

## Giovanni De Rosalia: Playwright, Poet and "Nofrio"

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An influential yet largely overlooked Italian American comedic artist of the early twentieth century was Giovanni De Rosalia (1864–1934), a Sicilian immigrant who was a key figure in the *Teatro Italiana di Varietà* of New York City. These popular variety show productions typically consisted of singing, dancing, and a drama or comedy sketch. They were presented continuously on weekends to appreciative audiences of primarily working class Italian immigrants. In 1927, at the height of this lively theatre environment, Giuseppe Cautela described the scene:

With the presentation of the *macchietta* (character sketch), and of songs, dances and farces the Teatro Italiano di Varietà came into being in New York. It corresponds in a great degree to the American vaudeville. It is a form of entertainment that has met with success and it fills the theatres to capacity . . . Only last Sunday I saw a young man trying to quiet his baby in the lobby of the Olympic Theatre, on Fourteenth Street, while his wife was enjoying the latest *macchietta* by Farfariello. No less than fifteen theatres in New York and Brooklyn are giving every week such varietà shows.<sup>1</sup>

De Rosalia was a contemporary of the equally popular and more widely discussed Eduardo Migliaccio (1881–1946), who invented the Chaplin-esque character, "Farfariello" cited by Cautela. Like Migliaccio, De Rosalia developed a similar character, "Nofrio." But while Migliaccio portrayed his central character as a tragi-comic figure, De Rosalia's Nofrio was a buffoon. Cautela went on to say of De Rosalia: "Several regions of Italy are represented by the actors with their different dialects. Puglia and Sicily, especially, have their *macchietti* and singers. Giovanni De Rosalia, a very able Sicilian actor and writer, has created the character of Nofrio, a half-wit, whom he introduces as protagonist in all his farces."<sup>2</sup> Ten years earlier, in 1917, Nofrio had already become the "darling of the public" according to *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, one of the predominant New York City Italian language newspapers: "*Giovanni De Rosalia, l'applauditissimo attore dialettale siciliano, il Nofrio esilarante in tante commedie e farse, è sempre*

*il beniamino del pubblico che frequenta il Maiori's Royal Theatre.*" (Giovanni De Rosalia, the acclaimed Sicilian dialect actor, the hilarious Nofrio in many comedies and farces, is always the darling of the public that frequents Maiori's Royal Theatre.)<sup>3</sup>

De Rosalia began his stage career succeeding the distinguished Antonio Maiori (1868–1938), a dramatic actor and producer who was regarded as the founder of Italian American theatre in New York. Maiori struggled to provide the immigrant community with a classical repertory based primarily on melodrama and Shakespeare, but he had difficulty attracting and maintaining an audience, due largely to the exclusive use of non-dialect language in his dramatic productions. Eventually, Maiori discontinued his dramatic repertory company and founded several variety theatres throughout New York.<sup>4</sup>

Initially following in Maiori's tragedian footsteps, De Rosalia recruited actors for a new dramatic company he was forming in 1907 through a solicitation in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. De Rosalia

and a partner had hoped to appeal to the more educated members of the community by providing a repertoire "rich and modern," and without regard to commercial appeal.<sup>5</sup> Like Maiori, De Rosalia also abandoned classical theatre after a while. However, he continued his theatrical pur-

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Precederà Varietà:  
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POSTI TUTTI NUMERATI.  
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Theatrical advertisement from *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 26 September 1925, p. 4.



suits as a dialect actor and writer, turning his attention to the creation of "siciliana newyorkese" farces, so popular among the immigrant population. Giovanni De Rosalia and Company received a favorable reception in a Brooklyn theatre where they debuted in a comedy by Ario Flamma entitled *Vigila di Natale* (Christmas Eve).<sup>6</sup>

In 1910, De Rosalia published a collection of original vignettes entitled, *A la pretura, bozzetti umoristici in dialetto siciliano* (To the magistrate's court; humorous sketches in Sicilian dialect). Within a few years his troupe was appearing regularly at Maiori's Royal Theatre, sharing the bill with other *varietà* performers and gaining an increasing number of devoted fans:

