



Photograph Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

**Cinema's Queen...**

# ANNA MAGNANI

**Celebrating the Centennial of Her Birth, We  
Reaffirm Her Talent and Stature in Film**

BY REEM NOURALLAH  
TRUBY CHIAVIELLO

*(Inside a general store in rural Louisiana.)*

Lady Torrance, a middle aged woman with raven hair and hazel eyes, wearing a dark shawl draped over her shoulders proceeds down a flight of stairs toward her former lover whom she has not seen or spoken to in many years.

She asks, "Do you remember those nights at my father's orchard...those wine drinking nights?"

He answers: "I have thought of nothing else."

Taking each step slowly and purposefully, she conveys a summary of their past relationship:

Youthful love born out of curiosity between an Italian immigrant's daughter and a native son of the South, the romance fading because of his doubts and cowardice, an inability by him to overcome his own bigotry and ethnocentrism. He left her and married one of his "own kind."

She seethes, "You couldn't bring yourself to marry the 'dago's' daughter."

Stepping down the last stair, she walks the remaining distance to face him and divulges her secret.

"I once carried your child in my body," she says.

She discovered she was pregnant the day he left her; she lost the baby. He moves to embrace her, to console her, to rekindle what they once they had. She refuses him, pushes him away.

"Get out!" she screams.

Seeing her enraged, he turns away and runs for the door.

She shouts after him, "I don't want your pity."

She exits, rushes back upstairs, all the while watched by the store clerk.

The above scene was from the film "The Fugitive Kind," based on the play "Orpheus Descending" by Tennessee Williams.

The role of Lady was played by Anna Magnani.

We know any of the great actresses of the past 50 years could have portrayed Lady with considerable skill and proficiency. We can envision Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, or Elizabeth Taylor in the role. We know that Meryl Streep, Jane Fonda and Diane Keaton would have performed the scene with competency and vigor. Today's top actresses Kate Winslet, Cate Blanchett and Gwyneth Paltrow would have provided the celluloid shouts and tears to move and intrigue audiences.

But none of them or for that matter any other actress could or will ever match what Magnani delivered in that scene. What we see in her portrayal of Lady is something for the ages; one of her many gifts of brilliant acting, another masterful depiction by her that captured the emotional truth and psychological complexity of the character.

What separates Magnani's performance from what anyone else could have achieved consists of only a few seconds in the scene. Midway in the line, "I once carried your child in my body," Magnani laughs. *She laughs.* Such an expression may seem incoherent, even ludicrous in lieu of the dramatic weight of the scene. But in that brief moment of laughter, in context to the tears and rage she has thus far given, Magnani conveys a depth to the character that no other actress would have even

considered.

Magnani shows the existential makeup of Lady that flashes out from the screen and tears into the heart and soul of every member of the audience.

Up to that point, we share with the character her anger and sadness. We want to reach out and help her, erase her pain, better her circumstances. But Magnani knows we are limited by our own sympathies. With that little laugh, she transforms the character into a guide who brings us to a place we normally do not like to go. Because of her, we see the futility that pervades in and around all of us; the unmet goals, the quashed desires, the broken promises. The scene is not just a scorned woman's admonishment of her former lover. Rather, it becomes a lesson in life, a chilling and frightening exercise that we can never forget.

Such is the power of Magnani.

No other actor or actress has or will likely ever reach the level of authenticity and intensity Magnani brought to the silver screen. Not a single role played by her after 1945 was considered anything less than extraordinary by film critics, filmgoers, her directors and fellow actors and actresses. As we mark this year the centennial of her birth through various tribulations, i.e., a stamp in Italy with her likeness imprinted on it, we are reminded that she was the greatest cinematic performer ever.

Such a proclamation may be hard to support in light of the difficulty Americans may find in viewing Magnani's films. Because the height of her career spanned only 17

Anna Magnani stars with Marisa Pavan in "The Rose Tattoo," circa 1955. The film won Magnani an Oscar for Best Actress. It was one of many acting awards she won throughout her career.



