Anna Magnani and Larry Chance in *The Rose Tattoo* (1955). Paramount Pictures / Photofest. © Paramount Pictures.

Mississippi Magnani: Transatlantic Collaborations and Civil Rights in *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Fugitive Kind*

Tiffany Gilbert

When we spoke I had no idea how impulsive and Southern she was.
—Tennessee Williams

Everything hinges on how Magnani uses her voice.
—Michal Grover-Friedlander

In 1982, in an interview with the journalist James Grissom, Tennessee Williams reflected upon the denouement of art and America. Dreading the inexorableness of age or suffering from the ragged existential hangover after a life of acclaim and addiction, Williams was nevertheless clear about the date of the end. "We sit here today," he tells Grissom, "and I have to say that everything really fell apart in 1973. Green tables on the television over which the entire Watergate soap opera played its sad fable. William Inge takes that final drive in that car in the Hollywood hills." Whereas Nixon's fall and Inge's suicide evoke the passing of an idea of America—exceptional, moral, splendid—and Williams's recognition of his own artistic evanescence, another loss pierces the playwright's heart: "And Anna Magnani dies, far away from me, silent and weak. Age has made it difficult for me to have much faith in things, but the death of Anna Magnani has made it almost impossible. It still seems incomprehensible that the world—my world—can function without her in it" ("Tenn"). Williams would die a few months later, in February 1983, at age seventy-one.

How do we comprehend the transatlantic scope of Williams's despair? Of the stars who portrayed his heroines on screen, Anna Magnani, I maintain, occupied the artistic and spiritual center of gravity of Tennessee Williams's dramatic cosmos. For her, Williams crafted the roles of Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo* (1950) and Lady Torrance in *Orpheus Descending* (1957), Italian immigrant women whose difference and desires crackled within the charged air of the Delta. Enticing Magnani to New York for the Broadway run of *The Rose Tattoo* was another story, however. In the summer of 1950, while vacationing in Italy, Williams was on a mission to gauge her interest. Magnani played coy, but the two eventually met in August in Rome. Writing to "Pru," whom Philip C. Kolin identifies as Truman Capote, Williams described his first encounter with the unpredictable star:

> When we spoke I had no idea how impulsive and Southern she was. There was a wait of almost an hour and then she sent some courier to ask me to meet her in front of the most ebullient and noisy sidewalk café in the city. She pretended as I expected she would not to speak English [sic] but then in the excitement of several moments she allowed that she could manage. In fact, darling, her accent is clear and her fluency sufficient. [. . .] She is beautiful and overwhelming, she is the meaning of sex and the force of life and when she laughs all of the questions about the why of everything are addressed more than adequately. (qtd. in Kolin 171)

Williams repeated these sentiments to Paul Bigelow, adding that Magnani possessed "the warmth and vigor of a panther" (*Selected Letters* 339). Citing her limited English, Magnani agreed to star only in the film adaptations of *The Rose Tattoo* (1955) and *The Fugitive Kind* (1960).[1]

A decade after Williams and Magnani's introduction, in a 1961 piece for *Life* entitled "Five Fiery Ladies," Williams dashed off quick, incisive tributes to Vivian Leigh, Geraldine Page, Elizabeth Taylor, and Katharine Hepburn. When it came to praising Magnani, he signaled his adoration with an emphatic typographical gesture: "MAGNANI! I put the name in caps with exclamation point because that is how she 'comes on'" (118). Coming to America, in her mid-forties, Magnani challenged the Hollywood beauty standard that dominated filmmaking after World War II. With her famously undisciplined hair, dark, encircled eyes, and aquiline nose, she

lacked Grace Kelly's icy, patrician bearing, Audrey Hepburn's gamine elegance, and Elizabeth Taylor's magnificent glamour. Magnani, instead, was a switch—sudden, absolute. "In a crowded room," Williams continued in *Life*, "she can sit perfectly motionless and silent, and still you feel the atmospheric tension of her presence, its quiver and hum in the air like a live wire exposed, and a mood of Anna's is like the presence of royalty. Out of this phenomenon of human electronics has come the greatest acting art of our times" (118).

With Magnani, Williams accessed alternative aesthetic and political vernaculars with which to experiment in his dramaturgy. In "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*," for example, he decoded some of his motivations for developing such a thematically and philosophically divergent work:

> *The Rose Tattoo* is the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance. [. . . I]t is the desire of an artist to work in new forms, however awkwardly at first, to break down barriers of what he has done before and what others have done better before and after and to crash, perhaps fatally, into some area that the bell-harness and rope would like to forbid him. (63)

His treatments of Italian subjects in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Orpheus Descending*, as well as his search for "new forms," were inspired by the post–World War II flourishing of neorealist cinema, a dynamic visual sensibility and language perfected by directors like Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica. In 1948, Williams visited Visconti on the set of *La terra trema*, based on Giovanni Verga's 1881 verismo masterpiece, the novel *I Malavoglia*. Such was Williams's fascination with this emerging aesthetic that he advised producers staging *The Rose Tattoo* to approach it "not with mere realism but with that poetically expressive treatment of realistic detail which has been called the 'New Realism' as it is portrayed in the Italian films of Di Sica [sic] and Rossellini" (qtd. in Parker, par. 8). Daniel Mann and the cinematographer James Wong Howe, according to R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray in *Hollywood's Tennessee: The Williams Films and*

