

ANNA MAGNANI: Miracle Worker

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by Donald Chase

Say what you will about the “celebration of women” offered on the most recent Oscarcast, it did, with an admirable taste and internationalism, include clips of Anna Magnani in *Open City* and in her Oscar-winning role in *The Rose Tattoo*. But it’s a safe bet that most American viewers under, say, age 45, perhaps even some who consider themselves cinematically literate, were not entirely sure whom they were watching. Or that the woman they were watching was many times during her life, and since, called the world’s greatest film actress. Or that she was, from 1955 to 1960, a household word in America, known to those now over 45 from her films (she made 49, starring in 36) and, secondarily, from print-media coverage and TV and nightclub impressions of her explosive acting style.

“Explosive,” “volcanic,” “eruptive”—all these words were used to describe her, and so, despite her many awards for “acting,” was the catchall term “force of nature.” Even her many smaller, but no less plangent, movie moments were described in terms of nature—words like “naturalistic,” “instinctive,” and “true-to-life” recur in her reviews. Her work was said to illuminate human nature—which it did, though few could explain how without resorting to humanist homilies (from “humane” on down) or vaporosities (from “sublime” and “ineffable” on up) that described the effect more than the cause. Which is understandable: the effect is very powerful. But concentrating overmuch on the effect shortchanges Magnani’s artistic intelligence and how she brought it to bear on a technique that her great admirer Bette Davis said “matches Vermeer[’s] for clarity and delicacy.”

When *Open City*, Roberto Rossellini’s portrait of Rome in the last months of World War II, hit American movie screens in 1946, critics and audiences alike responded with shock. It was, to borrow a phrase, the shock of the new—more precisely, of the new, or neo, realism of which the film quickly became a paradigm. Shot just after the American liberation, for \$19,000 on fluctuating electricity in the same streets where events like those depicted in the film had recently taken place, *Open City* had—and has—a documentary freshness and roughness. Even the film’s moral and political primitivism (Germans are bad; Italians are good or, at worst, victims) had its novel aspects. Never had a

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screen depiction of Gestapo decadence included lesbianism and cocaine use, and these elements of *Open City* that we now recognize as picturesque and melodramatic were often, in 1946, mistaken for the real, unvarnished, previously untold truth.

New also for American audiences was seeing a leading role played by an actress like Anna Magnani. "She's a real person," another character in the film says of her. That—or a newcomer, or a gifted amateur—is what many audiences took her for. And with reason. Her character, Pina, is steeped in the mess and muck of life. And encompassing of life's contradictions: She's a working-class widow and mother; is pregnant by her resistance-worker fiancé; is religious, and therefore a bit ashamed of her pregnancy. But more important than these circumstances are Magnani's appearance and her affect. Short, round, and untidy, she responds to each situation with a directness unmitigated by "acting" artifice, often seeming to heed the call of irresistible impulse. She bursts into tears from sheer weariness, and they're only interrupted, not stopped, by her fiancé's crypto-Communist assurances of a brighter postwar future. She practically cold-cocks her son for an unauthorized absence, and you fear for the boy's safety. She's so absorbed (and flattered) by a conversation with her fiancé's intellectual resistance cohort that she slides an ashtray onto the arm of his chair without taking her eyes off his face. Magnani's work is so much a part of Rossellini's neorealist context, her gestures so scaled to the size of his shots, that James Agee's review called her "a magnificent woman"—not an actress.

Even today we're not always fully aware that we're watching a concentrated and economical performance. That



THE MIRACLE.

awareness comes only after her final, Oscar-show-excerpted scene. Magnani's technical and emotional feat of hurling herself through a Nazi obstacle course to reach the vehicle in which her arrested fiancé is being taken away, running after it while crying his name, "Francesco! Francesco!" and then being shot down in the middle of the street—it takes this to recognize how much theatrical skill was in all that preceded it.

