

CIAO AMORE, CIAO (EXCERPTS)

DRUCKFAHNEN!!

erscheint 2007 in: DIMENSION2, vol.8, issue 2/3, guest edited by Romey Sabalius & Michael Wutz

FRANCO SUPINO

translated by Donal McLaughlin

IOLANDA IN SHUBRA (EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 8)

Bruno was crouching in front of the radio, trying to improve the reception; Iolanda was fidgeting around in her armchair, nervous as before a performance. The song “Grazie dei fiori” was announced. It had just won the newly established Sanremo Song Festival, the presenter’s voice was heard to say.

Iolanda looked at her brother: “I’m going to win that one day too.” She said it in a very matter-of-fact way, the way you say “There will be good weather tomorrow” or “The pyramids are one of the wonders of the world.”

“Don’t you want to be an actress?”

“Yes, I do—but the days of the silent movies have gone. Actresses have voices now, they speak and sing.”

“Then you’ll have to go to Italy.”

“Oh yes, I shall sing and appear in Italy, and all the Italians here in Shubra will hear me on the radio.”

Iolanda picked up on the melody and some of the words. She turned off the radio and together with her younger brother—the only person who saw no reason not to believe her—imagined how Pizzanilla (or what was her name again?) had appeared on the stage of the Casino in Sanremo. Iolanda had no idea how she should envisage Sanremo, the Casino, or Pizzanilla. Not that that was even necessary. She imagined herself instead on stage at the Opera House in Cairo: before her, as if through a filter, the audience, applauding, the volume down low. She imagined herself surrounded by photographers, smiling into their cameras. Then she, the winner, was asked to perform the winning song again. Giving it her all, Iolanda adopted a few likely poses for her brother—all this strictly supervised by Bruno himself. “When you become an actress, I’ll be your director,” he said.

IOLANDA IN PARIS (EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 10)

It is Christmas Day when the girl, now a young woman, lands in Paris. It is snowing, and the Christmas lights are glittering. She has never seen snow before, never seen so many lights before. You don’t see donkeys here; flocks of sheep aren’t herded through the streets. What is it Great-Uncle Duse says about the people from Serrastretta when they arrived in Cairo? *Saltare cent’anni in un giorno solo*. That’s what the young woman might think at this moment too: I’ve jumped a hundred years in a single day.

The promises made to her are like snowflakes: they melt when you try to touch them. The French director makes no effort at all to care for her. The address he left for her, Rue des Etoiles, doesn't even exist. Her agent gets her a place in a boarding house and leaves her waiting there for weeks. As is soon apparent, he has very few connections and no influence at all in the business. He can't come up with even the most pitiful supporting role for her. Paris is full of beautiful, young, talented girls. The young woman has a 38-inch bust and a 21-inch waist to flaunt; she has won two Egyptian beauty contests and acted in Egyptian films—but in Paris there are dozens of women with similar vital statistics and far more significant successes to point to. Although, over a period of months, the young woman sets her high heels clicking in the halls of many a film studio, she doesn't get a single booking. To her mother she writes cheerful letters, full of confidence about the professional opportunities that a city like Paris offers. The agent blames her coarse manner for the continuing dry spell. He gives the required notice at the boarding house and puts her instead in a cheap attic room. The young woman writes subsequently to her mother that she's now living very close to the most famous street in the world, the Champs Elysées.

The agent takes every opportunity to complain that she's merely costing him money and hassle. He'd like to send the young woman back to Cairo.

The director isn't comfortable with that—he, after all, established the initial contact. He remembers that the young woman danced and sang in his film. It was clear from that she had talent. He recommends paying for singing lessons for the young woman. "She's good, with her you'll make lots of money."

The agent gives her this last chance. Six more months, and then that is finally that. The young woman agrees. She has to gain time. And anyway, the days are long here; nothing to do but try to get her high-heels noticed. She'll sing, yes! Dance—yes, any kind you like! (Except tap-dancing!)

IN SANREMO (EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 39)

The bar was empty. The barman looked up, astonished, when I sat myself down on a stool, even more so when I ordered a pear brandy. There wasn't any. He rhymed off the different drinks he did have. I shook my head and ordered two coffees instead—first one, then the other. I turned and looked at the former stage, tried to forget that I'd gambled and lost.

