

Centro di Cultura Canadese  
Università degli Studi di Udine

PARCOURS MIGRANTS  
AU QUÉBEC  
L'ITALIANITÉ DE MARCO MICONE  
À PHILIPPE POLONI

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*Couverture*

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*Alexandra*, bronze, cm. 38x35x22

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# References to History and Stereotyping Italian Characters in Canadian Plays

KATALIN KÜRTÖSI

Drama and theatre are very sensitive mirrors of a given stage of society and culture therefore in the following paper I am going to make some observations about how Italian people were perceived by Canadian stage characters within the span of twenty years and how these reflections were linked to milestone events in history. We will see that the notion of the stereotypical Italian character underwent a remarkable change when Marco Micone, a playwright of Italian background started to write for the stage in Montreal.

Before dealing with the plays, let us cast a quick look at what we mean by stereotypes. As Brislin says, in the process of intercultural categorization we use stereotypes which – in spite of the pejorative tone of the term – «are absolutely necessary for thinking and communication [...] a fact which must be realized in any analysis of interaction between individuals from different backgrounds» (cf. Gudykunst W. B., Kim Y.Y., 1984, 27). Stereotypes are the indispensable first tool when we start to communicate with strangers,

when we make predictions about strangers using cultural or sociocultural data, our predictions are based on stereotypes. This is both necessary and unavoidable. We must recognize that we cannot communicate with people from our own or another culture [...] without stereotypes. Stereotypes become problematical (i.e., cause us to make incorrect inferences and predictions about strangers' behavior) in the process of communication when they are held rigidly and do not allow us to perceive individual differences [...].

When we first meet strangers, our initial interpretations and predictions about their behavior are based on our stereotypes. Our stereotypes may be either culturally or socioculturally based [...]. Based on our stereotypes, we interpret strangers' behavior and make predictions about how they will respond to us.

To the extent that our stereotypes are accurate, our inferences and cultural or sociocultural predictions of strangers' behavior are accurate. [...] Maintaining 'open' stereotypes and controlling our ethnocentrism make it possible for us to

n to make inferences and predictions about strangers' behavior based on :hocultural data, and, therefore, to open up the possibility of interpersonal tionships with strangers (*ibidem*, 27-28).

subject of our analysis are three plays written in Canada between 1968 and nely, *Les Belles-Sœurs* (1996) by Michel Tremblay, *Ever Loving* (1980) by Hollingsworth and *Babele* (1989) by Marco Micone in which we wish to ow stereotypes are used and surpassed as far as Italians or Italian charac- oncerned.

*elles-Sœurs* can – among other things – be regarded as a play about the of subcultures and their differences from mainstream culture. In this we can observe various manifestations of judging the others, including the ejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentrism. As we all know, Lisette de Courval haracter who never misses an occasion to parade her experiences in which serve as good starting point for the others to add their only *euro- ession*, namely how their Italo-Canadian neighbours carry out their every- ities.

ETTE DE COURVAL [...] en Urope, le monde se lavent pas !  
 S-NEIGES VERRETTE Y'ont l'air assez sales, aussi ! Prenez l'Italienne à côté de z nous [...]  
 ETE DE COURVAL Avez-vous déjà remarqué sa corde à linge, le lundi ?  
 ]  
 rien qu'une chose à vous dire : c'monde-là, là, ça porte pas de sous-vête- nts ! [...]  
 RIE-ANGE BROUILLETTE Peut-être qu'a l'aime mieux étendre ses sous-vête- nts dans la maison [...] par pudeur !  
 ETE DE COURVAL La pudeur, y connaissent pas ça, les Uropéens ! (Tremblay 1996, 27-28).

passage shows that Europeans in general are merged with the given Italo- n neighbour family to whom the Quebecois majority of the district ap- s with strong negative prejudices. These women, who speak a language full etter words, are truly upset by the public manifestation of emotions by the The *belles-sœurs* do not hesitate to generalize based on superficial impres- ost probably they are not aware of the fact that in Europe there are several : cultures – all they can realize is that next to them people have different doing everyday activities and of behaviour: it is much easier to reject them ile than getting to know them. This negative approach to otherness is a true ation of ethnocentrism.