Photograph by Associated Press Archives

Poor and dispossessed women were often the types of roles given to and demanded by Anna Magnani.



years, 1945 to 1962, and all but four of her films were made in Italy, most of her work is not easily obtainable here in the United States. Only the films she made in America can be viewed with relative ease such as "The Fugitive Kind," "The Rose Tattoo," in which she won an Oscar for Best Actress, "Wild is the Wind," and "The Secret of Santa Vittoria."

For the casual filmgoer, Magnani's looks are more recognizable than her films. Her iconic image is still prevalent today. She is shown in a black and white still photo, in character wearing peasant clothes, jet black hair that is straight and unkempt, eyes brimming with rage and passion. It is the look that comes to mind when we think of Magnani. For a short time in the 1950s, she was an unlikely exotic sex symbol, a flip side to the blonde beauties of America. She was the sultry and earthy Southern Italian woman, possessing a light olive complexion, a soft yet significant Roman nose, a Greek and Eastern Mediterranean complexion.

She was dangerous and desirable.

Magnani's looks were well-suited for the roles she played. She was often cast as a member of Italy's poor and dispossessed, a prostitute, a single mother, an outcast. Her films were often controversial, one of which, "Mama Roma" was banned for some 33 years in the United States. She was the heroine of the neorealist era,

the height of Italian influence in cinema, directed by such greats as Roberto Rossellini, who was for a time her lover, Luchino Visconti, Vittorio De Sica and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Magnani's life was a lot like her films. She was born in Rome to extreme poverty, practically parentless, raised by her grandmother, a stranger to her father. It remains a mystery as to where her father came from, for many observers believe his blood is the source of her exotic looks. Some say her father was from Alexandria, Egypt while others say Calabria.

For Magnani, the only ticket out of the Roman slum was through her innate talents in singing and dancing. She was in many ways a self-made woman. While attending Rome's Academy of Dramatic Art, she moonlighted as a singer, eventually becoming a headline act in Italian nightclubs and cabarets; the Edith Piaf of Italy.

The 1953 film "The Golden Coach," directed by the great French filmmaker Jean Renoir, displays some of Magnani's vaudevillian talents. The film, noted for its vibrant colors and set design, about an Italian theatrical performer who migrates to Peru in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, features a few snippets of Magnani's past stage persona. She dances, plays mandolin and performs a mime act. We see how diminutive she was, at 5' 3", the smallest figure on screen while standing with the entire

cast during the film's stunning finish. Renoir said about her that "she was the greatest actress I have ever worked with," a recurring mantra by filmmakers.

Magnani's best film is perhaps the 1951 "Bellissima," directed by Visconti. Typical of the neorealist era the film fuses effortlessly comedy and tragedy in gritty surroundings.

Magnani plays Maddalena, a stage mother who moves about Cinecittà, the renowned movie studio in Rome, trying to get her daughter in the movies. We see her confront, cajole and beg anyone and everyone in the film business to give her daughter a screen test. She realizes at the end of the film, after hearing laughter and jeers among the film crew, that her daughter has no

talent. The film's climax is the close up of Magnani at the scene's end. The reaction by her is mesmerizing. She conveys all the feelings and emotions of not only the character but of motherhood itself. Anger, embarrassment, humiliation, resentment, affection and deep unrelenting love come alive in the dark, sad eyes of the actress. It was one of many performances by her that moved audiences to tears.

Magnani's career was in many ways a collection of scenes like the ones mentioned in "The Fugitive Kind" and "Bellissima." They were cinematic jewels that came together to symbolize the struggles, ambiguities, defeats and triumphs of women. Her characters were mostly independent women trying to get ahead by any means

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Anna Magnani with Roberto Rossellini, one of the many great Italian directors she worked with in her career.

necessary in a society of rules and mores structured by men. She can be seen then in films being beaten by an abusive husband, lectured by an ambivalent priest, threatened by a vicious pimp. Or she can be seen slapping ruthlessly an intruder, playing one suitor against the other, holding her own in the open market. No matter what film Magnani starred in, one thing was for sure: She played a strong and resilient woman, the type of role she demanded from filmmakers.