That skill was honed in the theater (she played the title role in *Anna Christie*), revue and 16 mostly supporting film roles in the ten years before *Open City*. (She was 36 when *Open City* was made in 1944, and a few hours after filming her death scene was on stage, in a revue.) One amusing early film is *Teresa Venerdì* (aka *Doctor Beware*), made in 1941 but not released in the U.S. until 1951. In this romantic comedy-of-values directed by Vittorio De Sica and starring De Sica as a playboy pediatrician, Magnani has a five-scene supporting role as a vain, grasping showgirl. She offers a broadly theatrical caricature, skillfully leavened by well-scaled details (her sullen apathy while rehearsing her "Queen of Jazz" number), and a terrific humanizing touch (her sincere, hair-trigger empathy at hearing someone's going hungry, right in the middle of her least sincere scene).

In a similar vein is Gennaro Righelli's lively populist comedy *Abbasso la ricchezza!* (aka *Peddlin' in Society*, '47), which presents Magnani as Gioconda, a fruitseller who has gotten rich from Italy's postwar economic chaos and now wants social acceptance as well. The number, variety, and intensity of comically garrulous moments exceed those in *Teresa*; this is a starring role, specifically written for her. Magnani gives these moments the theatrical brio and crack timing they demand. More remarkably, she gives some of them the daringly "real" nastiness and pettiness that Jean Harlow's and Barbara Stanwyck's climbers had in pre-Code pictures. Survival in postwar Rome was apparently as much a question of bulldozing improvisation as in Depression America. Knowing this firsthand, Italian audiences gave a good deal of moral slack to "Nanarella"—Magnani's offscreen nickname, and

also the name of the tragicomic, tender-
virago, Soul-of-Rome persona that had
begun to coalesce around her as a result
of roles like *Gioconda*.

Again meeting the requirements of a
starring role, *Abbasso's* script generously
exhibits the tender side of the virago—
maybe too generously. But Magnani
never plays insecurity or defeat the same
way twice, or the way she plays them in
other movies. The scene in which she
wipes her hands on her apron after
returning to the fruitsellers' market is
particularly well gauged. And Magnani
dignifies *Gioconda* by giving her a sense
of her own ridiculousness: boogie-
woogie-ing in a too-young, too-complicated
dress, she stops to laugh at herself.

Magnani never discussed her craft in
detail, and when she broached the sub-
ject at all she was self-contradictory. She
said she was "not really a professional
actress." And: "I only manage to work
well when I'm free to do what I want . . .
I have to invent." At other times, though,
she noted that she was not really much
like her Nanarella persona, and that the
stage was the real craft-teaching medium
for an actress. In any case, by the time
she played two non-Nanarella roles in
Rossellini's *L'Amore* in 1947–48, she had
both a mastery of bravura theatrical technique
and unusual access to her own inventive,
instinctive truth. Indeed, at first—but only
at first—they seem to exist discretely in
the film's two segments.

The first installment of the double-
header, *Una voca humana*, is based on
Jean Cocteau's one-act theater monologue
The Human Voice—an odd choice for a
neorealist director and a (pardon the
oxymoron) neorealist star. In their

hands, the film remains a one-woman,
one-set show whose skimpy social context
is a bourgeois context, presented without
comment. For nearly all its 35 minutes,
Magnani is on the phone with the lawyer
lover who has just ended their five-year
affair. The conversation is interrupted
twice, dividing the movie into three
movements (actually, arias) and allowing
Magnani to do variations on the theme of
love lost, raising the emotional stakes with
each variation.

She does that in demanding long
takes. We admire her histrionic elasticity
in umpteen quicksilver transitions. We
admire her social elasticity in convincingly
rising from her usual working-class niche
to the bourgeoisie. We admire her skill at
letting light and air into a lightless,
airless piece (mostly by small shows of
anger and self-disgust and small moments
with her dog—and it was her dog). But the
elasticities and the skill are very much those
of an actress, a professional actress if you
will, and so while we admire we are not
transported. Then, at the film's very end,
Magnani is all raw need: with the phone
cord wrapped around her neck, she hears
a dial tone signaling that the beloved has
met her request to hang up first, and she
cries, "I love you, my love, I love you,
I love you, I love you, I love you, I love
you, I love you." The words seem to
geyser up from her entrails. Now we are
transported.