*Al Maiori's Royal Theatre i successi della compagnia di varietà si moltiplicano serralmente. Speciale menzione merita la brava ed applaudita coppia Marconi sempre interessante nell'esteso repertorio di bei duetti napoletani. Giovanni De Rosalia, va senza dirlo, è sempre il beniamino del pubblico, che non si stanca mai di acclamarlo nelle esilaranti e divertenti farse e commedie.* (At Maiori's Royal Theatre the successes of the variety company are multiple this evening. Deserving special mention are the skillful and acclaimed, always interesting Marconi couple with a wide repertoire of beautiful Neapolitan duets. Giovanni De Rosalia, it goes without saying, is always the darling of the public, who never tire of applauding his hilarious and amusing farces and comedies.)<sup>7</sup>

In all of these performances, De Rosalia portrayed Nofrio, the Sicilian immigrant bumpkin whose character was based loosely on the Neapolitan clown, Pulcinella. Wearing a large false nose, he wore a few shabby clothes and a cap.<sup>8</sup>

De Rosalia's farces poked fun at greenhorn immigrants like Nofrio who were often confused or exploited by their own *paesani* and the bosses, landlords, and businessmen with whom they dealt. Portions of the dialogue in De Rosalia's scripts, particularly those he eventually recorded on disc, were peppered with "Italglish" words such as *sciaddappa* (shut up), *ausa* (house), and *baccausa* (backhouse, toilet). This idiomatic dialect, in addition to serving a utilitarian purpose among immigrants from different dialectical regions, lent itself easily to caricature and humor. As such, De Rosalia and other Italian dialect comedians exploited "Italglish" in various ways for their enthusiastic audiences.<sup>9</sup> De Rosalia even used "Italglish" incorrectly for comic effect. During one skit recorded on Columbia Records, *Nofrio ha la moglie Americana* (Nofrio has an American wife), Nofrio's wife tells him, "Oh, shut up!" Nofrio tries to reply in English, "You no tella me sciaddappa, baccausa I ama di ausaband."<sup>10</sup>

The Italian Book Company published librettos of De Rosalia's farces that sold for *fifteen soldi* (fifteen cents) each in 1917. Although only a hand-

ful of these works still exist today, they constitute a significant contribution to the literature of Italian-American theatre. Among his early published farces were *Nofrio sindaco* (Nofrio the mayor), and *Nofrio locandiere* (Nofrio the innkeeper). De Rosalia's careful attention to the use of Sicilian dialect in his scripts is represented in the following excerpt from *Nofrio sindaco*, during an exchange between Mayor Nofrio and his aide Filippo concerning a crowd waiting to speak to the mayor:

Nof. (*entrano da dove sono usciti*) Tutti si nni avevanu jutu ddu pugnazzu di vastasi!

Fil. Ma lei, signor sindaco, aveva perduto troppo tempo!

Nof. Iu sugnu lu sinnacu, e sugnu patruni di perdiri tempu 'nfina chi mi piaci a mia. E ora, pi rabbia, li porci li fazzu cuntinuari a stari 'mmenzu la strata.

Fil. Ma, scusi...

Nof. E puru vui...! E fintantucchi sugnu sinnacu iu, li porci hannu a stari strati strati.<sup>11</sup>

Nof. (they enter from where they have exited) Everyone out there has been reduced to a handful of degenerates!

Fil. But you, Mr. Mayor, have wasted too much time!

Nof. I am the mayor, and I can do whatever I want whenever I want. And now, because I'm mad, the pigs will wait in the middle of the street.

Fil. But, excuse me...

Nof. And you too...! And for as long as I am the mayor, the pigs will have to wander from street to street.

