

English Translation of Review of
Via Toledo by Night by Raffaele Viviani
by Enrico Fiore, *IL MATTINO* (Napoli) 26/09/2005

RAFFAELE VIVIANI

"Bammenella" debuts in New York

On stage for the first time, the one act *Via Toledo by Night*

The author also of modern Italian theatre

"I'm very well known in this part of town / dancing all night to the hurdy-gurdy tunes / in the back streets of Napoli. / And if patrols of police should come by / I turn on my heels and away I fly! / If they should catch me and bring me in / it's just a formality." Do you recognize the lyrics? They are, in Martha King's translation, from "*So' Bammenella* (translated as "Bambinella", n.d.r.) '*e copp' 'e Quartiere*". And they're what 180 spectators (that's the size of the house) heard in Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.

On the cover of the program for the evening—prepared by Antonia Lezza, professor at the University of Salerno and editor with Pasquale Scialò of Viviani's Teatro, published by Guida—was the title *Via Toledo by Night*. Yes, the debut of Don Raffaele in the United States. And it's not by accident that it was once performed with the very famous one act, *La musica dei ciechi* (Music of the Blind) as part of Patroni Griffi's legendary presentation, *Napoli: notte e giorno* (Naples: Night and Day). Just as it's not by accident that the event had the stamp, in her double role as producer and director, of the same Jane House who—after having included *Via Toledo by Night* among the plays covered in the volume *20th Century Italian Drama: The First 50 Years, an Anthology*, published by Columbia University Press and edited by her together with Antonio Attisani—also wrote a biography of Viviani for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Modern Italian Theatre*.

To be precise, this was a staged reading of the text, with Elaine Smith as narrator, and in the principal roles, the actor-singers Nick Raio (Leopoldo Coletta), Jonathan Teague Cook (Scarrafone, the Coachman, the Organ Grinder), Clinton Curtis (Tummasino), Joe Alfano (Pascalino, Mario, Affunzino), Sheldon Baxter (Pizza Man, Rag Man or 'o Sapunariello), Frank Kamai (Filiberto Esposito), Stephanie Jensen-Moulton (Rusella), Laura Beth Brown (Margherita), Eve Gigliotti (Ines, or, more precisely, Bammenella) and Linda Bianchi (Flora). And now there is also a CD of this performance.

The result? Well now, just picture a Viviani falling between the Irish ballad tradition, *West Side Story*, and Gershwin on the one hand and melodrama, classical Neapolitan song, and the Italian folk tradition on the other. You will understand, then, why Jane House—in writing to Giuliano Longone, Viviani's grandson, with regard to rights—spoke about Don Raffaele's works as "musical." And you will understand, as well, the reason why Gigliotti gives an operatic interpretation of Bammenella. It also explains the strange insertion in *Via Toledo by Night* of the popular song "*Vitti na crozza*," which as everyone knows originated in Sicily. However, it is beyond question that those who had a hand in this production were dedicated, committed and serious in their approach to the work. We are naturally led to think of *Questi fantasmi!*, the play by Eduardo that John Turturro put on stage under the title *Souls of Naples*, and we cannot help noticing with satisfaction an upsurge of sincere interest in the US in both Neapolitan theatre and Neapolitan culture. Interest and respect. And did you notice, by the way, that the only word in Bammenella's song that was not translated into English was "Napoli"?