Rossellini precedes *L'Amore's* second,
superior segment, the 45-minute neorealist
Christian parable *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*),
with a title card that declares it "an
homage to the art of Anna Magnani." This
card may have been moved from the very
beginning of *L'Amore*—Rossellini scholar
Peter Bru-

nette places it there—when *The Miracle*
was separated from its companion piece
for its famously controversial U.S. release.
In any event, Rossellini's irritatingly
distancing encomium, plus our unconscious
awareness of Magnani's socially elastic
dip into the rural peasantry, are forgotten
a minute into the story. Her performance
is so limpid and lived that, as with
Open City, it's only retrospectively that
we fully appreciate its art.

Scripted by Tullio Pinelli and Rossellini
from *Open City* co-writer Federico Fellini's
story, *The Miracle* traces the mortification
and exaltation of Nanni, a halfwit,
primitively devout goatherd. In the first
sequence, she is seduced by a vagabond
(Fellini) with a passing resemblance to
religious-calendar representations of St.
Joseph. Or does she offer herself to him?
We're not sure because of the provocative
way the film and Magnani mix up
circumstances and drives, conflating the
effects of sun and wine with those of
physical avidity and spiritual yearning.
Magnani's a kineshetic marvel in this
sequence as she quickly identifies each of
these ingredients for us before assimilating
it into the mix—a mix she spices vocally
with clinical madness by her rushed
cadences and



THE ROSE TATTOO.



Lattuada's THE BANDIT, with Amedeo Nazzari.

her crazily pinging *a* in the word *santi* (saints).

When Nanni becomes a pregnant outcast, Magnani keeps bathos at bay with her economy and astringency (and Rossellini with his camera distances). An almost imperceptible movement of her jaw as she stares at the basket of apples belonging to a fellow churchgoer conveys hunger so effectively that our saliva flows. Magnani's jaw is slack and her mouth contorted (try this combo in the mirror and see how hard it is) when listening to any who doubt her claim that, by a miracle, St. Joseph is the father of her expected child. Her features assume a more normal cast as, intransigently and self-alienatingly, she restates that claim. In part, the film is a celebration of her faith, suggesting that, proud and delusional as it is, it's better than no faith.

Faith as much as labor pains seems to inflame Magnani when she hauls herself up to a hilltop monastery to give birth. But Magnani's sudden, palpable, lucid joy as, suckling the newborn, she cries, "My baby, *mine, mine!*" tells us that secular maternity is the real miracle. In the end, Rossellini's homage is apt. Magnani's performance in *The Miracle* is one of the greatest ever by a film



BELLISSIMA: with Tina Apicella.

actress, up there with Falconetti's Jeanne d'Arc, Vivien Leigh's Blanche, her own Maddalena in Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* ('52).

What is acting, really?" Maddalena, a working-class stage mother, asks her own reflection. "If I think I'm someone else, I end up being someone else." Then she smiles serenely as she combs her tangled, greasy hair, instantly becomes ten years younger and a social class or two higher, and proclaims, "That's acting!"

It is, and we see numerous other examples of it in this satirical *comédie larmoyante* that is quite unlike anything else Visconti directed. Throughout this vehicle that Magnani drives but remains nicely contained by, we see her acting on two levels. She acts Maddalena, and she acts Maddalena acting (or improvising) modesty or boastfulness, naïveté or shrewdness, submission or intransigence, whatever it takes to get her 7-year-old daughter (Tina Apicella) a part in a film planned by Alessandro Blasetti (played by director Blasetti himself). At one point in *Bellissima*, Maddalena so convincingly acts the aggrieved wife before a Greek chorus of neighbors that we're shocked when her husband shouts, "Stop your playacting!" (Rewind the video and look for the occasional, tiny false notes.)

In some ways Maddalena is the apotheosis of Magnani's "Nanarella" persona. A lot has been made of the long, giant closeup of Magnani's tragically defeated face in the projection booth at Cinecittà as she listens to Blasetti and coterie laugh derisively at the screen test. Yes, it does indicate the eloquence of silence and stillness. But an ear-

lier, less necessary (though reportedly written at Magnani's behest), more mixed-tone riverbank scene between Maddalena and a charming, slippery studio flunky (Walter Chiari) is arguably richer. Her daughter's screen test secured, she goodnaturefully tells him, as one Roman improviser to another, that she knows the money she'd given him to grease the skids for the test stayed in his pocket. He tries to seduce her anyway, and she registers, mostly wordlessly, sadness, flattery, amusement, temptation, and fear of temptation before turning him down. No wonder that after *Bellissima* Bette Davis called Magnani "the greatest actress I have ever seen"—an opinion trumpeted in the film's American ads.

