



What Do Pizza, Mario Merola, and the Camorra Have to Do with Ikea?

Laura E. Ruberto (March 15, 2008)

A long-lost relative from Brooklyn finds his way to an Italian kids' movie.

I first spotted the children's animated film *Totò Sapore e la Magica Storia della Pizza* (2003, directed by Maurizio Forestieri) a few years ago when it was playing in the Afragola Ikea, just outside of Naples. I'd planted my generally TV-deprived preschool-aged son with a slice of pizza in front of the maxi-schermo, but stopped in my tracks when I heard an on-screen character yell "o' scugnizzo" (a term I'd come to associate with my own son since living in Campania, and surely not something I was expecting from any U.S.-imported kid's film).

Afragola is a curious example of Neapolitan-style sprawl: big box businesses line up along the A16, built in great part, according to Roberto Saviano, because of "Camorra infiltration" of "the municipal government of Afragola". In fact, Afragola gets pretty heavy coverage in his bestselling [Gomorrah](#) [1], where he notes that Ikea sits on "land controlled" by the Moccia clan, itself noted for its powerful women.

I finally sat down to watch the feature-length Italian cartoon last week back here in California. (Given that there's pretty much no chance it would be screened at my local Ikea, I had to hunt down my own copy on the 'net.) The film tells the story of Totò, an eighteenth century cantastorie who staves off the hunger of Neapolitans by singing songs about food:

Pomodoro, mozzarella, pastasciutta e maccheroni
melanzane, peperoni, il mio show comincia qua.

Involtini, cotolette, costolette di maiale

i crostini di caviale solo a chi li chiederà,

e se siete un pò depressi e se vi sentite soli

la mia zuppa di fagioli tutti allegri vi farà,

e sarete più felici se di me voi vi fidate

come faccio io le alici mai nessuno le farà.

...

Sono io Totò Sapore vendo cibo virtuale,

ma chi sa se può bastare per sfamare la città.

Totò dances around the city with Pulcinella at his side, evoking not only the comedic style of that other Neapolitan Totò but also of another cinematic do-gooder Totò—from Vittorio De Sica's magical (neo)realist film *Miracolo a Milano* (click on most of the pics here to find videolinks).



[2]

[3]

Life would continue much the same for the Neapolitan peasants in the movie, except for two problems: the French are about to invade and there's an evil witch, Vesuvia, who is particularly annoyed at how happy all the folk in the city remain despite their dire poverty. So she cooks up a complicated scheme to break everyone's spirits, especially Totò's. Her ruse involves a long-lost immigrant relative, magical pots and pans, and a smart, young love interest, Confiante, to distract our otherwise level-headed protagonist.

There's a definite Naples-heavy slant to the cast and crew—a whole slew of big names were involved in its production. By far, my favorite is the voice of Vesuvia's servo, Vincenzone, played by Mario Merola. The popularity of the Neapolitan singer and actor, who died in December 2006, arguably sprang largely from Italian immigrant fans throughout the Americas, where he was known as “il re della sceneggiata.”



[4]

Merola's Vincenzone is a jolly fellow whose big dream is to be an actor, but who's stuck working for the volcanic strega. At one point, he pretends to be the lawyer of a distant relative of Totò who has come to Naples all the way from Brooklyn. Here lo zio dall'America returns bearing gifts that deceive and mock Totò, a curious twist to the returning immigrant theme.

The film concludes, more or less, with Totò, Confiance, Pulcinella, and Vicenzone (appropriately now a friend of il popolo), saving Naples from French invasion by feeding them pizza, cooked to perfection within the belly of Mount Vesuvius. Historical inaccuracies aside, it's fun to see a piece of Italian (region-specific) popular culture, especially one geared to children. It's refreshing to see how the film counters imports from Pixar, recalling Naples' history, cuisine, relationship to the working poor and transnational migration. All that at your local Swedish-Camorra outpost!



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