This dialect comedy style was a huge success for De Rosalia and by 1921, with more than a dozen published farces, he was performing his Nofrio routines frequently on the *varietà* stages of New York and Brooklyn. During the winter of 1921, De Rosalia appeared often at the Olympic Theatre on East 14<sup>th</sup> Street. In December, he performed a skit entitled *Il Natale di Nofrio* (Nofrio's Christmas). As a personal touch for his loyal fans, he placed an ad in *Il Progresso* which read "G. De Rosalia invita i suoi ammiratori a passare il Primo Dell'Anno questa Domenica all'Olympic" (G. De Rosalia invites his admirers to pass the New Year on Sunday at the Olympic Theatre).<sup>12</sup>

Nofrio's popularity continued to soar and by 1925 De Rosalia and Company were topping the bill at the Olympic, the Apollo, the Lyric, and Maiori's Royal Theatre. He appeared frequently at the Fourteenth Street Theatre where he and his troupe provided hours of entertainment to hoards of fans that crowded the playhouse nightly: "Alle 14 Strade. Oggi si repete la brillantissima commedia dal titolo 'Nofrio sensalè di matrimonio' che



ieri sera attiro una folla enorme. Giovanni De Rosalia con la sua compagnia fu applauditissimo." (At the 14th Street [Theatre]. Today the brilliant comedy entitled "Nofrio the Marriage Broker" that last night attracted an enormous crowd is repeated. Giovanni De Rosalia with his company was applauded most enthusiastically.)<sup>13</sup>

Among those members of his repertory company on stage with him was his wife, Francesca Gaudio De Rosalia (1882-1968), who often played the role of Nofrio's bemused foil. The company would perform in continuous shows, sometimes going from 8:30 p.m. until 2:00 a.m., featuring music, dance and even silent films. De Rosalia himself would begin the show with one or more monologues and then progress into a comic sketch with a full complement of characters and action. Each skit generally lasted no more than twenty minutes and was repeated nightly to increasing crowds.<sup>14</sup> De Rosalia delighted audiences by providing a string of new parodies with titles such as *Miracolo di S. Nofrio* (Miracle of St. Nofrio), and *Nofrio sensalè di matrimonio* (Nofrio the marriage broker):

Alle 14 Strade. Vi sarà di nuovo De Rosalia nella comicissima sua macchietta di "Nofrio." Questa sera "Nofrio" diverrà santo ed opererà miracoli, domani sera e domenica riprenderà le vesti di comune mortale e sarà sensalè di matrimonio. In ambedue le commedie la "verve" sarà abbondante e tale da far ridere I musoni più areigni. (At the 14<sup>th</sup> Street [Theatre]. There again will be the great comic De Rosalia in his character of "Nofrio." This evening "Nofrio" will become a saint and will perform miracles, tomorrow evening and Sunday he will return to the common clothes of a mortal and will be a marriage broker. In both comedies the "enthusiasm" will abound and so will make even sulkers laugh more than usual.)<sup>15</sup>

Not only a talented playwright and actor, De Rosalia was also a skilled poet, who occasionally incorporated poems into his farces. Sketches sometimes ended with a short verse, typically representing a moral of sorts and, of course, drawing the audience into applause. In this simple rhyme at the conclusion of *Nofrio locandiere*, Nofrio bids goodbye to his days as a troubled innkeeper, swearing on the soul of his grandmother that he will get rid of the inn:

Dumani sta lucanna mi la vinnu...	Tomorrow I will sell this tavern...
E, giuru, e m'avi a cridiri,	And, I swear, you must believe me,
Pi l'arma di me' nanna,	On the soul of my grandmother,
Si campu natru seculu,	If I live another century,
Nun grapu cchiù lucanna. <sup>16</sup>	I will not open another tavern.