One of the most eagerly awaited collaborations of the "greatest actress" was with Jean Renoir, deemed by many the "greatest director," on *The Golden Coach* ('53). The result is imperfect, thanks to a babel of accents from a multilingual cast working in (or postdubbed into) English and some lapses in directorial rhythm attributed variously to working in English, or in Italy, or in color (or all three). But it's also glorious, thanks to (paradoxically) the color palette (black, white, green, red and, especially, gold), the playful intricacies of Renoir's meditation on life and/vs. theater (*Bellissima*'s subtext is *The Golden Coach*'s announced subject), and, of course, Magnani. With her combination of down-to-earthness and volatility, she's a perfect avatar for both life and theater, and their convergence and conflict.

In a play-within-a-film, she's Camilla, the Columbine of an Italian commedia dell'arte troupe visiting a Spanish colony



THE FUGITIVE KIND: with Marlon Brando.

in 18th century Latin America, deeply worried about her ability to win audiences "in a foreign language." This was Magnani's first film in English. In 1952, she had refused the Broadway version of *The Rose Tattoo*, which Tennessee Williams had written especially for her, because of her fear of English. But here, aside from a few unintelligible words and misplaced inflections, Magnani does indeed win us in a foreign language.

More important, Camilla worries about her diminished satisfaction from winning audiences. Three overlapping love affairs—a headfirst plunge into "real" life—seem to compensate. A soldier of fortune offers companionable devotion. The Spanish viceroy satisfies her desire for social elevation and riches (including a golden coach). A bullfighter indulges her taste for emotional extremes, never more than in the 40-second closeup that elides the successive anticipation, pride, anxiety, horror, joyous relief and, finally, triumph she feels while watching him in the ring.

And yet, feeling she's still roleplaying in some essential way, she declares: "I must understand—I'm absolutely and sincerely alive on the stage. Why do I succeed on the stage and destroy everything in my life? Where is truth, where does the theater end and life begin?" There's no preciousness in these lines as Magnani, an actress universally praised for authenticity of performance but reportedly unlucky in love, speaks them in a questing, full-throated voice: she turns a conceit into a *cri de coeur*. And when, at the film's very end, having chosen art over life, she is asked if she misses her three swains, she scrunches her eyelids for a moment, then lifts them to stare straight ahead and speak her fadeout line: she turns its three barely audible syllables into a spasm of the soul.

The *Rose Tattoo* ('55) opened the Hollywood chapter of Magnani's career and determined its form: high-voltage characters in classically structured, essentially theatrical, jockeying-for-Oscar pieces. *Tattoo* was directed by Daniel Mann, who had guided Shirley Booth to a 1952 Best Actress Oscar in *Tattoo* producer Hal Wallis' movie of Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Magnani, of course, would win an Oscar for *Tattoo*, and in 1960 Mann would direct Elizabeth Taylor in her Oscared *Butterfield 8* role.

Tattoo also established Magnani's Hollywood modus operandi. As Serafina

delle Rose, the narrow but passionate, husband-revering Italian immigrant only half-assimilated into a small Gulf Coast town, she gives herself over fully to each of the text's succession of arias. But, as in her more boisterous, or theatrical, Italian roles, she punctuates or intersperses the arias with grace notes and humor; pulls up the theatrical roots of the character and plants them in movie soil, often neorealist movie soil. When a squad of neighborhood women and a parish priest come to tell Serafina of her husband's sudden death, Magnani's small gesture—she waves her splayed hands as if to ward off evil as she repeats, "Don't speak, don't speak," in a high, choked voice—is arguably more telling than the big, final collapse on the floor.