Every single recording from the 1967 Sanremo Festival had disappeared from the archives of the Italian broadcasting company. Reports, though, agreed that Iolanda had looked like a country girl in her dowdy, rather ordinary dress. I imagined her evoking pity, a bit like Paulette Goddard in Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Yes, I thought, that was the perfect way to perform "Ciao amore, ciao": to come across as a human being, entirely powerless, at the mercy of an industrialized world.

I fished my CD player out of my plastic bag, put on the headphones, and turned up the volume.

The music drowned out the noise from the video arcade. It was a live recording—from the 1970s—released only after Iolanda's death. This was exactly how the song must have sounded, here in this room. I imagined being a member of the jury—in Sanremo, in '67.

Iolanda's voice is strong and passionate. The more she sings, the more convincing the song is. She manages to get the balance right between inner emotion and expression. She is able to increase the intensity, from the verse to the refrain, and even from the first refrain to the second.

No, I thought, eventually, that's not what it is. She was more than just performing, interpreting, the song; she knew exactly what she was singing about. She'd grown up as an Italian in Egypt, after all; was viewed in France, where she lived, as exotic; had been invited to Sanremo as a foreigner. There couldn't have been a better partner for Luigi. For the first time ever, a song

with a political message had been broadcast from Sanremo into homes all over Italy. For the first time ever, a song focused on the exploited, on the losers fighting to stay afloat in the economic centers of the north, only to meet with rejection and hate. A song that, broadcast live from Sanremo, ought to have changed the world.

When I spotted my disappointment in the mirror behind the bar, I grimaced.

TOO BAD ABOUT MY MONEY (EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 44)

Father was in the shed. It was so dark in there, he'd put the light on. He was in the process of varnishing something. No, woodstain was what it was, as I was soon to smell. I saw the crate in which he normally kept straw for the rabbit. "What are you doing here?" he asked, looking up from his work, briefly.

"I'm here to ask you something, *professore*," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder to greet him.

"That's right—make fun of me. I'd like to know who'll be pulling your leg when you're old."

I asked him what he was doing. He was building a new rabbit hutch. But surely I hadn't come to find that out.

I asked him if he could remember the year 1967, January 1967. He thought about it and then said yes, very well, he'd been a builder with Lustiger at the time. He hadn't forgotten at all: it had been the first year that he wasn't just a seasonal worker any more and had been allowed to remain in Switzerland for the whole year. In winter, they'd built two-bedroom houses in Langenmatt, and it had been so cold he thought his fingers would drop off.

Mother was right, Father had a better memory both for things in his own life and events in the country. I was beginning to feel more confident. "And the Sanremo Festival that year, do you remember that?"

He shrugged his shoulders. No doubt they'd listened to it.

Almost euphoric already, I told him about Luigi Mai and "Ciao amore, ciao."

But Father shook his head, he could remember neither the song nor the man behind it.

I fell silent, disappointed.

Father carried on staining. I saw how the brush left faint strokes on the wood.

"Father," I asked, as if things were about to get serious, "I'd like to understand something and need you to help me: why can neither you nor my mother remember, though you heard the Festival at the time? I mean, considering that someone on the radio was singing about your own situation. That someone was trying to capture what you've to put up with, here, abroad, in order to raise awareness back in Italy. All that, and yet not even you, the people affected, notice. No wonder he failed, he was bound to." I'd started to stutter a bit and to sound accusing.

Father remained silent. He turned the structure round, stood it on one edge, and dipped his brush into the woodstain.

"What was the song called again?" he asked, as if he needed time to think.

I repeated the title.

He paused for a moment, raised his head, and then shook it again.

I sighed.

After a while, as if to explain himself, he said: "A singer singing at Sanremo about emigrants

- I doubt anybody expected that, back then. For the same reason, it doesn't surprise me either that nobody took a blind bit of notice. I've never heard tell of it, at least, and to be honest, I find it difficult to believe that someone ever did that. —Did the song sell at all?"

"You bet it did! Gigi Mai committed suicide that same evening, you see."

I'd yet to mention this side of things, I suddenly noticed, for Father immediately said, "Oh, that's the song you're on about! Of course it made headlines. That, I can remember. So that means this Mai guy's the one who appeared with Iolanda."

