

Renzo Arbore: "The Mythical Totò Changed Our lives For the Better"

Judith Harris (April 12, 2017)



Extraordinary commemorations for Totò, the actor who died 50 years ago, include the opening of a museum in his honor. For Renzo Arbore, "Totò was my myth, an artist who changed our lives for the better."

The Italian movie star most in the news these days is none other than the actor Totò, who died 50 years ago on April 15. The commemorations are extraordinary. Italy is dedicating the month of May, the annual Monuments Month, to Totò. Also on the grand scale, the city of Naples is creating a museum in his honor in the historic Palazzo dello Spagnuolo. On April 5, following a proposal by his admirer Renzo Arbore, the University Federico II of Naples granted Totò a posthumous degree, followed by a special broadcast April 16 on Italian state TV Rai2. For Arbore, "Totò was my myth, an



artist who changed our lives for the better." Newsmagazines are full of tributes, and even our little town of Trevignano Romano, pop. 6,000, offered a free, month-long series of showings of Totò's less well-known films.

Totò was born February 15, 1898, in the notorious dirt-poor, crowded and lively Neapolitan slum Rione Sanità. He was the illegitimate son of a nobleman, Giuseppe De Curtis, and a beautiful street-poor beauty just 16 years old, Anna Clemente. Supposedly due to Giuseppe's father's wrath at their social gap, for decades Giuseppe refused to recognize his son. From time to time Totò's father would make handsome presents to her, but otherwise gave her and her son little financial help. To make ends meet, his mother, Anna, worked from home as a dressmaker.

Only when that irascible grandfather died in 1921 did the couple finally marry. (See [>>>](#) [2].) In 1928, when Totò was 30 years of age, his father, Giuseppe, finally recognized him formally, but further judiciary trials were in store, and only in 1945 was the complicated story straightened out. At that point Totò acquired countless fancy names, plus a title:

Antonio Griffo Focas Flavio Angelo, Ducas Comneno Porfirogenito Gagliardi De Curtis di Bisanzio, Altezza Imperiale, Conte Palatino, Cavaliere del Sacro Romano Impero, esarca di Ravenna, duca di Macedonia e Illiria, principe di Costantinopoli, di Sicilia, di Tessaglia, di Ponto, di Moldavia, di Dardania, del Peloponneso, conte di Cipro e di Epiro, conte e duca di Drivasto e di Duraz.

Still, in the end Totò was most often known locally and simply (or not so simply) as Prince Antonio De Curtis. At 15, taking the stage name Clermont, the boy had made his acting debut in a local theater. He continued to appear on stage in Naples in comedies that reflected the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. This is improvised comedy developed in the 16th century, in which a stock characters appear and reappear: "devious servants, old men, lovers and captains." In that form of theater, the exaggeration of character traits is fundamental. Popular in France as well as Italy, the Neapolitans added to it Pulcinello, the character who became, in England, Punch, as in the Punch and Judy shows. Part of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" was inspired by the commedia, as are the trio of characters painted by Picasso in "The Three Musicians" (1921). See at this link [>>>](#) [3].

By 1932 Totò was successful enough to have his own company in Naples and five years later made his film debut in "Fermo con le mani!" (Keep your hands still!). With Italy's entry into World War II, he volunteered as a soldier, but was so terrified that, in an improvised performance, he feigned a heart attack and was released from the military, transferring to work on the railroads. At war's end he returned to the theater, becoming acquainted with the great actors Eduardo De Filippo and his brother Peppino.

He had little cinema success, however, until the Fifties, when he was already starring in such films as "Guardie e ladri" (Cops and Robbers). Even then he maintained something of the Commedia dell'Arte, by clinging to a certain style of mechanical, marionette-like action, always wearing the same outfit: tight trousers, derby hat, brightly colored sox. His father had died in 1944 and, with her son's success, his mother converted her dressmaking business into a theatrical agency representing her son. Totò himself became a notorious womanizer, keeping a cot in his dressing room, "just in case" (again, according to his web page).



Given this theatrical heritage, it would be easy to put Totò down to simplistic comedy. But he was not merely a comedian, for he managed to incorporate into the whacky exaggerations of the Commedia dell'Arte a moving and often subtle degree of humanity -- a sense of poignancy and even tragedy.

Totò died in Rome of a heart attack. As one of his mourners, a fellow actor, recorded, "He was the last of the great actors of the Commedia dell'Arte." He is survived by his daughter, Lilibian De Curtis. Six minutes of his funeral, as reported on Telegiornale new film, along with segments from his films, can be seen at this [link](#) [4].

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