Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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‘The marvellous invention of colour photography is destined to bring about a revolution in the stage arts. Imagine, for instance, a phonograph in conjunction with a colour–photograph camera, able to reproduce not just movements, but also shades, hues, shadows, and just think of the effect ...’

Cristoforo Antolli threw the newspaper down spitefully. Yet, it was a copy of the *Avvisatore di provincia* (*The Country Courier*), a quality weekly paper—focused on rural affairs, to be sure, but moderate in outlook—which was printed in Radicofani and of which he, Cristoforo Antolli, was an erstwhile contributor and shareholder. Everyone remembered the masterful essays on culture in the column ‘The Padua Sweet Pea’, which in recent years had graced the pages of the *Avvisatore* under Antolli’s illustrious name. And that had certain features on the grafting of plum trees—which appeared in the very same paper, and which caused quite the stir in the whole province—had they not been published under a very transparent pseudonym of the mayor of Roccasperta?1

Thus, the suspicion that Cristoforo Antolli wasn’t favourably inclined towards the newspaper would be groundless. And the act of spite and anger that had so brusquely interrupted his perusal of the scientific article in the *The Country Courier* would have seemed strange, indeed, illogical even, had the very words uttered by the mayor shortly afterwards not served both as commentary and explanation.

‘These newspapers!... The monstrosity is certainly spreading fast... But I don’t buy it! No more singers, no more orchestra, no more choirs, only a filmmaker and a photographer on the stage... Good for them! They’re clever, for sure, but I’m not buying it.’

His words burned with an inimitable tone of fierce irony, impossible to capture in words.

Cristoforo Antolli refused to keep reading the paper. He was disgusted! So he began to leaf through the voluminous correspondence that the postman had just let fall into the letterbox: he ripped open many envelopes, glanced through the many written sheets, unfolded, and put to one side several newsletters. All of a sudden, in the middle of this onerous task, he made an exclamation of pleasant surprise.

‘Oh! The tenor Sebastiani will be at the Municipal Theatre! And not a cent in membership fees!’
The mayor cleaned his glasses and read the letter again. It was definitely an impresario's letter, with the classic letterhead at the top of the paper and the unmistakable stamp underneath the signature.

‘Catullo Merangoli, impresario!’ the mayor repeated several times, almost not believing his eyes. A first-rate company, the latest operas on the books, and Sebastiani as the tenor! It was absurd.

For, after triumphs in Milan, in St. Petersburg and in Madrid, there was no sacrifice that an impresario wouldn’t make to ensure the participation of the famous tenor.

At a party in his penthouse on Broadway in New York, the billionaire Vanderbilt had paid 5000 lire for two hours of Sebastiani’s singing; and an American journalist had once calculated that even an American oil baron wouldn’t have been able to secure the famous tenor’s services for anything less than a dollar per musical note... More expensive than Patti, and twice the price paid at a similar event to Madame Nordica!5

And now, Sebastiani was coming to sing Gli ugonotti (The Huguenots) at the Municipal Theatre in Roccasperta!5

It was absurd, but true.

For the very same day, Catullo Merangoli, the impresario, came straight from Milan, and requested the honour of a meeting with the mayor. He was a nervous little man, this impresario: very small of stature, with his face shaved very precisely; he hid the phenomenal thinness of his body in an enormous green cloak that reached down to his ankles; and his gold-rimmed glasses failed to mask the sly looks coming from his twitching, vivid, extremely mobile eyes. He examined the theatre meticulously, made a rapid calculation of the number of seats, and was evidently satisfied.

‘There’s only one clause in the contract,’ he said just before leaving.

‘Which is?’

‘Extreme secrecy! No one must go inside the theatre before the start of the performance.’

‘Not even the members of the Council?’

‘Not even the mayor!’

Cristoforo Antolli, offended in his capacity as the first citizen of Roccasperta, wanted to argue the point, but the resolute tone of Catullo Merangoli’s reply cut short the question before he had even asked it.

‘Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

And so, the impresario left, and the Mayor went to attend a meeting of the Municipal Council.
That same evening, several mysterious boxes arrived in Roccasperta, accompanied by employees of Merangoli Enterprises. The boxes and their retinue were let into the theatre (a small, family theatre, left to the district by the late Prince in his will), and they were shrouded in the most total mystery for the three days that followed. The men never left the theatre, and the Mayor himself passed them food through the window in the ticket office; those who came to poke around were turned away politely, but firmly.

Three times a day, the entire Council could be found gathered under the station roof, awaiting the train’s arrival. The train would puff to a halt, make its scheduled five-minute stop, then leave again, disappearing on the curving tracks between the sun-soaked hills, green with vineyards, and grey with olive groves. But not a single chorister, not a single costume, not a single musician, was headed for the theatre in Roccasperta.

