



Agrippino Manteo (1884-1947)

- [Jo Ann Cavallo \(Columbia University\)](#)

Active 1923-1939 in United States; Argentina

Born in the town of Grammichele (province of Catania) in 1884, Agrippino Manteo was orphaned at the age of four. Although he and his sister subsequently lived with their grandmother, Agrippino often ran away due to her harsh measures and the incessant farm chores. The puppeteer Pepino Crimi, whose father had established a theater in 1858, took the boy under his wing, setting the stage for a life devoted to Sicilian *opera dei pupi* (puppet theater) across three continents.

At the age of twenty-one Agrippino immigrated to Mendoza, Argentina, with his wife, Catarina, and their first child, Ida (née Agata, also known as Aida). He worked as a baker while constructing marionettes, and, when he had amassed a sufficient number, he opened a puppet theater there. In 1916, Agrippino answered the call to return to Italy to fight in the First World War, leaving behind his wife, daughter, and three sons who in the meantime had been born in Argentina, Michael (Michele), Dom (Domingo), and Pino (Agrippino II). Following the war, in June 1919 he immigrated to New York City, where he had relatives. His immediate family, including the marionettes, joined him there, and in 1923 Agrippino opened a puppet theater on Catherine Street in Little Italy. His youngest child, Johnny, was born in New York.

The Manteos moved their theater to 109 Mulberry Street in 1928. Agrippino's wife Catarina sewed costumes and collected the entrance fees. When Agrippino's sons came of age, they worked together on the bridge to manipulate the puppets which, according to the Catanese tradition, stood four- to five-feet tall and could weigh as much as one hundred pounds. His daughter Ida had learned from a young age to assist the production by sewing costumes, painting scenery, and playing the piano. When she turned eighteen, she provided the voices for the female parts, and sometimes manipulated the heavy puppets as well. Agrippino spoke for all the male characters and constructed new puppets with the assistance of a sculptor, who fashioned the heads. During this time Agrippino, known as Papa Manteo, also ran an electrical business by day.

The Manteo theater was known for its dramatic inventiveness and elaborate scripts. Although the audiences consisted primarily of local Italian immigrants, newspaper articles of the time indicate that the puppet plays also attracted the attention of spectators from outside the neighborhood. A 1933 article from the *New York Times* reports: "Weekdays the neighborhood and a few uptown students of the puppet art pay their 25-cent admission fee and sit goggle eyed between 8 and 10:30 P.M., watching the fortunes of Roland, Charlemagne and the twelve peers, and on Sundays they attend from 5 to 7 P.M" (Greene).

It is commonly repeated in overviews of the Manteo family that their repertory corresponded to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Baird). In reality, however, like other authentic Sicilian puppet companies, the Manteos based their plays on Giusto Lo Dico's *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [History of the Paladins of France], a three-thousand page prose rendition of medieval and Renaissance chivalric narratives that included not only the *Orlando Furioso*, but also the works of Andrea da Barberino, Pulci, Boiardo, and Tasso, as well as several other lesser-known authors. Agrippino, moreover, incorporated material from Lo Dico's prequels and sequels to stage a cycle that began with the Roman emperor Constantine and his conversion to Christianity and extended forward to the period of the Crusades. His son Michael later recalled that it took over three years to complete this entire cycle of 394 plays.

Agrippino Manteo was initially one of a number of puppeteers who carried on this popular Sicilian tradition in the New World beginning with the large wave of Italian immigrants in the 1880s and '90s. Susan Kalcik points to the existence of puppet theaters in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, New Jersey, Chicago, San Francisco, and Cleveland, as well as Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires (Kalcik 13). However, as new generations of Italian Americans became increasingly less familiar with the Italian language and at the same time more interested in Hollywood movies, puppet theaters found themselves without their traditional audience. Agrippino would buy materials from puppeteers who were forced to close, at one point amassing about 500 puppets (Mandell 57). The Manteo family theater continued to operate nightly until 1939 when the 18-year-old Johnny died of tuberculosis. Agrippino died eight years later. Many of the puppets in storage were eventually thrown away by the landlord of the warehouse while the remaining ones were destroyed by rodents (Caparrotti 7).

During this period Agrippino's surviving children harbored a dream to restore the family tradition. Having learned the craft from his father, Michael (b. September 2, 1909) constructed a new series of marionettes. When his own children became of age, he reinstated the Manteo Sicilian Marionette Theater and the family affectionately dubbed him Papa Manteo II. In her free time Ida (b. June 10, 1905) designed and sewed the costumes and painted the scenery, while during performances she provided the female voices and played the piano.

Ida's daughter Susan Bruno remembers her family's intense and constant focus on their puppet tradition: "That's all they've ever done. At gatherings they talk marionettes, my uncle's always cleaning the marionettes, my mother's always sewing..." (Kalcik 14). In 1980 the Manteo family performed at the World Puppetry Festival held at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. Pino Manteo recalls that one of the Cuticchio brothers present at the festival remarked how they had maintained the style of puppet theater still popular in the late 1800s (Caparrotti 8). In 1983, Michael Manteo received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for his outstanding contribution to American culture.

One can see the Manteo family at work in Tony De Nonno's prize-winning documentary *It's One Family: Knock on Wood* (1982), featuring Michael both on stage and in the workshop along with his son Pino and sister Ida. There is also a brief glimpse of Manteo puppets in an outdoor performance staged for a scene in *Godfather II*: walking through the streets during a festival in Little Italy, a Mafioso looks at knights clashing their swords on stage and ironically remarks that this form of entertainment is too violent for him.

From 1986 to 1991, about two hundred Manteo puppets were housed at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences. A number of these puppets were subsequently donated by the Manteo family to the Italian American Museum, located at 155 Mulberry Street in New York's Little Italy, close to the site of the family's theater. The puppets are in safe keeping and currently waiting to be displayed. A few Manteo marionettes can also be found at the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institute.

(I gratefully acknowledge Ida's daughter Susan Bruno and Michael's son Pino Manteo for supplying information about the family's history, including copies of the newspaper and magazine articles cited below.)

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Citation: Cavallo, Jo Ann. "Agrippino Manteo". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 20 March 2012. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13090, accessed 16 November 2016.]

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ISSN 1747-678X