\* *Loving* is a film-like play about war brides with scenes spanning over thir-

ty years between 1938 and 1970. Among the characters we can meet Chuck Malecarne, an Italian-Canadian from Halifax and Luce Maria Marini from the North of Italy whom he meets and marries during the war. Chuck, who looks «exaggeratedly Mediterranean» in the playwright's directions (Hollingsworth M. 1984, 637), is a singer and pianist in a bar while Luce – who «doesn't look English» (*ibidem*, 642) – dreams about making a career of a singer in *America*, i.e. New York. Both of them have *speaking names*: Chuck is double-linked to meat (and bad meat) – Luce finds it a «terrible name [...] Rotten flesh» (*ibidem*, 715) – while Luce aspires towards *light* and the sea. It is also worth noting that Chuck cannot correctly pronounce Luce's name – says «loose» instead – while they are married. For Luce, Canada is the place of frustration and disappointment: instead of the New York of her dreams, she has to live in Halifax in a family headed by Chuck's father who is «Napolitano [...] not Italian» (*ibidem*, 663). Luce is prejudiced about the Canadians around her, too, saying that they are «peasants» – in their eyes she is nothing but a snobbish fascist (*ibidem*, 671) who never leaves the house and when people visit them does not speak to them. After several years of marriage, they separate, Chuck remarries and plays the piano at La Gondola, an Italian restaurant at Niagara Falls: he assumes an Italian accent. Luce, on the other hand works for an Italian TV channel in Toronto, learns English, then French, and even makes it to New York.

Throughout the play Luce is described using accessories of the Italian-stereotype: at the time of the anti-ethnic riot in Halifax, she is strongly holding to her rosary. She is interested only in becoming a singer – it was through music that they got acquainted: Chuck sang «You are my sunshine» to her (*ibidem*, 678): sunshine is connected with her name. Italian bars, dinner clubs, food also can be considered as integral parts of the stereotypically Italian features.

On the level of language use we find a variety of strategies: at the beginning, Luce refuses to improve her English and Chuck has very limited Italian – by the end of the play, Luce is ready to speak and learn other languages while Chuck is pretending to have a strong Italian accent. What is unique in the case of ethnic characters on the stage is that they give themselves away immediately by their look («exaggeratedly Mediterranean») and by their use of language, including the accent: their difference is visible and audible to the audience. If we look at what she says and how, we find *macaroni language* in the early years of Luce's life in Canada.

CHUCK Come, Loose. I don't get it. Why do you have to spend all your time on the railway station?

[...]

LUCE People, la gente. Vengono, vanno. Dove vanno?

LUCK What?

CE Where they go? La gente?

LUCK How should I know? On journeys – they're travelling.

CE Stranieri. Da dove? Where from they come? (*ibidem*, 645).

in most plays using bilingual strategy, here, too, we can find a short scene in which Luce attempts to master another language. Luce did so well before the war started – as she was preparing for her singer's career in New York.

LUCK Mio nome... my name is Luce Maria Marini... How do you do? [...] I will to be a cantatrice. You like? I like you, Yank. I like to go to New York. Non è possibile. È cattiva – ogni giorno... take lesson make practise, hello Mama, hello Papa. Eat food, stay house, learn English, for what? Ogni giorno lo stesso. Same. Nothing to make. Che noioso. In America non è così. My mother wishes I should... marry with Angelo... my cugino – cowsin. Non voglio, non voglio sposarmi. I will not marry with Italian boy. I marry with American man (*ibidem*, 651, 652).

Luce makes mistakes in this process and mixes languages as it is natural when one learns a new language. Stereotyping can be touched upon not only by other people concerned with Luce and Italians, but on her part, too: she refuses to return to Italy because she feels that 'here she is kept «in chains»' (*ibidem*, 710), they have to serve their husband. On the other hand, she is strongly prejudiced against Germans:

LUCK [...] Lotte Lenya? Marlene Dietrich? They're Germans – bunch of spies.

CE No... they are women. They are success.

LUCK Krauts aren't women.

CE At least they are not in chains.

LUCK Well, they should be (*ibidem*, 710).

Luce is it her independence that gives her confidence and success: she is a well-known singer, she has moved to New York – but keeps her childhood home and does not give up her roots.

Over the course of the play – i.e. over the thirty years it spans – both Luce and Chuck have undergone a remarkable development: she left the world of day-dreams and entered in the world of these day-dreams, by realizing the most important thing in making her career as singer, she was able to leave behind the stereotypical image she used to have. Chuck, on the other hand, mastered a new sense of ethnicity by going back to his roots by acquiring an Italian accent and approaching the stereotypical image of the Italian as bar-singer.