Postwar America, reproduced the neorealist style for the film version by incorporating its visual hallmarks:

> [T]he camera sometimes focuses as much on the community—particularly the chorus of village women, who serve mainly as comic relief—as it does on the principals. Wallis (with Mann evidently not objecting) was more interested in making a muted, realistic drama, in the vein of *Sheba* and other small black-and-white adult films of the period. Frequent long takes afford the actors (particularly Magnani) the opportunity to shape multilayered performances, usually glimpsed in medium long shots that place the characters firmly within a carefully observed milieu. (113)

Williams's ambitions to master new modes of expression notwithstanding, Giuliana Muscio in "A Transcultural Perspective on the Casting of *The Rose Tattoo*" credits Magnani with securing Williams's neorealist bona fides and with keeping *The Rose Tattoo*'s

> complex aesthetic project together, through her incredible performance, in which all her abilities are at play: her earlier experiences in vaudeville, encouraging her spontaneity, her work with the neorealist masters, the strong female characters she was called to play in those years, her very womanhood (the special gift to be both a sloppy housewife and a seductive Southern Italian woman), most of all, her intensity. (31)

Muscio's commendation applies only to the affective ephemera of Magnani's performative skills, for Magnani contributes more than "spontaneity" and "intensity" to Williams's "aesthetic project." Robert Rea insists upon a reading of *The Rose Tattoo* as

> a global model [that] reorients the South away from the North and toward the world, meanwhile transforming time-worn, insular concepts of place. From this perspective, the immigrant figure urges the audience to rethink the traditional image of the South on a much broader scale. In doing so, the sense of place imagined in *The Rose Tattoo* draws attention to the U.S. South as a crossroads of the world. (141)

To Rea's point, Magnani's physical and vocal presence in the films globalizes Williams's discussion about the South's racial dilemma in ways

that Maureen Stapleton's performances as Serafina and Lady, for which she "passed" as Italian on Broadway, never could achieve. Indeed, Magnani's outsider status affords Williams critical and creative "cover" to crack the veneer of a romanticized South alluded to in plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Her United States film output (including George Cukor's *Wild Is the Wind* [1957]) tracks a gathering storm of civil and cultural change—1954's *Brown* decision; the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi; Rosa Parks's bus protest in Alabama that same year; and Arkansas's Little Rock Nine, in 1957. Situating her performances within this context of upheaval yields a fascinating reading of the Magnani-Williams partnership. Together, in Mann's *The Rose Tattoo* and Sidney Lumet's *The Fugitive Kind*, star and playwright collaborate in a transatlantic critique of whiteness, in which Magnani serves as agent of rebellion and proxy for minority rage.

Serafina Strikes Back in *The Rose Tattoo*

Of the two films, *The Rose Tattoo* ends—albeit tenuously—happily; Williams called it, in dedication to his partner, Frank Merlo, "my love-play to the world" (*Memoirs* 162). It is, like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, loud—the outside world is only one bleating goat, booming banana truck, or cackling *strega* away. Yet underneath its comic veneer runs a current of rage, sorrow, lust, all the more electric because of Magnani herself. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Magnani portrays Serafina with an arrogant regality, born out of the character's unabashed sexual adoration for her once baron, now banana-truck-driving husband, Rosario. When her priest and other neighborhood wives tell her the tragic news of Rosario's fiery death during a high-speed police chase, Magnani does not indulge audience expectations for a signature primordial wail; she does not shout her beloved's name the way she shouts "Francesco!" in the 1945 Italian film *Roma, città aperta*. Instead, Serafina's voice catches in her throat as she pleads, "Don't speak." She spends much of the film in prolonged mourning. But Serafina's mourning is anything but passive: in cremating her husband's remains, she defies the laws of the church; in demanding that her priest reveal Rosario's confession and the truth of his infidelity, she scandalizes her faith; in ignoring her hygiene and dress, she embarrasses

her daughter, Rosa (Marisa Pavan). As Serafina, Magnani "comes on" (to invoke Williams) less as a pariah than as a patron saint of social rebellion and brazen femininity.

Like many works in the Williams canon, *The Rose Tattoo* fixates on otherness, which manifests itself as linguistic, religious, ethnic, national, social, and generational difference. In a scene invented for the film, Magnani and Pavan enact these transcultural divisions between mother and daughter over civics. Returning late from her school's spring formal, where she falls in love at first dance with the Navy seaman Jack Hunter, Rosa claims instead to have spent the night studying for an exam. Serafina, ironing graduation dresses, does not buy Rosa's excuse:

> SERAFINA: Civics, you study civics till a quarter past one?
>
> ROSA: Yes, I study civics. Civics is very important, and tomorrow's the final.
>
> SERAFINA: Oh, I know.
>
> ROSA: I'm very tired, Mama. Help me unfold the sofa, will you?
>
> SERAFINA: Come here, Rosa, come on. Kneel to Our Lady and swear to me you study civics.
>
> ROSA: No, I will not.
>
> SERAFINA: Because you don't study no civics tonight.
>
> ROSA: "Don't study no civics." Why do you talk like you just came over in steerage? This isn't Sicily, Mother, and you are not a baronessa. You do sewing. Daddy . . . Daddy hauled bananas. He hauled bananas and something under the banan—[2]

