenti.ca>, Retrieved May 27, 2013.

generations of Italian-Canadians are assimilating more and more into the Canadian culture, the future of Italian as a *lingua viva*, a spoken language, is very bleak and it is estimated that in the next twenty to thirty years it will cease to be used entirely. The only traces of it will be in the very little Italian literature (poems and mostly theatre) produced in the last forty years or so. These ethnic texts can become a true testament of this great community and all that it has contributed to this Country. As William Boelhower states in *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*, “The limits of one’s language signify the limits of one’s world²⁷”. The Italian community has demonstrated its resilience and perseverance, in breaking down the barriers between the new world and the old one and has found its existential wholeness in a new liminal space that is the Italian-Canadian one.

²⁷ William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*, Venezia, Italy, Edizioni Helvetia, 1984, p. 26.

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