Magnani's body is very expressive here. Calming down after the further crushing news that her husband was



WILD IS THE WIND: with Anthony Quinn.

unfaithful, she's a zombie dressed in a slip, a limp doll that moves in response to the most feathery touch from her teenaged daughter. Magnani often uses her body to tell us what her devoutly Catholic character will not tell us about herself—that what she had with her husband was great sex. And to tell us what the text of a mid-Fifties movie could not tell us about itself—that this is a ripe seriocomedy about the effects of Serafina's deprivation of great sex and her longing for more of it. In the sexual push-pull of her first big scene with Burt Lancaster (game but miscast as the amiable clown Mangiocavallo), Magnani seems to lose pounds and years when yielding to her attraction, gains back both when put off by him.

Despite the movie's reticences, it was pretty startling to see in an American movie of this vintage a woman neither

young nor trim with Magnani's degree of sexual appetite—and sexual snobbery, her late husband having been "the best and not the second best but the only best." And it was surprising how totally the ageist, antiseptic, chauvinistic America of the time took the 48-year-old, unkempt, foreign Magnani into its heart. (Maybe foreignness explained her unseemly looks and unseemly middle-years sexuality.) *The Rose Tattoo* racked up about \$60 million in ticket sales in 1993 terms, and made Magnani a leading lady for whom Hollywood producers sought vehicles.

Magnani once said that *Wild Is the Wind* and *The Fugitive Kind*, her two post-*Tattoo* Hollywood films, "suffer a bit from mannerism." In fact, she did a rather impressive job of liberating them from mannerism, if by that she meant worked-out theatrical staleness.

In *Wind* ('57), from producer Wallis and director George Cukor, Magnani plays Gioia, the Italian mail-order bride of widowed Nevada sheep rancher Anthony Quinn. He expects a duplicate of his first wife, who was Magnani's sister; frustrated by his demands, she begins an affair with his adoptive son (Anthony Franciosa). Surprisingly, this trite, contraption-like plot accommodates a number of oddities and pleasures. Probably no other Cukor film spends as much time in the great outdoors. Certainly no other film documents the birth of a lamb or records the process by which a ewe is tricked into giving suck to a newborn not her own while the leading lady improvises anxiety and then relief in the same frame. There's also an improvisatory naturalness in Magnani's early scenes with Quinn as she grapples with English, and often reverts to Italian. The scene in which she and Franciosa flaunt their affair over a meal with Quinn's brother and sister-in-law daringly skirts arrogance and cruelty; yet by suggesting that Gioia just can't help herself, Magnani never incurs the audience's censure. She even gets hot lava to flow in the volcanic eruptions the script requires of her with programmatic regularity. The actress deserved the Oscar nomination she got for *Wild Is the Wind*, though neither her performance nor her name won it popular success.

The mannerism of *The Fugitive Kind* was harder to combat because it was deeper-rooted. Second-rate Tennessee Williams, of which this movie's theatrical source, *Orpheus Descending*, is an

example, is by definition mannered, never more so than in the dualities (the loved and the loveless, the buyers and the bought, the strong and the weak, etc.) that function so effectively in first-rate Williams. In this much-awaited (and so inevitably disappointing) teaming with Marlon Brando, Magnani didn't want to play "weak," wanted her trapped, frustrated invalid's wife to "have balls," to quote director Sidney Lumet quoting her. This results in an interesting but not entirely justified softening of Brando's guitar-playing stud.

Otherwise Magnani's instincts seem right for the text and the context. She nuances the first big high-flown confrontation with Brando through the fluid expressiveness of her hands, using them in turn to worry, deny, lash out, protect her physical and emotional modesty, and ultimately to reach out imploringly. Other scenes are notably spare of gesture (the whole performance is somewhat grave, short on self-mockery and laughter), and this seems right, too. Though Magnani is playing a "dago bootlegger's daughter" in a Dixie backwater, the Orpheus myth is, after all, Greek. Magnani's Grecian purity and simplicity in a couple of Williams' patented OB/GYN monologues make pregnancy seem akin to beatification, its unwanted termination akin to perdition. Also pure and simple, if more quotidian, is her craving for sleep; she does it better than anyone except the real-life insomniac Marilyn Monroe.