At that moment, Rosa cannot speak another syllable: Serafina slaps the words out of her daughter's mouth, striking her into silence with enough force to push her out of the frame. "You don't study civics no more," she says, resuming her ironing. Mocking her mother's English, Rosa hits a nerve at the center of the immigrant experience: language. Rose De Angelis recalls the social history influencing Serafina's interactions:

> The daily negotiations between the language of origin and that of the host country became an expression of the intrinsic tension in the everyday lives of immigrant men and women. While *campanilismo* [a coalescing of group identity around

> the place its members live or came from] fostered the illusion of an Italian village in America and created the security of an extended family, it also isolated immigrants from American life and from learning the English language. (21)

In this light, the word *civics*, repeated seven times throughout their dispute, takes on increased significance. It emphasizes the rights and practices of citizenship—how to be an American. It suggests Rosa's individual freedom, which Serafina counters with religious fervor and maternal superiority. When Serafina bars Rosa from learning civics, we sense her opposition to her daughter's Americanization. It is worth noting that Serafina's predicament in some ways resembles Magnani's. The invented scene makes use of Magnani's linguistic otherness to emphasize critical tensions between Serafina, who immigrates to America to marry a stranger, and Rosa, who, we infer, is American-born. At the same time, those tensions between characters call attention to the linguistic and discursive displacement that Magnani, with all her international cachet, still experiences in Williams's mid-century South.

Similar tensions arise when Jack, who, with one exception, wears only his summer white service dress, meets Serafina for the first time. When Serafina impresses upon Jack the Sicilian ways of love, he responds with naïve, excited patriotism. He reminds Serafina that she no longer lives in Sicily, that "[t]his is the United States." However, Williams locates this story in the American South, a region the public eye associated with hatred and suspicion of nonwhites, including Italian immigrants who worked the sugar plantations in the Delta when freed black men and women fled North. According to the historian Clive Webb, twenty-nine Sicilians were lynched between 1886 and 1910, victims of Reconstruction-era xenophobia that escalated into mob violence. As he explains, "The complex social status of Sicilians intersected both ethnicity and race. In terms of their nationality, culture, and religion, Sicilians constituted a distinct ethnic minority [and were] cast as alien outsiders and unworthy to claim the political privileges of whiteness" (177–78).

Within the world of *The Rose Tattoo*, Serafina inhabits a zone that is largely insulated from the pressures and "privileges of whiteness." Her estrangement is, for the most part, by design: her unlicensed sewing

business is home-based and ensconced within the comfort of her immigrant community. Williams conveys the vivid romanticism of Serafina's orbit in his production notes: "We see an interior that is as colorful as a booth at a carnival. There are many religious articles and pictures of ruby and gilt, the brass cage of a gaudy parrot, a large bowl of goldfish, cut-glass decanters and vases, rose-patterned wallpaper and a rose-colored carpet; everything is exclamatory in its brightness like the projection of a woman's heart passionately in love" (*Rose* 269–70).

The Gulf Coast setting of *The Rose Tattoo* remains a segregated place in which Italians create their own community but into which white people trespass and take. We see this dynamic play out in the film's opening frames. Instead of unveiling the Sicilian neighborhood, its music and people, as directed in the play, Mann inserts a scene that takes place downtown, where a couple of giddy children question a woman as she leaves a tattoo parlor. The woman (Virginia Grey), blonde and monochromatically appareled to amplify her Waspy exterior, tells them she received a rose tattoo "right over my heart." By shifting between two locations at the beginning of the film, Mann visually conveys both the geographic and the cultural separation between the Sicilian and white communities. Magnani's Serafina first appears at the local grocer's, surrounded by other Italian wives who dispute her choice in eggs. Only Grade A eggs for her Grade A husband, Serafina proudly asserts. Magnani, as in many of her previous works, stands out from the crowd: in her black skirt, cinched in to accentuate her shape, and décolletage-enhancing blouse printed with palm fronds, her hair elegantly coiffed, she cuts a stylish figure among the complaining horde in their unflattering housedresses. Serafina returns home, where Grey's Estelle, Rosario's lover, waits with a yard of rose-colored silk and a request: she wants Serafina to make a shirt for a man who is "wild like a Gypsy." Magnani's Catholic gentility contrasts with Grey's abrasiveness: "I am a married woman in business. I don't know nothing about wild men and wild women." Serafina's entrepreneurial status and sense of propriety elevate her above Estelle, the blackjack dealer at the seedy Mardi Gras Club.