De Rosalia wrote poetry for more than just his farces. Among his early works was a book entitled *Raccolta di brindisi per ogni occasione in dialetto siciliano* (A collection of toasts for all occasions in Sicilian dialect). Written in verse, some are clever tributes for holidays like Easter or Christmas. Others are poignant toasts for special occasions, such as *Pi un zitaggiu* (For a wedding):

L'auguri a sti dui spusi	Best wishes to the newlyweds
Picciuteddi e graziosi,	Young and beautiful,
Iu ci fazzu cu' l'affettu	I make this with affection
Di stu cori giustu e rettu.	From my heart honest and true.
Sia la vita tutta ciuri	May life be wonderful
'Ntra la gioia e 'ntra l'amuri.	Amidst joy and love.
D'iddi multu arrassu sia	May every pain and illness
Ogni pena o malatia.	Stay away from them.
Idda ad iddu sia fidili	Whether she is faithful to him
Iddu ad idda 'un sia infidili.	Whether he is unfaithful to her.
Chi l'invidia mai li tocchi	May envy never touch them
Cu' li nivuri mal'occhi.	With blackness and evil.
E ci vogghiu augurari	And may they be blessed with
Multi figghi e assai dinari. <sup>17</sup>	Many children and much money.

In 1921, De Rosalia published *A Pippina; versi siciliani* a series of romantic poems in Sicilian dialect. Two years later, in 1923 and near the height of his career, he published a more substantial collection of Sicilian verse in a book entitled *Amuri chi chianci* (Love that cries). In this work, De Rosalia revealed another side of his personality in simply written verses of love, laughter and pain. A gifted poet, he was adept at balancing humor and solemnity.

Moreover, to appeal to a more sophisticated audience of Italian readers, De Rosalia had the Sicilian verses translated into non-dialect Italian for the second half of the book. The opening stanza from one poem, *Amuri pi li besti* (Love for the beasts), illustrates differences between the two versions, and the uncomplicated style in which he wrote them. In this excerpt, the poet realizes that his muse has enjoyed caressing her little puppy more than him:

(Versioni Sicilianu)	(Versione Italiano)
Nutava sempri quannu accarizzavi	M'ero accorto che quando accarezzavi
Lu cagnuleddu to', chi tu pruvavi	Il fido cagnolino tu provavi
Piaciri tali chi, a lu paraguni,	Piacere tal, che, certo, al paragone,
Lu gaudiu chi sintivi quannu a mia	Era magra la gioia che godevi
Facivi 'na carizza, nun valia.	Quando a me una carezza concedevi! <sup>18</sup>



(English Translation)

I realized that when you caressed  
 The faithful puppy, you felt  
 Such pleasure, that, certainly, by comparison,  
 The joy you experienced was slight  
 When to me a caress you granted!

While De Rosalia was enjoying great success on the Italian-American stage, he was invited to appear on radio station WFAB by his good friend and impresario of the Fourteenth Street Theatre, Clemente Giglio (1886-1943). De Rosalia expressed some uneasiness about performing in a studio rather than on stage saying, "It's a different thing, this business (pointing to the microphone) without the public. I don't like it."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, De Rosalia spent much time behind a microphone recording many of his farces for the Columbia, Victor, and Okeh record labels. These were not the full-length sketches he and his company performed on stage, but instead were skits pared down to about three minutes each and featuring only two or three characters to advance the plot quickly for the seventy-eight r.p.m. format.

He was very successful in making his farces widely available on disc, recording nearly two hundred of them between 1916 and 1928. For a brief time in the early 1920s, De Rosalia even issued records on his own "Nofrio" label in association with Giglio.<sup>20</sup> Eighty-seven year old Louis Rossi of E. Rossi & Company, a gift shop in New York's Little Italy, recalls as a young boy delivering royalty checks to De Rosalia "until he bought a nice house in Brooklyn." Through the sales of his recordings, Nofrio gained nationwide popularity among Italian immigrants.<sup>21</sup>

On some recordings De Rosalia played Nofrio as being intoxicated, which usually was cause for his troubles throughout the rest of the sketch. In one Columbia recording, *Nofrio sparra lu jocu di focu* (Nofrio shoots off fireworks), an extended visit to the tavern results in Nofrio missing a date with his girlfriend to see the fireworks (*jocu di focu*). When she questions his whereabouts, he explains that he was forced to accompany a friend to the tavern and wasn't able to leave until the tavern closed and they were finally thrown out. She cries that she had wanted to see the fireworks. Nofrio asks her if she had ever seen them before. When she replies "Never!" he is perplexed. He asks, "Your father never took you to see the fireworks?" "Never!" she repeats. Nofrio says that if he had raised a daughter as beautiful as she, there would have been fireworks every night. He tells her that he will shoot off fireworks himself. When she inquires how, he explains that he will use his mouth. She doubts that it could be as good as the real thing, but Nofrio reassures her and proceeds

to interpret the sound of the fireworks, "Biddi-boom, biddi-boom, papa-papa, mama-mama, stupidu-stupidu," and so on. Finally, the skit ends with Nofrio imitating the band music played after the display.<sup>22</sup> The humor is simple, mildly suggestive, and effective.

