

Delirious Naples: Hofstra University spotlights Naples

Daniele Demarco (November 21, 2011)



More than forty experts met at Hofstra University's campus on Long Island to present the capital of Campania to the American public

Despite being one of the most critical periods of time for Naples, including an ongoing, unsolvable situation for the past seventeen years involving the city's uncollected trash, there are those on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean who view Campania's capital as the epicenter of music, literature, and culture. Pellegrino D'Acierno is Professor of Comparative Literature at [Hofstra University](#) [2]. For the love of Naples, the city where he studied when he lived in an apartment on the Riviera di Chiaia, D'Acierno, along with his colleague Stanislao Pugliese, was able to assemble a team comprised of more than forty intellectuals who share his sentiments. It took eighteen months to bring together this sort of "dream team," but in the end the effort paid off. Yesterday morning, the team met at Hofstra University's Cultural Center to begin a cultural marathon that would last, seemingly nonstop, until Saturday, November 19.



The title of the conference is resonant and evocative: “Delirious Naples.” This name, D’Acierno explained during his introduction, aims to be an anthem for the many contradictions embodied in one city that, like a labyrinth, seems to hide its secrets and rebel against any kind of interpretation. It is the Naples that speaks with the voice of the Cumaean Sibyl, the Naples that has bewitched true intellectuals such as Goethe, Nietzsche, and Walter Benjamin, the Naples that deserves to be understood beyond the stereotypes and clichés. Professors D’Acierno and Pugliese’s initiative becomes all the more admirable if one considers Naples’s image abroad. Few students on campus took part in an event that was mainly geared to an audience of experts and enthusiasts.

Students rarely think of Naples as a city of culture like Rome, Florence, or Venice. Many associate it with scenic wonders that in reality are located outside the city in places like Capri, Pompeii, and Herculaneum. Others, however, associate it with stereotypes like pizza and the mandolin, and even with organized crime and uncollected trash. Then there’s someone like Michael, 26, a student at Hofstra’s law school who asked if Naples is a city in the South of France. But Michael seemed quite informed about recent developments in Italian politics. He is familiar with Mario Monti and knows the situation surrounding outgoing Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. If this young person, a product of the American university system, had attended the event at the Cultural Center, he surely would have discovered an unknown world. Naples, one of the most important and beautiful cities on the Peninsula, is a metropolis that, as Fred Gardaphé, Professor Emeritus of Italian and Italian American Studies at [Queens College/CUNY](#) [3], has said, “was among the richest and most cultured in Europe.” It’s also true that the city has experienced difficult times: immigration, earthquakes, and cholera. It has fallen so far from glory that, as Gardaphé observes, someone can yell “Vaffannapoli” (literally “Go to Naples”) in a derogatory sense, as if to say “Go to hell.”

All this, however, has not detracted from the capital city’s hidden assets and untapped potential. “Once upon a time,” reflects Professor D’Acierno, “the city of Naples was a cosmos. Today it has turned into a chaos-mos.” Associate Professor of Italian Studies Patrizia La Trecchia stresses that without the cultural layers that are concentrated in that chaos, Naples would not be able to produce those influences that make its culture so special. “From a cultural point of view,” Professor La Trecchia added, “today Naples is the forerunner in new models of globalization, a globalization that’s south-centric and tends to incorporate influences from all over the Third World. In this sense, rap influenced by the Neapolitan group Almamegretta with its Arab tones and warbling is really a symbol of the city.” Music was the main theme that ran through the first day of “Delirious Naples.” It was the music of Naples that first enchanted Nelson Moe, Associate Professor of Italian at [Columbia University](#) [4]. Professor Moe recalled the days when he was in Naples to study the work of Carlo Levi. His walks included stops on Via San Biagio dei Librai, the famous street in the historic center dotted with small book shops. “During those months,” he said, “I remember the songs of Pino Daniele in particular. And through his music I learned about Naples, a city where you never really know how to be alone.” At one point during the conference, songs from the musical comedy Scugnizzi were played. The music, according to Stanislao Pugliese, was reminiscent of the chorus at the stadium after the Naples–Milan soccer match last September, where the home team won 3–1 in a comeback with a one goal disadvantage. At the end of the match, the entire stadium sang “[O Surdat nnamurat](#) [5],” one of the classic Neapolitan songs, but it’s also an anthem for fans of the Naples team. John Monteleone and John Barbera, both musicians of Italian descent, demonstrated the influences of Neapolitan music on the American musical repertoire. Monteleone has even suggested the influence of the mandolin on traditional blue-grass music genre, the branch of country music more open to European folk music.

Joseph Sciorra, Associate Director of Academic and Cultural Programs at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, traced the footsteps left by the Neapolitan song “[Core ‘ngrato](#) [6]” on the Italian and Latin American repertoire, tracking down samples of musical notes in old movies, rap songs, comic sketches by Franco and Ciccio, and even in a recent episodes of the Sopranos. B. Amore, an artist and writer who works in both Italy and the United States, brought the first day of “Delirious Naples” to a close. Amore created a site-specific installation and ten additional multi-media pieces for the occasion. Every single piece focuses on the historical and cultural relationship between Naples and New York as well as the experience of immigrants from southern Italy. In these pieces, Amore has incorporated everyday objects: things unearthed by chance in basements and warehouses, written documents of valuable historical record, old letters, and musical scores.



"Perhaps," she said, "if these materials can become art, one day even the garbage in Naples can become art." At the end of the evening we met Angelo Cannavacciuolo, a Neapolitan actor and writer known to Italian audiences for playing the part of Marina Suma's bumbling brother in [Sapore di Mare](#) [7] (Taste of the Sea, 1983), one of the most popular Italian comedies directed and produced by the Vanzina brothers. Over time, Cannavacciuolo has managed to shake off that role and capture the attention of critics as a director and novelist. His latest book, *Le Cose Accadono* (Things Happen), published in 2008, was awarded the prestigious Premio Domenico Rea prize for fiction.

Cannavacciuolo was among the presenters at the second day of "Delirious Naples," which focused on Neapolitan literature from Matilde Serao to Anna Maria Ortese and Fabrizia Ramondino. Cannavacciuolo's goal was to explain to American and Italian-American audiences the importance of their views in a comprehensive reading of the city that manages to do justice to its true soul. "We need," he said, "an external eye that observes us and can bring to light all of those aspects of our Neapolitan being that we have internalized and can longer interpret objectively."

The image of the city that is reflected from across the ocean can help us understand ourselves better. Even the effort made today to try and translate some typical expressions in Neapolitan dialect for the audience present can become an excellent tool for self-analysis and self-awareness. There are, in fact, phrases, clichés, proverbs, and phrases from old songs that we now repeat almost mechanically without understanding the meaning. But their meaning is contained in the soul of the city. From this point of view," Cannavacciuolo continued, "an event like Delirious Naples can teach us a lot."

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Links

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- [2] <http://www.hofstra.edu/home/index.html>
- [3] <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Pages/default.aspx>
- [4] <http://www.columbia.edu/>
- [5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHZKzvKqBDI&feature=related>
- [6] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5nUjj3ekc>
- [7] http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapore_di_mare