The Rose Tattoo portrays whiteness through the specter of white women, who figure as marital threats, paternalistic rescuers, or vulgar

Fig. 1. A disheveled Serafina (Anna Magnani) defies her daughter's teacher (Dorrit Kempton) in *The Rose Tattoo*.

gossips. When Serafina, angry at Rosa for her interest in a sailor she met at a school dance, refuses to allow Rosa to attend her high school graduation and withholds the formal dresses sewn for the daughters of the local women, chaos erupts. Rosa threatens to cut her wrists, the gaudy parrot squawks, and Serafina shouts at everyone. As the women storm the porch en masse, Rosa's teacher, Miss Yorke (Dorrit Kempton), arrives. They appeal to her in a flurry of Italian to settle the melee. "You ladies know I don't understand Italian! So, please," she begs. Her generalization, "You ladies," smacks of smug condescension, but she intercedes on their behalf. Adopting a patronizing tone, Miss Yorke chastises Serafina—who is dressed in a torn nightgown and sloppy robe, still mourning her husband three years after his fatal accident—for her irrational behavior and indecent attire (fig. 1). Unimpressed with the teacher's presumptive airs, Serafina pounds her stomach. "You make me sick!" she says. Rosa, overwhelmed with embarrassment, runs into the street. Serafina's private suffering now becomes an object of public scrutiny. Despite the attention, she remains unbowed and curses the school:

> SERAFINA: Rosa! How high is this high school where she gets mixed up with a sailor? How high is this high school? I will show you. It's high like that horse's dirt on the street. That's your high school! Scuola maledetta! Scuola maledetta!

> MISS YORKE: Mrs. Delle Rose, I don't understand how a woman that acts as you could have such a sweet and refined young girl for a daughter.
>
> SERAFINA: Oh, my. Do you want me to talk refined, do you? Then do me this one thing please! Stop ruining the girls at the high school!

Stiff and prim, Miss Yorke attempts to shame Serafina into compliance. Serafina views her and the school as the source of Rosa's ruination. Indeed, reiterates Rea, "A generational clash organizes the initial conflict around two competing sets of values." Rea quotes Jacob Adler's observation that "the family's new 'environment has made Rosa not Sicilian, not Southern, but American'" (144). Rosa's embarrassment is born not only out of disgust for Serafina's dress—Serafina can change, if she prefers—but also out of her mother's disregard for authority; the other women and Rosa seek Miss Yorke's guidance, but Serafina does not. Serafina's incivility brands her, in Rosa's eyes, "the freak of the neighborhood."

There is something gloriously freakish about the Italian star in this scene, in that she departs from normative modes of Hollywood femininity: conventionally beautiful, young, and fertile. Opposite Kempton's uptight spinster and Pavan's virginal ingénue, Magnani, at forty-seven, occupies a cinematically tangential space: middle life. In *The Rose Tattoo*, she embodies a bold, mature sexuality; she portrays a widow who mourns the death of her husband, whose body she adored, as the end of *her* desire. In appearance and performance, she offers a robust, sensual alternative to the theatrical and stylized representations of middle-aged women more typical of Hollywood at the time, which generally portrayed their sexuality as either nonexistent or an object of anxiety, pity, or comedy. (Compare Magnani's Serafina to some of the roles played by her United States contemporaries: for example, Gloria Swanson's delusional has-been in *Sunset Boulevard*, Bette Davis's imperious Elizabeth I in *The Virgin Queen* and dowdy Brooklyn mother in *The Catered Affair*, and Joan Crawford's campy saloonkeeper in *Johnny Guitar*.)

Writing Serafina for Magnani and insisting upon a neorealist approach to the film production of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams signaled a shift away from the machinery of Hollywood artifice to a grittier, more poetically

expressive aesthetic. In this regard, one aspect of Magnani's performance stands out for the critic John DiLeo. In *Tennessee Williams and Company: His Essential Screen Actors*, DiLeo salutes Magnani's emotionalism, especially a single handclap that he calls "the one clap," which Magnani deploys to convey Serafina's mood and as a substitute for language. He reasons, "And since Magnani's English can sometimes be a challenge for the listener, these gestures are priceless, even though I suspect that Magnani's Serafina is the kind of generously emotional performance that can be understood without knowledge of either English *or* Italian" (73). His praise notwithstanding, DiLeo seems to imply that Magnani's clapping exists either to compensate for or to mask language difference. However, this conclusion shortchanges Magnani, whose deliberate leverage of silence (e.g., to communicate Serafina's bewildered shock when she realizes Rosario is dead) and substitution of gesture for language (e.g., surprising Estelle with a glancing blow to the face at the Mardi Gras Club) throughout the film suggest artistic choice, not compensation.

Furthermore, to view Magnani's performance style merely as an example of neorealism's aesthetic transposition to Hollywood skirts over the larger implications of her emplacement within this southern context. Williams understood the significance of Magnani's presence. Her emphatically Italian persona and performance generate extra tension for viewers who know about the violence directed at Italians in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast at the turn of the twentieth century—in particular, those who, according to Vincenza Scarpaci, either fraternized with black people, as we see in *The Fugitive Kind*, or "did not fit the expectations of a capitalist society" (63). *The Rose Tattoo* offers the dramatic possibility of resistance. Even in, or perhaps because of, her titanic grief, Serafina confounds the limits of decorum; accosting her priest and Miss Yorke, she upsets the tenuous bonds of "polite" southern society. Through Magnani, the audience enjoys the vicarious thrill of Serafina's defiance. And by aligning Serafina's defiance with ethnic otherness, *The Rose Tattoo* does implicitly what *The Fugitive Kind* will later do explicitly: namely, it links the ethnic persecution of the past with the racial conflict rising in the United States South at the time of filming.