More than any other actress or actor, Magnani came to epitomize the Italian mystique. She fascinated audiences, especially those outside Italy. Her emotional range was incredible. American and English filmgoers, used to more stoic performances by their Anglophile actors and actresses, were enamored by Magnani's ability, grounded in her Latin blood, to cry, scream, shout and laugh, all in a single scene, always in proper context. She was particularly famous for her laugh, a raucous and unpretentious expression that was her signature trait.

What made Magnani most unique was her ability to elevate her roles beyond the trappings of cliché and melodrama. Although she was celebrated for her overt expressions, she was often at her best with nuances, silent moves and understatements. In the form of facial gestures, smiles, nods, and glances, she was able to present an underside to a character that could be both unsettling and enchanting.

In the 1962 film "Mama Roma," for instance, Magnani played a reformed prostitute living with her teenage son on the edge of Italy's capital. Directed uncompromisingly and imaginatively by Pasolini, who was also a poet and writer, the film was restricted from the United States until 1988.

Magnani's approach in this film was to underplay the role, much to Pasolini's dismay. It was only after the director saw the final version that he praised Magnani's work.

"If I had to shoot the film over," he said, "I would have still chosen her."

Similar to "Bellissima," Magnani's character Mama tries to improve the life of her child Ettore through her hard work and personal sacrifice. As a reformed prostitute, however, who actually goes back to the street midway in the film, her methods of upbringing evolve as deviant and dysfunctional. In one scene, she arranges her son to sleep with another prostitute in order to keep him away from a wayward neighborhood girl.

What made the film so controversial was Pasolini's focus on the psychosexual elements of the characters. The film's reputation suffered greatly from what some

observers considered were incestuous inferences between the two main characters, although there is not a single scene in the film that was graphic or shot in bad taste.

Magnani's depiction was so truthful and deep that her character's deviant nature became apparent to filmgoers. Near the film's beginning she follows her son and his friends in broad daylight. There is no dialogue, just the camera watching Magnani watch the boy from a distance. Magnani shows in her face the thoughts and feelings of a mother. We see the care, affection, and love for the boy. But then she leers at the boy and his friends for a few seconds. As such, we are reminded that she is a prostitute, that she interprets everything through the prism of sex and sexual innuendo. It is an inherent abnormality of the character that although maybe not incestuous is still disturbing. The scene works because it sets up the remainder of the film. As the film progresses, Magnani affirms the admirable qualities of the character. She is devoted to the proper upbringing of her child in spite of her moral deviancies and failings. Because of Magnani's authentic portrayal, the audience can understand and sympathize with her character by the film's end.

"Mama Roma" was just one of many films that showcased the multifaceted dimensions of Magnani's acting. It was also the start of a steep decline in her career. Overtaken by the French New Wave, the Italian neorealist era had ended. The kinds of films that Magnani could excel in were much less in demand. She made only two more films, the American "The Secret of Santa Vittoria," with Anthony Quinn and Federico Fellini's "Roma" where she appeared as herself for a brief moment shying away from the camera.

Magnani exists today within the boundaries of her legacy, not yet equal to the level of her talent. Mostly dominated by American film stars, she is rarely if ever included in the top 10 list of the world's greatest actors and actresses. Since her death in 1973, from pancreatic cancer, she has been given due adulation by only those with a deep passion for international cinema and classic Italian films. With the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth now upon us, the opportunity is ours to view her films, either again or for the first time, and see an extraordinary performer move and engage us.

Perhaps Marlon Brando, considered our greatest actor, knew best Magnani's magnanimous talent and stature. He played the store clerk in "The Fugitive Kind." As Magnani exits the scene and rushes upstairs after that incredible performance, he is seen looking up at her in awe.



Anna Magnani with Ettore Garofalo in "Mama Roma," circa 1962.