Luce's well-known trilogy of *Gens du silence*, *Addolorata* and *Déjà l'agonie*,

Marco Micone published a short play, entitled *Babele* in «Vice Versa» (n. 26, 1989). The two scenes present an Italian family and Jacques, a young Quebecois who wants to rent Pasquale's apartment. We are witnesses to generation conflict between father (Pasquale) and son (Tony): Pasquale represents the true first-generation immigrant who worked hard to achieve financial security for the family – he has several apartments to let – while Tony would like to live his own life, move out from the family house and asks his father to let him move into one of the apartments instead of letting it to Jacques. Micone uses stereotypical features to describe the look of his characters: Pasquale is «grosso», Tony, like university students in general, wears jeans, while Jacques is «ben vestito». In the course of the play, however, he moves away from stereotypes and creates a true conflict situation involving not only the differences between father and son, but between the two of them and Jacques. To be more exact, we can notice a delicate balance between stereotyping the Italian characters and giving them individual features.

Pasquale wants to please Jacques – whom he seems to observe more as a guest than just someone looking for a flat to let – by offering him his own home-made wine, of which he is very proud. Antonietta, the mother, in her turn, offers Jacques «lupini» – so the old generation fits into the stereotype of Italian hospitality. Tony has ironical remarks both about the wine and the specialty of his mother. Jacques is puzzled in this situation – out of politeness he pretends to enjoy it, but Tony is upset by his attitude: «Plus les Italiens sont ridicules plus vous, les Québécois les trouvez sympathiques» (Micone M. 1989, 31).

Like in ethnic texts in general, language is an important issue in this play, too – and let's not forget that «No language is neutral» (Pivato J. 1998, 157) Pasquale mixes standard Italian, Italian dialect and a very simple French. Tony speaks English, Italian dialect, and French as well: «Parle 'nglese come un 'Nglese e un francese meglio di Francese» (Micone M. 1989, 30) – he is also a *translator* between Jacques who, of course, speaks French and «L'anglais un petit peu, l'italien pas du tout» (*ibidem*, 31) and his mother who can speak only the dialect. As the title suggests, the play is truly *babelesque* – language is used to discuss issues related to languages. Not only do the characters comment about their own or the other characters' language competence and about languages in general (e.g. Pasquale tells Jacques with some irony that «L'inglese è troppo difficile per certa gente. [...] Mon garzon, parler con vous» (*ibidem*, 31) but Tony also abuses his language competence when translating between Jacques and Antonietta: when Jacques asks him to help him tell the woman that he would prefer not to try «lupini», Tony whispers the opposite in his ears.



JACQUES Comment lui dire que j'en veux pas ?

[...]

JACQUES Signora, i lupini ... SUBITO (*ibidem*, 31).

A bit later, Tony makes fun of the efforts of his parents by saying «Mange, bois, tu veux le logement» (*ibidem*, 32). Pasquale, however, cannot notice that their aggressive friendliness and hospitality simply frighten Jacques – he even wants to enter into a bargaining phase, offering him six months free, but Jacques decides to flee the scene.

What we can see in this play is that stereotypes are used to a limited degree: as starting points for characterization, for creating the atmosphere, but the playwright soon moves on to elaborate on the cultural and generation differences. The title is an accurate indication of the language strategy: we can find the multiple switch – standard translation (Pivato J. 2000, 11, 15) – including standard Italian, dialect, Quebec French, Quebec French with Italian accent (in the case of Pasquale) and standard English. This kind of linguistic hybridity is «not just an act of the imagination but a reflection of local reality», as Joseph Pivato puts it (*ibidem*, 11).

Finally, let us cast a quick look at the presence of history in the plays. Interestingly, *Ever Loving* and *Babele* deal with the second world war while in Tremblay's play reflects upon the reception of Italian immigrants in the working class district of Montreal. In Hollingsworth's play the war offers the initial element for the four men who will get to Canada as war brides from various parts of Europe. It was a special case of immigration and several sociological works analyze it. Italy as enemy state, and consequently Italians as members of that community are subjects of prejudice during the ethnic clashes in Halifax. In Micone's play, Pasquale points out the common roots of French and Italian languages, then adds that: «Francese e Italiani come les doigts della mano. Francia e Italia sempre amies. Una sola eccezione, guerra, une fois, na vota sole. Un errore terribile... À genoux, tutti in ginocchio, cinquante millions d'italiani à genoux. Che umiliazione!» (Micone M. 1989, 32). story, memory thus creep in personal exchanges on every level.

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