Mann balances Serafina and Miss Yorke's conflict with a similar sequence in which Magnani squares off against Jo Van Fleet and Florence Sundstrom, who portray Bessie and Flora, two middle-aged, "man-crazy" groupies on their way to a legionnaires' convention in New Orleans. The conflict is once again American versus ethnic other, but interestingly, propriety is now aligned with otherness. As the high school marching band's performance of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" is heard in the distance, Serafina struggles to put on a decent dress for Rosa's graduation. Just as she is about to leave, Bessie, with Flora in tow, barges into the house demanding her "sexy" blouse, really just two bandanas stitched together. While they wait for Serafina to finish sewing, Flora and Bessie gossip about a naked girl thrown into a taxi and shout from the window to a carload of balding legionnaires. Their salacious banter offends Serafina, who sternly reminds them, "You are not in a honky-tonk. [. . .] This is the house of Rosario Delle Rose, and I won't have dirty talk in here." Angered by Serafina's haughtiness, Bessie spills the truth about the town's worst-kept secret, Rosario's affair with Estelle Hohengarten: "Everybody's known it but Serafina. I'm just telling the facts that come out at the inquest while she was in bed with her eyes shut tight and the sheet pulled over her head like a female ostrich. [. . .] He had a rose tattoo on his chest, the stuck-up thing, and Estelle was so gone on him she went down to Bourbon Street and had one put on her. Yeah, a rose tattoo on her chest same as the macaroni's." Serafina does not let these slurs slide. She assails Bessie, screaming, "Liar!" as she throws the women onto the street. We learn later that, although police arrive to question Serafina, they do not arrest her.

These two encounters with Miss Yorke and Bessie set up the inevitable clash between Serafina and the "other woman," Estelle, at the Mardi Gras Club. The film departs significantly here from its theatrical antecedent, where the confrontation occurs on the telephone. Here, Magnani, accompanied by Burt Lancaster's Alvaro Mangiacavalli—a buffoonish truck driver who seeks to replace Rosario in Serafina's heart—takes Serafina's righteous anger to Estelle's turf. If Serafina's house, with its religious articles and rules of propriety, is a source of her pride, respectability, and power, the Mardi Gras Club is its sleazy opposite. Serafina storms through the door and demands to see Estelle. We glimpse Magnani through the

Fig. 2. Tennessee Williams's cameo in *The Rose Tattoo*: the playwright is visible as a bar patron wearing a striped shirt.

legs of women dancing on the bar in the foreground; their headless bodies recall the dressmaker dummies in Serafina's house. This kind of action is probably not unusual at the Mardi Gras Club, and most of the patrons appear blasé—except one: Williams himself (fig. 2). Of all the film adaptations of his plays, Williams reserved his only cameo for *The Rose Tattoo*, in which he sits at the bar in a striped shirt. Why does the playwright insert himself in the drama at this moment, in this film? In contrast to Lancaster's character, who looks distressed, Williams, with a hint of a smile on his face, appears to enjoy the spectacle of Magnani at the height of her dramatic powers. "She takes over like Grant did in Richmond," he related in a letter to his former collaborator and director Elia Kazan; indeed, at this point in *The Rose Tattoo*, she "owns" the room (qtd. in Lahr 337). As maker watches muse, Williams's presence immortalizes the collaboration between outsiders—in sensibility, in art, and in desire.

The camera tracks Serafina as she passes through the front of the club, demanding Estelle's whereabouts, to the back, where, behind a beaded curtain, her nemesis deals cards at the blackjack table. Like the rose motif that repeats throughout the drama, details of the women's first meeting

echo in their final exchange—in style (Magnani is in black again; Grey's earlier gray monochrome is now white) and in sentiment:

> ESTELLE: Don't you remember? I brought you the rose-colored silk to make him a shirt. You said, "For a man?" and I said, "Yes, for a man that's wild like a Gypsy!" Remember?
>
> SERAFINA: I remember. [*Serafina strikes Estelle across the face with her purse.*]
>
> ESTELLE: Let me at her! Let me—let go of me! Let me at her! I'll show her whether it's a lie or not. I have proof. I have proof!
>
> SERAFINA: What proof? Please! What proof?
>
> ESTELLE: If she thinks it's a lie, let me show her this. [*Estelle tears open her cardigan.*] See for yourself. His rose tattooed on my chest!

Serafina assaults Estelle with another savage blow. Publicizing her grievance, she rejects decorum and makes a spectacle of herself. Serafina forgets her place—at home, at her church, at the Mardi Gras Club, and even in the South itself.

Unlike Rosa, who assimilates and, by marrying Jack Hunter, is absorbed into the military industrial complex, Serafina lashes out against a system that reduces her baron of a husband to a banana truck driver and forces her to take in sewing to make ends meet. She stands up to the white women who patronize, mock, or cuckold her. Creating Serafina for Magnani, Williams traffics Magnani's established star persona of resistance, disruption, and excess into a storyline entangled in the historical roots of Italians in the American South.