On the day in question, a billboard of gigantic proportions, erected during the night, announced to all and sundry that at 8.30 that evening at the Municipal Theatre, Merangoli Enterprises would be mounting the first performance of *The Huguenots* featuring the famous tenor Sebastiani!

The well to do of Roccasperta consulted one another—indignantly! It was impossible, ridiculous, a joke in the poorest taste! There wasn’t even the shadow of a singer in town; and what about the sets and the costumes, and the choirs, and the orchestra? Not even a trace. The only part of the enterprise that had been seen was those four mysterious people, still shut inside the theatre together with their suspicious-looking crates. Someone proposed to invade the theatre, and the secretary of the Council ran to the Mayor’s residence, to request Cristoforo Antolli’s authorization to adopt this extreme, but very necessary measure.

But Cristoforo Antolli had vanished. The butler was interrogated in short order; he claimed to have seen him in agitated conversation with a game warden from Radicofani. Then the mayor, his face flushed, had leapt on his mule and galloped out of town. And it was true! An hour or so later we could have found the mayor of Roccasperta in Radicofani, then in Castel Rotondo, then in Sforzesca, redder than a tomato, flinging sweat from his forehead with tight fists, frowning intensely, and his face conveying an air of dumbfounded astonishment.

For he had been informed that the very same Merangoli Enterprises billboard, advertising the very same performance of *The Huguenots* featuring the tenor Sebastiani—at the same time, no less!—had appeared in Sforzesca, in Castel Rotondo, in Radicofani, in a meeting hall, in an amateur theatre group, in a private home separated by several miles of valleys, hills, and vineyards, and he had wanted to confirm this himself.
‘God help me! I’m going mad!’ the mayor exclaimed in dismay, while the mule, trotting exhaustedly, brought him back to Roccasperta.

Once back in town, Cristoforo Antolli saw that the theatre's interior was brightly lit.

‘The performance!’ exclaimed the mayor, beside himself with dismay.

‘It started half an hour ago,’ said a gamekeeper.

Cristoforo Antolli leapt off his mule and, drenched in sweat and dust though he was, launched himself into the theatre.

The sight before him froze him in place, like a statue.

The large room was immersed in shadow, but crowded with spectators. On the stage, illuminated by an intense glow, almost dazzling, the action of the first act was taking place in a breathtaking setting. The orchestra was not visible; but it was certainly playing, hidden somewhere, for at that very moment it was accompanying the tenor in the first notes of his *romanza*.

‘Sebastiani,’ said the mayor in a strangled tone.

It was really him, the tenor, he could recognize his voice; an immense, torrential voice with the most delicious timbre.

Just at that moment, a feverish and growing disruption was propagating through the theatre:

‘Fire!’

There was a dreadful uproar. The ladies in the boxes fainted; the spectators on the balcony and in the stalls charged towards the doors, while the stage was lit up with a hot light, like the flames of an oven.

But the performance wasn’t interrupted and in the midst of the smoke and the flames, Sebastiani continued to sing, smiling, with his warm, glorious tone.

The following day Cristoforo Antolli was reading the *The Country Courier*.

‘Confirming what our reporter wrote in our last issue, the performance of *The Huguenots* was reproduced last night in Liquor Society Rooms of Radicofani by the marvellous Merangoli Colour-Photograph Cinema. Special machines invented by Catullo Merangoli gave the sound of the singing an extraordinary intensity; as for the images, these gave such an illusion of life that the audience, electrified, wanted the tenor Sebastiani on stage at all costs—without stopping to think that while his image elicited applause in Radicofani, the famous Sebastiani in flesh and bones was singing *Norma* at Covent Garden in London.’

‘At the last minute we heard the news of a fire in the theatre of nearby Roccasperta. The damage is not serious and the building was insured: the Cinema is safe. As for this incredible machine, it continued to function during the fire; as long as the large empty space between the proscenium
arch remained untouched by the flames, one could see the tenor Sebastiani calmly miming along to his exquisite singing.’

‘Cinematografo a colori’, Messaggero della gioventù, 2/5 (4 February 1900), pp. 77–78. Translated by Marco Ladd.

Notes

1. [Translator’s note. As opposed to Radicofani, which is a small town in the mountains south of Tuscany, Roccasperta is an immaginary town.]

2. [Editors’ note. Adelina Patti (1843–1919) was acclaimed Italian soprano and Lillian Nordica (1857–1914) was a renowned American dramatic soprano.]

3. [Editors’ note. The author is referring to the 1836 French opera, Les Huguenots, by Giacomo Meyerbeer.]