During three decades of stage performances, radio appearances, and disc recordings, Giovanni De Rosalia cultivated a large following of Italian immigrants who saw at once their own gullibility, posturing, and chicanery reflected in Nofrio. Loyal fans were entertained by his farces featuring the impish Nofrio, and were moved at times by his poetry. De Rosalia appreciated his public and he derived immense satisfaction from performing for them. In 1934, after a long illness, Giovanni De Rosalia died surrounded by family, friends, and associates.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, the passing of this popular artist was not even marked by the *New York Times*. Today, his legacy lingers on in the few remaining works, printed and recorded, that can be found only in private collections and rare book archives.

## NOTES

- 1 Giuseppe Cautela, "The Italian Theatre in New York," *American Mercury*, 12, (September 1927), p.110.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 3 "Teatri e Vaudevilles," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 23 November 1917, p. 3.
- 4 A. Richard Sogliuzzo, "Notes for a History of the Italian-American Theatre of New York," *Theatre Survey*, 14, (November 1973), pp. 64-67.
- 5 "Arte e Artisti," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 13 September 1907, p. 4.
- 6 "Figure e Scene del Teatro Popolare Italiano a New York," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 28 June 1942, p. 5-S.
- 7 "Teatri e Vaudevilles," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 9 November 1917, p. 3.
- 8 "Figure e Scene del Teatro Popolare Italiano a New York," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 28 June 1942, p. 5-S.
- 9 Michael La Sorte, *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 159.
- 10 Giovanni De Rosalia & Company, *Nofrio ha la moglie Americana*. 78 r.p.m. disc. Columbia E-7765, 1922.
- 11 Giovanni De Rosalia, *Nofrio sindaco* (New York: [no publisher], 1918), pp. 11-12.
- 12 Theatrical advertisements, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 29 December 1921, p. 4.
- 13 "Teatri ed Arte," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 27 September 1925.
- 14 "Figure e Scene del Teatro Popolare Italiano a New York," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 28 June 1942, p. 5-S.
- 15 "Teatri ed Arte," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 25 September 1925, p. 11.
- 16 Giovanni De Rosalia, *Nofrio locandiere* (New York: [no publisher], 1917), p. 16.
- 17 Giovanni De Rosalia, *Raccolta di brindisi in dialetto siciliano, per tutte le occasioni*. (New York: Italian Book Company [Societa' Libreria Italiana]), 1916, p. 5.



- 18 Giovanni De Rosalia, *Amuri chi chianci: versi siciliani* (Traduzione Italiana di Italo Stanco). (New York: L. Scarlino, 1923), pp. 81, 175.
- 19 "Teatri ed Arte," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 15 November 1934, p. 4.
- 20 Spottswood, Richard K., *Ethnic Music on Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942 (Volume 1, Western Europe)*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 388-395.
- 21 Interview, Louis Rossi, E. Rossi & Company shop owner, March 1999. (From the late 1920's into the 1930's my own grandfather, Giuseppe Accardi of Wisconsin, collected a number of 78 r.p.m. Nofrio records featuring G. De Rosalia and Company. My aunt, Sadie Parrinello, says that the local record store used to phone him to let him know when a new opera had arrived. Typically, he would bring home the latest Nofrio disc as well. A colleague, Vincent Vanacore, tells a similar story about his grandfather in Florida who was notified by the shop owner each time a new Nofrio record arrived.)
- 22 Giovanni De Rosalia & Company, *Nofrio spara lu jocu di focu*. 78 r.p.m. disc. Columbia E-9044, 1923.
- 23 "Teatri ed Arte," *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, 15 November 1934, p. 4.