I nodded.

"Iolanda's Italian, she's from Calabria, did you know that?" Father asked, sounding like a teacher underlining something important.

"Of course," I said, "it's her I'm interested in, isn't it."

About Iolanda Father knew a great deal, of course. She was, in his eyes, an admirable artist. He was impressed by the fact that while she hardly ever returned to Italy following those events, she'd continued to record in Italian, for those Italians scattered all over the world.

I told him I'd been in her birthplace in Egypt and in her home village in Calabria.

Father listened, shaking his head time and time again. "I've something far better for you," he said finally. The crate was finished; Father rested it on some mesh to dry. "You're from Montalto, near Naples, after all—so why take so much interest in a woman from Calabria?"

"Why not?" I said.

"Because I've got something else for you. Something that should interest you far more."

I felt a little irritated, put out, even. More than that, though, I was disappointed: he always had to know better. He cleaned his hands carefully with a cloth soaked in alcohol. "Do you like the new rabbit hutch?" he asked.

I took time to look at it, checking out every detail, every corner. The rabbits were outside in the small fenced-in area behind the shed. Their ears stood up, their eyes were full of trust. It's not easy for him to kill them, but he does, and it doesn't bother me to eat the meat because my father is good to them.

Finally, it was time, and he led me into the house, into the cellar, where he has a kind of office. It's always cool down there. There is a table in it, a divan, and an old, not very attractive sideboard. First, he had to look for his glasses in the drawer. He lifted out the hefty glasses and put them on. They're monstrous. His company had given them to him—before he was pensioned off early as an unqualified foreigner, that is—to protect his eyes from sparks, and now he was using them as reading glasses.

He took a pile of newspapers from a drawer and flicked through a few. "You'll be amazed," he said.

They were editions of *Giornale di Montalto*, the paper from his home village. It comes out four times a year on glossy paper, a folded sheet, four pages of text. It had a circulation, I read, of 200 copies, forty of which went to subscribers in Northern Italy and elsewhere, all round the world. The paper was sent to them. The subscribers were listed by name beneath the masthead. There were addresses in America, Canada, Argentina, and Germany. My parents weren't the only subscribers in Switzerland; another family in Delémont was listed. The paper contained mainly official news. Projects from the community were introduced in a terrible bureaucratic style.

The thing of greatest interest for my parents were the obituaries. The dead are the people you're most likely to know if you've been away from the village for so many years.

Father was leafing carefully through the various editions. He allowed me to lift only those he'd already checked. Finally, he found what he was looking for. "Here," he said, "that's what you should research."

I took the paper, in the center of which was a photograph with a substantial caption beneath

it. I recognized immediately where the picture had been taken, outside the Pagliarone, a pub near the house my parents had built for themselves in Montalto. Six men were to be seen in the picture, their arms round each other's shoulders. Two I recognized: Tonino, the owner, who should really have married my Aunt Enza, and to his left, Anthony Quinn.

"What's he doing in Montalto?" I asked, amazed, as I went on to read: This photograph is published to mark the death of Anthony Quinn. It was taken at the beginning of the 80s when Quinn visited Montalto, the home village of his ancestors who'd lived in the Vitriera region.

"That's amazed you, hasn't it?" Father said.

I was indeed a little taken aback. "That's strange," I said, "I mean ... interesting ... Did you know that?"

"I knew he was Italian, but that he was from Montalto ..."

I checked the photograph closely, wondering whether it was a montage, or whether some other kind of trick had been played. But without a doubt it was the Pagliarone, with Tonino and Anthony Quinn outside it.

"And do you think you'll follow up on this? Vitriera is right above Traccio, after all, where I was born. Quinn is surely his stage name. I'd love to know what the family was really called and when his ancestors emigrated and whether he was in regular touch with Montalto."

Now it was my turn to shake my head violently. "No, that's completely out of the question. I don't have time for that. Why do you only ever tell me these things when it's too late?"

"Aren't I always the last person you come to, to ask?"

I looked at my father. In these protective glasses he looked hilarious. He removed them, smiling. He paused for a moment, then crossed himself. I smiled too and managed to say "Poveri soldì miei" before he did. *Too bad about my money.*