

Remembering Ennio Flaiano: The Woman in the Wardrobe

N. L. (June 27, 2012)



The Origin Theater Company in association with Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò and Kairos Italy Theater presented a one-act play by the celebrated Italian screenwriter, playwright, novelist, journalist and drama critic who is best known for his work with Fellini in honor of the fortieth anniversary of his death.



Novelist, scriptwriter, journalist, dramatist and film critic: Ennio Flaiano was an intellectual whose literary and journalistic endeavors shaped the course of Italian postwar cinema. Flaiano signed no less than 58 screenplays and collaborated on scores of other film projects with directors like Blasetti, Fellini, Antonioni, Wilder, Berlanga and Malle just to name a few. He is best known for his pivotal contributions to Fellini's masterpieces *I Vitelloni*, *8 ½*, and *La Dolce Vita*.

Flaiano died in November of 1972 and the celebrations of the anniversary of his death have already started. The [Origin Theater Company](#) [2] in association with [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [3] and [Kairos Italy Theater](#) [4] presented a one-act play, *The Woman in the Wardrobe* featuring actors Tom O'Keefe (the Poet), Rocco Sisto (the Chief of Police), Carlo Giuliano (a Policeman) and Rosemary Fine (the Maidservant).

Directed by Laura Caparrotti of Kairos Italy Theater and translated by Marisa Trubiano, this absurd and ironic story, written for "simple, deplorable entertainment," tells us about a poet and his hidden secret.

"The Woman in the Wardrobe is brief yet exceptionally powerful," Laura Caparrotti explained. "How many of us had to deal with the absurdity of meaningless and never ending bureaucracy? Historically, Marisa has told me, with this piece Flaiano was mocking Fascist bureaucracy. The way I see it, especially after having read all the writer's notes on the characters (i.e. the notes say of the Inspector that 'he ponders with intensity' or 'he meditates' yet it is obvious that he is not doing that at all and actually the author is mocking his behavior), I find in it, once again, a portrait of the society I live in. Flaiano is a friend, someone who is always there to tell me 'I understand.'"

The casting was, in addition to the writing, what made this play so wonderful to watch. "When I first read it," Caparrotti said, "I immediately saw in my mind Rocco Sisto playing the Inspector and Tom O'Keefe in the role of the Poet. They are wonderful actor who are always willing to play and have fun. Working with them was easy because they immediately understood the spirit of the text."

It has been years now, at least ten, that Kairos Italy Theater has focused its attention on Flaiano. It all started with public readings, in Italian, of his books and plays. Then Laura Caparrotti met Marisa Trubiano, Assistant Professor of Italian at Montclair State University and the Flaiano in the US, and the collaboration began.

In 2002 and 2004 the company brought to the stage *The Papaleo Case* (a satirical one-act play about the absurdly funny resurrection of a self-absorbed writer and the demise of his illusions) performed, by two separate casts, both in English and in Italian. The piece was translated by Marisa herself. More readings were performed through the following years and now it is time for *The Woman in the Wardrobe*.

We were able to reach Marisa Trubiano for a short interview. In 2010 Marisa penned [Ennio Flaiano and His Italy: Postcards from a Changing World](#) [5], a book that "identifies the ways in which Flaiano's distinctive travel diary 'satirically registering the transformative journey from provincial Italian to global citizen' captured and shaped the changing tastes of an entire generation of Italians on the film set, in the newspaper office and on the street. The book highlights Flaiano's uneven yet steadily developing anticolonialist stance, his emerging postmodern autobiography, and his interrogation of notions of regional, national and cultural superiority."

We talked a bit about her work on *The Woman in the Wardrobe*.

When did you first hear about Flaiano and what captured your attention?

I first heard about Flaiano while vacationing in Pescara many years ago. The annual Premi Internazionali Flaiano organized by the Associazione Culturale Ennio Flaiano in collaboration with the Ministero degli Esteri were being publicized, and when I asked about this author, a cousin of mine recommended that I read his novel *A Time to Kill*. The more I read about Flaiano, the more interesting I found his work and I decided to focus my PhD dissertation research and then a book (published in 2010 by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press) on it.



How is Flaiano perceived in the US and in Italy? Does he get the attention he deserves?

My impression continues to be that in Italy, Flaiano's work for the cinema has always been noted and appreciated, mostly due to his long working relationship with Federico Fellini. If in the U.S. he is known at all, it is almost exclusively for that. In Italy, he is often reduced to a sarcastic and witty figure, known for his caustic epigrams that illustrated a great -- and often antagonistic -- intelligence. Instead, a real description of Flaiano should acknowledge how versatile, forward-thinking, insightful, and perfectly relevant he was -- and still is -- as a writer working with a number of genres. In recent years, thanks to the work of the Associazione Flaiano, the Fondo Flaiano of the Biblioteca Cantonale in Lugano, and publications by Sergiacomo, Natalini, Fracassa, and others (and here, I'd like to thank Laura Caparrotti and Kairos for bringing Flaiano in very tangible ways to an English-speaking theater audience), Flaiano is gaining more of the attention his whole oeuvre deserves.

Why did you choose the Woman in the Wardrobe to celebrate his anniversary?

I am currently working on the translation of all of Flaiano's comedies. Years ago, again thanks to Laura and Kairos, *The Papaleo Case* was performed in New York and Montclair. It was Laura who chose *The Woman in the Wardrobe* to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Flaiano's death. I think this farse is particularly relevant these days, as our modern lives become more and more embroiled in the details of modern life, and we are losing sight of the bigger picture of the real issues -- even real crimes, for example -- being perpetrated.

What are the challenges of translating his work?

The challenge in translating Flaiano is precisely translating the humor -- one of the hardest things to do as a translator and, quite frankly, something that I am still learning to do! -- and specific cultural referents for a non-Italian audience. It was quite an honor to hear such accomplished actors read my translation in English of *La donna nell'armadio*. Hearing the comedy in English come alive, understanding even better the rhythm of the dialogue, among other things, was an incredible experience. I am even more convinced that this project is truly worth pursuing and bringing to a larger audience.

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