#### SELECTED WORKS OF GIOVANNI DE ROSALIA (1864-1934)

##### SKITS AND FARCES

*A la pretura; bozzetti umoristici in dialetto siciliano*. New York: Riola, 1910.

*Nofrio locandiere*. New York: [no publisher], 1917. (Biblioteca Siciliana on title page.) Two titles listed as available inside the back cover of this work:

*Nofrio eroe del 31 febbraio.*  
*Nofrio sindaco.*

*Nofrio sindaco*. New York: [no publisher], 1918. (Biblioteca Siciliana on title page.) Four titles listed as available inside the back cover of this work:

*Nofrio eroe del 31 febbraio.*  
*Nofrio in pericolo.*  
*Nofrio invitato a colazione.*  
*Nofrio ai bagni.*

*È Nofrio, o è Pietro*. New York: [no publisher], 1919. (Biblioteca Siciliana on title page.)

*Nofrio senzale di matrimoni*. New York: [no publisher], 1919. (Biblioteca Siciliana on title page.) Eleven titles listed as available from La Follia inside back cover of this work:

*Nofrio sindaco.*  
*Nofrio locandiere.*  
*Nofrio al telefono.*  
*Nofrio in pericolo.*  
*Nofrio ai bagni.*  
*Nofrio si deve tirare.*  
*Nofrio senzale di matrimoni.*  
*È Nofrio, o è Pietro?*  
*Tre mariti ed una moglie.*

*Il duello di Nofrio.*

*Lettere umoristiche d'amore e di sdegno.*

*Nofrio si deve tirare*. New York: [no publisher], 1919. (Biblioteca Siciliana on title page.)

##### POETRY

*Raccolta di brindisi in dialetto siciliano, per tutte le occasioni*. New York: Italian Book Company (Società Libreria Italiana), 1916

*A Pippina; versi siciliani*. New York: Polyglot Publishing House, 1921.

*Amuri chi chianci: versi siciliani* (Traduzione Italiana di Italo Stanco). New York: L. Scarlino, 1923.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY (G. DE ROSALIA AND COMPANY) FROM THE COLLECTION OF GIUSEPPE ACCARDI (1889-1956)

All titles are in 78 r.p.m. format. English translations of titles are provided on the Victor label.

*Nofrio parte per l'America*. Columbia E-7600. 1922.

*Nofrio ritorno del l'America*. Columbia E-7600. 1922.

*Nofrio e l'ebreo*. Columbia E-7765. 1922.

*Nofrio ha la moglie Americana*. Columbia E-7765. 1922.

*Nofrio spara lu jocu di focu*. Columbia E-9044. 1923.

*Nofrio allo stato civile*. Columbia E-9044. 1923.

*A Nofrio partorisce la moglie*. Columbia 14076-F. 1924.

*Nofrio arriva tardi*. Columbia 14076-F. 1924.

*Nofrio dallo speciale*. Columbia 14163-F. 1924.

*La terza telefonata di Nofrio*. Columbia 14163-F. 1924.

*Nofrio in areoplano*. Columbia 14175-F. 1925.

*La festa di San Giuseppe*. Columbia 14175-F. 1925.

*Il Santo di Nofrio*. Okeh 9053-A. 1922.

*Nofrio all'ospedale*. Okeh 9053-B. 1922.

*Nofrio maestro di banda*. Okeh General 86009-A. 1923.

*Una festa 'ntra la strada*. Okeh General 86009-B. 1923.

*Nofrio parra cu la luna / Nofrio talks to the moon*. Victor 72926-A. 1920.

*La pinsata di Nofrio / Nofrio's idea*. Victor 72926-B. 1920.

*Nofrio senzali di matrimoni / Nofrio, the matchmaker*. Victor 77884-A. 1919.

*Nofrio coscritto / Nofrio, the recruit*. Victor 77884-B. 1922.