Lady's Blues: *The Fugitive Kind*

By the time Magnani returns to America in 1959, three years after winning the Best Actress Oscar for *The Rose Tattoo*, to star as Lady Torrance in *The Fugitive Kind*, racial strife has escalated in the South. However, for all his plays' surfeit of regional flavor and verisimilitude, Williams avoids explicit confrontation with racial themes. He opts instead for allusions to blues or jazz music, as Nick Moschovakis points out in his essay "Tennessee Williams's American Blues: From the Early Manuscripts to *Menagerie*." In

the case of the musician character Val Xavier, Lady's object of desire and hope for escape (whose name suggests he might be a "savior"), Williams imagines a poseur à la "Mailer's 'white Negro,' an urban hipster, [who] was born of a *ménage à trois* among the bohemian, the juvenile delinquent, and the African American—the latter responsible for bringing 'the cultural dowry' [Mailer's term] of music, language, and attitude" (Goldthwaite). Though the character is explicitly linked to Orpheus in earlier versions of the play, the pedigree of Brando's Val in *The Fugitive Kind*, according to the reviewer Parker Tyler, can be traced to more-contemporary origins. More Beat than Bacchic, this Val, Tyler writes, "is one of the misfits of the great Open Road," or, as Tyler continues, an ersatz Elvis Presley. "The fact that his lifetime racket is playing a guitar for his keep is one of those acutely pathetic things about life in general and the theatrical world in particular" (48). Despite the ubiquity of Val's guitar in the mise-en-scène, the instrument remains largely sidelined. With the exception of one incidental song, Lumet's film deprives this Orpheus in a snakeskin jacket of the vocal powers needed to restore his southern Eurydice to life.

The Fugitive Kind, Williams's third attempt to treat the Orpheus myth (following the failed run of *Battle of Angels* [1941] and its troubled successor, *Orpheus Descending* [1957]), unfolds as a kind of elegy that summons the blues disposition that Ralph Ellison famously describes in his review of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Apart from its musical associations, "[t]he blues," Ellison writes,

> is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (129)

The Fugitive Kind relates the brutal experience of existing under a racially oppressive regime. Such were Lumet's anxieties about telling Williams's story in its native South that he relocated the shooting of the film from the Gulf Coast to Milton, New York. In an interview included on the Criterion Collection edition of the film, Lumet reports, "I didn't shoot the picture in the South, where it should have been shot normally,

because I had a mixed cast racially, and I was not going to expose them to shooting in Mississippi. Pre–civil rights, you know, living in different hotels would have been a nightmare. [. . .] I also thought it might be better for Anna." How, then, does Lumet orchestrate *The Fugitive Kind*'s blues sensibilities around Magnani? As Lady Torrance, she sleepwalks through a disappointed existence, trapped in a vile marriage to a dying, racist merchant. While Brando's Val mumbles and riffs philosophically about abstractions like art and the meaning of existence, Magnani's throaty voice imbues Lady's history with an expressive defiance that richly registers the lower octaves of Lady Torrance's "personal catastrophe."

Magnani's vocal presence, so resonant within the blues-tinged geography of the American South, originates in her postwar Italian films. Famously, in *Roma, città aperta*, Magnani launches into a fusillade of "Francesco! Francesco! Francesco!," a desperate cri de coeur for her fiancé, whom Nazi forces arrest and cart away to a concentration camp. Pitched above the helpless murmuring of the other women with whom she is detained, Magnani's mighty cries are silenced only by the deadly staccato of the Nazi machine guns that kill her. Three years later, in 1948, Rossellini showcases Magnani's vocal mastery in the short film *Una voce umana*, based on Jean Cocteau's play *La voix humaine*, or *The Human Voice*. The story of a jilted woman who languishes in her apartment talking on the telephone to (or waiting for a call from) her recently engaged ex-lover, *Una voce umana* is a self-contained work: there are no entrances or exits; Magnani simply appears, gazing in her bathroom mirror, a worn expression on her face. Apart from an occasional whimper from her dog, footsteps on the landing outside her apartment door, a mélange of indistinct diegetic noises, and the muffled echo of her lover's voice, the predominant sound—the only sound to which we are drawn—is Magnani's voice.

In a 1955 interview with *Cahiers du Cinema*, Rossellini discussed his creative approach to his star. "More than any other subject," the director confessed, "*La voix humaine* gave me the chance to use the camera as a microscope, especially since the phenomenon to examine was called Anna Magnani" (qtd. in Grover-Friedlander 125). Most obviously, the film operates as a microphone that records with agonizing precision the emotional vicissitudes of Magnani's character, on whom the audience eavesdrops. The

film critic Donald Chase comments on the thrilling acoustics of her voice: "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.' The words seem to geyser up from her entrails. Now we *are* transported" (44).

