

It's All About Franca

Maggie Martino (January 22, 2010)



She might not be a young girl anymore, but she is still great, if not the greatest. She is Franca Valeri. The acting company "Kairos Italy Theater" will celebrate her in New York this upcoming February by performing "Tosca e le altre due" (Tosca and the two downstairs) at "the cell".



Once upon a time there was in Italy a young girl who made people laugh. She portrayed women of all classes, regions, and walks of life. She was successful in radio, theater, and cinema. Once upon a time... that girl still exists and still makes people laugh, smile and... use their brain.

She might not be a young girl anymore, but she is still great, if not the greatest. She is Franca Valeri.

For the few who don't recall her, Franca Valeri is Alberto Sordi's wife in Dino Risi's "Il Vedovo" (The Widower) or the snob lady in "Totò a Colori" (Full-Color Totò), Sophia Loren's cousin in "Il Segno di Venere" (The sign of Venus). Most of all, Franca Valeri is an icon, because from the 50s on she has represented the most satirical aspects of Italian society.

Franca Valeri was born in Milan on July 31, 1920 as Alma Franca Maria Norsa. Her father was Jewish while her mother was Catholic. This upper middle-class family lived a very comfortable life in the city and gave absolute priority to good education and appropriate social behaviors.

At that time, however, Italy was about to enter a very dark period. In 1922 the National Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini took power, and in 1938 – after more than a decade of dictatorship – the Racial Laws gave start to Jewish persecution in the country. The family was forced to leave its beautiful apartment in Via Mozart, and to hide somewhere else.

Franca's father and brother escaped to Switzerland, while Franca stayed in Milan with her mother, hidden in the back room of an apartment of a crumbling building in Via Santa Marta. They remained there for a year and a half, never having a chance to get out, not even for a few hours. After the end of the War, the family was reunited and Franca decided to become an actress. She already played satirical shows for her mother's friends, and she became famous for her talent among her acquaintances as well.

Almost needless to say, her family, especially her father, strongly disapproved her choice: a good family girl doesn't become an actress! That's when Franca moved to Rome and took a new name: she decided she would start her career alone, without the backing of her family. She didn't want to compromise her parents' reputation.

She chose "Valeri" as her new surname to pay tribute to the French poet Paul Valéry.

She was rejected by the Accademia di Arte Drammatica, the National Italian drama school. (the same school that afterwards awarded her with an honorary diploma, for being one of the most talented Italian actresses of the time). But she didn't give up on her dream and started playing her famous "La Signorina Snob" (Mrs. Snob) in several radio programs. The character represented the society she used to be part of when she lived with her family, and was inspired by some of her mother's friends.

Her date at that time was the young Italian actor Vittorio Caprioli, who worked with the famous cabaret group "I Gobbi". Shortly, she joined the acting company herself, becoming its only female member. A star was born.

Her repertory kept growing as she invented new female roles that mirrored the different aspects of the society she lived in. A "collection" that is also adaptable to modern society. Take the case of "the wife": she talks about her happy marriage (which is of course everything but happy) with a whining voice and a self-contained attitude. She is the portrait of whoever wants to keep up appearances or is unable to change a miserable status. Consider also the "rich lady" character who – when visiting a hospital for poor people – suggests to an illiterate woman to read Thomas Mann in original language "because it's so much better". And what about the beautiful and unprepared pin-up who plays in spite of her ignorance of theater and culture in general?

What Franca Valeri created in these latest decades is "an irresistible vademecum by which she has mocked the vices and snobberies of bourgeois life and de facto become a humorist for intellectuals that is liked by the masses."



She is creative, but she also knows how to put on stage tics dressed up as ambitions, sketch roles and combinations that make of appearance a way of life. Her gallery of women is in fact a compendium of style and class: the actress, the Roman seamstress, the neighborhood star, the high-class philanthropist, the tenor's wife, the intellectual from Bologna, the Sanremo music festival presenter, the noble lady from Veneto and, of course, the manicure girl Cesira, Mrs. Cecioni and Miss Snob don't leave any doubts about her rare vocation and give us an occasion for reflection and laughs and giggles.

Throughout her career she played in more than 50 movies, several TV series, endless TV programs, and in even more stage productions. She has written movies and plays, directed Operas, established a prestigious Opera contest, and a foundation for abandoned animals. She partnered with the major stars and directors of Italian cinema.

Turning 90 next July, Franca is more than ever looked at as the main actress and playwright of Italian theater. She is a gay icon in Italy, and an idol for every person who loves great theater and great writing.

Unfortunately Franca Valeri is not recognized as much as she should be. Maybe because she is a woman who lived in a man world; or because she sharply portrayed the everyday life of "normal people", and most of us feel uncomfortable about it; or maybe it is that she never behaved as a Diva... We can't find a valuable reason for this, but we do know that we'd like to see both Italian and International Film and Theatre Festivals and Theatre Festivals dedicated to her and to the great revolution she has been...and is. Yes, she still is: despite of her age, she still tours the major theatres of Italy and in October 2010 she will actually present a new play in Rome.

Franca Valeri will be celebrated in New York this upcoming February by the acting company "Kairos Italy Theater" that will perform her "Tosca e le altre due" (Tosca and the two downstairs) at "the cell".

Tosca e le Altre Due

(Tosca and the Two Downstairs)

by Franca Valeri

Translated by Natasha Lardera

With: Marta Mondelli and Laura Caparrotti

And Rocco Sisto (Voice Over)

Directed by Laura Caparrotti

Set Designer: Lucretia Moroni

Music: Giacomo Puccini

In Italian with English Supertitles

February 3 to 21, 2010

The Cell, 338 W 23rd Street, Manhattan

Presented by Kairos Italy Theater and The Cell

First week: Wed - Sat at 8:00 pm, Sat and Sun at 3:00 PM



Second week: Fri - Sat at 8:00 PM, Sat and Sun at 3:00 PM

Third week: Wed - Sat at 8:00 PM, Sat and Sun at 3:00 PM

Tickets \$ 20.00 - \$ 15.00 Students, Seniors and IIC Members showing ID card at box office

Box office: www.brownpapertickets.com [2], 800-838-3006

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