The American impression of Magnani's career after the critical drubbing (only half deserved) and box-office failure of *The Fugitive Kind* is of a petering out or decline. While it's true she wasn't as busy as before, it's also true that when *Two Women* was planned as an English-language film with Cukor as director, Magnani was offered the mother role. She later admitted she turned it down out of vanity about playing mother to as mature and voluptuous an actress as Sophia Loren. Loren finally played the mother role herself, in Italian, under De Sica's direction, and won an Oscar. And De Sica, a viable Magnani collaborator, then made a career out of directing Loren (with Marcello Mastroianni).

Among other veteran Magnani collaborators, neither Rossellini nor Fellini nor Visconti was any longer making the kind of film she could fit into. But in 1962, she worked with the up-and-coming Pier Paolo Pasolini on *Mamma Roma*. The title tells only half the story



OPEN CITY.

—Magnani's character is both mother and whore. As the whore, she has a scene, perhaps seven minutes long and done in a single traveling shot, that knocks the wind out of you. Returning to her outdoor suburban Roman stomp-ing grounds after an absence of months, Magnani struts a gauntlet of old friends, enemies, and neutrals, responding to warm greetings, returning vulgar insults, and just shooting the breeze. At least twice you think, This is a stupendous coup de cinema, an exemplary fusion of form and content, of technique and spontaneity, but they can't sustain it a second longer. But Magnani and Pasolini not only sustain it—they scale, indeed sail right over brand-new, even higher peaks.

Unfortunately, the movie never comes up with anything else remotely comparable to this scene. *Mamma Roma's* updated neorealism and Magnani's update on Nanarella failed at the Italian box office, and that failure dried up the flow of film offers. Magnani went back to the theater, where in the



THE GOLDEN COACH.

mid Sixties she had triumphs in Menotti's staging of *Medea* and Zeffirelli's of *La Lupa*. You almost wish she had stayed in the theater instead of accepting the Hollywood-financed, Italian-filmed, Stanley Kramer-directed *Secret of Santa Vittoria* ('69). In her last big-screen starring role, Magnani came perilously close to a Fifties nightclub impersonation of herself. But in 1971–72 there were four well-received telefilms, all conceived for her, as a tribute to her, and all directed by Alfredo Gianetti. Mastroianni costarred in one.

And then finally there was her 60-second appearance in *Fellini Roma* in 1972, a year before her death of pancreatic cancer at 65. At the very end of the film, there's a nocturnal encounter with Magnani on the street outside her apartment building. It's probably as staged as anything else in Fellini's over-baked, pseudo-documentary phantasmagoria on the Eternal City. But Magnani, calling one last time on her gift for judging what a film needs of her and then delivering it, gives the episode an honesty the rest lacks. After the Maestro's offcamera voice identifies her for the spectator, he notes that "she might well be the living symbol of the city."

"You think so?" Magnani replies with skeptical amusement.

"Rome seen as vestal virgin, she-wolf, an aristocrat and a tramp, a somber buffoon," Fellini gasses on.

"Oh, Federico, I'm far too sleepy now," says Magnani, a tad impatient.

"May I ask you a question?" Fellini persists.

"No, I don't trust you," Magnani answers the colleague of neorealist days who went on to an increasingly surreal and self-referential cinema. "Ciao, go to sleep," she adds, ending the interview, the film, her own life on the screen. ❀

The following Anna Magnani films are available on videocassette in the U.S.: *Open City* (Video Award), *Teresa Venerdì/Doctor Beware* (Rizzoli A.C. Video), *Peddlin' in Society* (Video Room, New York), *Amore* (Connoisseur Video title for *L'Amore*), *Bellissima* (Rizzoli A.C.), *The Golden Coach* (Balzac Video; Voyager Criterion laserdisc), *The Rose Tattoo* (Paramount Home Video), *The Fugitive Kind* (Key Video), *Roma* (MGM/UA Home Video title for *Fellini Roma*). The Connoisseur release of *Mamma Roma* is pending. *Wild Is the Wind* is not yet on video but has recently joined the American Movie Classics repertory.

Donald Chase has written frequently on film subjects for *The New York Times*.