Such dynamic, transporting emotionalism, argues Michal Grover-Friedlander in her book *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*, results in a film that fuses realism with the operatic. Absent any explication of the protagonist's life or any dramatization of inciting events, *Una voce umana* is, like Cocteau's original play and like most productions and adaptations of it, a spectacle of a character's suffering. Rossellini's film is also, however, an audiovisual valentine to and of its sole actress, Magnani. The film's liberal use of long takes (which suited the actress's penchant for improvisation), harsh camera angles, and unflattering lighting enables its audience to witness Magnani qua Magnani. Grover-Friedlander insists, "[T]he film creates its own unexpected form of realism. Beyond any neorealist convention, it is the very presence of the flesh-and-blood Anna Magnani, the actress beyond or above the character she portrays, that makes this film so realistic" (126). Even as the cameras focus on Magnani's magnificently anguished face, Rossellini's filmic decisions subsume the visual into the vocal. Rossellini "deliberately chooses bad and unbeautifying angles, thus highlighting Magnani's *vocal* persona," reasons Grover-Friedlander. *Una voce umana*

> depends predominantly on nuanced inflections in Magnani's voice; its constant "vocal close-up" pits claustrophobic visuals against intense expansions in sound. [. . .] The auditory-vocal space is intensified as hearing and speech are strained to the utmost. The voice suffuses the image or the image drowns in voice. This all-encompassing vocality leads to what I think of as the "operaticness" of the film. (126)

By the end of the film, everything Magnani has said on the phone to her lover—hurried pleas for reconciliation, hushed acquiescence, sudden eruptions of desire—dissolves into razor-edged screams uttered into the void left by her lover's farewell on the other end of the line.

Magnani's intuitive, masterful deployment of her voice becomes a hallmark of her neorealist iconicity. In *Bellissima* (1951), Visconti's film about Maddalena, a resourceful mother who hustles all over Rome to win an audition for her young daughter at Cinecittà Studios, we hear Magnani before we see her. Shouting her daughter Maria's name—the child has disappeared on the sprawling lot—Magnani's voice booms over the cacophonous horde of eager mothers rushing the soundstage and construction crews hammering out new sets. Even a studio functionary announcing the auditions needs a megaphone to compete with Magnani's sonic presence. Tina Chiappetta-Miller frames her discussion of Magnani's voice in *Bellissima* in terms of the "diva" and her ability to master the visual and aural fields. Following Teresa De Lauretis's concept of "imaging," Chiappetta-Miller writes,

> As a signifying process, De Lauretis notes, the cinema "works as an imaging machine, which by producing images (of women or not of women) also tends to reproduce woman as image." Magnani's active engagement in her own imaging complicates this visual reproduction. It is her diva status, articulated via her voice, that ultimately allows her characters to project a struggle that, I believe, more authentically expresses female identity: that is, the struggle between complying with ideologies of femininity and resisting them. (368)

If her voice "projects a struggle," as Chiappetta-Miller claims, Magnani manipulates it to project Maddalena's aspirations. She teaches Maria the proper pronunciation of "soap" ("sa-pon-e") and "school" ("scuo-la"), accenting each syllable to disguise the child's lisp and their social class.

Meanwhile, Magnani's vocality in *The Fugitive Kind* amplifies Lady's diminished position within the racist confines of Williams's fictional Two River County. The daughter of an Italian wine garden proprietor killed by "vigilantes" for selling liquor to "niggers," Lady exists in a peculiar limbo between white and black society. Returning from Memphis, where her husband, Jabe (Victor Jory), was hospitalized, she first appears in the film the morning after a young black man escapes from the town jail and is shot during the manhunt, a portent of the disaster to come. Jabe's friends Dog and Pee-Wee rally around him, helping him out of the car and up the steps; meanwhile, Lady lingers behind, reluctant to join the party in

the general store. Her place in—or, rather, outside—Jabe's circle is clear. Arranging the scene around merchandise and the store's support beams, Lumet divides the frame in half to distinguish Lady's marginal status visually and emotionally; it is hardly coincidental that the scene aligns her with the other outsiders, Val Xavier and Carol Cutrere, on the left side. On the right side of the frame, Dog's and Pee-Wee's officious wives and two spinsters clamor and compliment Jabe's appearance; hobbled, sweaty, and dying of cancer, Jabe nevertheless "looks like he has a Florida suntan."[3] The party scarcely notices Lady. The camera moves with Magnani, and her first speech hints at Lady's predicament—namely, how to assert agency in an oppressive marriage:

> LADY: You see, Jabe? You've got a reception committee to meet us. Ha, ha! They've prepared a buffet supper.
>
> JABE: I see there been some changes made here. How come the shoe department is back there now?
>
> LADY: Well, Jabe, we—we always had the problem with lights in the store.
>
> JABE: So you put the shoe department further away from the window, huh? That's sensible. That's a very intelligent solution to the problem, Lady. Well—tomorrow I'll, uh, get me some men to help move the shoe department back front.
>
> LADY: Okay. It's your store.
>
> JABE: Glad you reminded me of it.

Lady deflects nosy inquiries about Jabe's surgery. When Jabe bangs his cane on the floor to signal that Lady is needed, Magnani's approach to the flight of stairs conveys Lady's trepidation and sense of inevitability.

While Val claims an aesthetic and spiritual attachment to the blues, Lady *lives* the blues. In Val, there remains a frisson of affect. He boasts about his doglike body temperature, superior breath control, and massage skills. In contrast, Lady's lived experience has been a primer in suffering, largely defined by three events: plantation heir David Cutrere's seduction and betrayal; her father's immolation in his wine garden; and her crushing, masochistic marriage to Jabe. Returning late to the store after chauffeuring Carol to a juke joint and the local cemetery, Val overhears Lady mumble to herself, "I wish I were dead. Dead." Like her, Val has become, in his words,

Fig. 3. Lady Torrance (Anna Magnani) confronts David Cutrere (John Baragrey) in *The Fugitive Kind*.

"fed up" with life's absurdities. Yet, whereas he "busts up" a party to express his outrage, Lady languishes in isolation. Much of her interaction with Val, who is looking for a job, thus springs as much from curiosity as from the desire to communicate with someone who may understand her struggle. She pulls up a chair and settles into Val's soliloquy about a mythic bird that "spends its life on the wind." Whether or not she believes his fanciful story is irrelevant; she sympathizes. Val's speech interrupts Lady's loveless existence with Jabe and restores her faith long enough to share her own dream: to build a confectionery behind the store like her father's wine garden. In this moment, Lady is at her most unguarded. Telling Val about her plans to "take advantage of the after the movies trade," she opens up the difficult subject of her father's death. She is on the verge of explaining when the sound of Jabe's cane silences her.

In his essay "*The Fugitive Kind*: When Sidney Went to Tennessee," David Thomson acknowledges, "This is a mood picture, where, if you pay close attention, you can feel the lights come up and fade away to match the eloquence of the speeches." With the exception of its climax, *The Fugitive Kind* is a relatively staid film. It trades on intimacies gradually conveyed through shadows and speech, not sudden action. When Lady's ex-lover David Cutrere (John Baragrey) shows up to escort his sister, Carol, outside

the town limits, Lady tries to play the part of the cool, impartial businesswoman, but unreconciled emotions give way. Lumet stages the scene on the staircase that splits Lady's world between Jabe's hellish sickroom and the paradise her restored confectionery offers (fig. 3). Magnani uses the architecture of the scene to her full advantage, modulating her anger as she descends the staircase. From the top, she asserts her authority: "I told you once to never come in this store. If your wild sister comes here again, send somebody else for her. Not you. Not you. I hold hard feelings." Emboldened, she speaks confidently, emphasizing her agency with each step: "And don't pity me either. I haven't gone down so terribly far in the world. I got a going concern in this mercantile store. And back there is the confectionery which open this spring." The timbre of Magnani's voice darkens as she approaches the store level. Reaching the landing, Magnani pauses to regain her composure; however, her voice struggles to convince us of Lady's indifference. It quavers. She reminds David of their past rendezvous in her father's wine garden and reveals a secret that devastates them both:

> LADY: I carried your child in my body the summer you quit me.
>
> DAVID: I didn't know.
>
> LADY: No. I didn't write you no letter about it. I was proud then. I had pride, that summer they burned the wine garden of my father. And you, you—you washed your hands clean of any connection with a dago bootlegger's daughter. And took that society girl that restored your home place and gave you such wellborn children!

Magnani's voice fingers the jagged grain of Lady's lament, as Ellison might put it. She extends the words "dago bootlegger's daughter," elongating the syllables of the ethnic slur "dago," in particular, to emphasize her foreignness and mock the racism directed at her father. She shames David for giving in to the pressures of inheritance and marrying "up," for reclaiming the privilege of his southern white roots in the face of the violence she experienced. When David tries to embrace her, she composes herself enough to kick him out of the store. She steps back onto the landing to regain her authority over David; through her tears, she croaks out a declaration that no longer attempts to hide her heartbreak: "Get out! Get

out! I just wanted to tell you my life ain't over!" Contrasting her previous self-assured pose, Magnani slumps on the banister, bemoaning the loss of her pride.

After Lady confronts David, she endures Jabe's salacious insinuations about her satisfaction with Val's work, in front of Sheriff Talbot and Vee. Shortly thereafter, Lady asks Val to drive her "some place." The place turns out to be the burned-out ruins of her father's wine garden. Here, she explains how she and her father would sing to the patrons, but now her voice is "cracked." After Sheriff Talbot tracks them down under the specious premise that Jabe's car has been reported missing, they return to the store. Lady suggests that Val sleep in a makeshift bedroom "to save money." This is a ploy, of course, to seduce him. He calls her out and threatens to quit. Lady, crying, begs him to stay because "I need you to live. To go on living."

Palmer and Bray point to the playwright's audacious deployment of sex as a means of salvation. Lady's body, wound tightly like a spring throughout much of the film and long closed off to intimacy after her abortion of David's child, opens itself to Val's tenderness. Lady and Val's relationship marks a critical turn in the film. Whereas the film initially positioned Brando as its visual and narrative catalyst, by the end of *The Fugitive Kind*, Magnani has become its center. To illustrate this development in Lady's character, the film recycles the split framing and blocking featured in Lady and Jabe's return from Memphis. This time, Lady and Jabe fight over a traveling calliope announcing the opening of the confectionery. As before, the camera tracks Magnani on the left, while Jabe, on the right half of the frame, taunts her with ethnic slurs and accusations. "What dago song did you sing?" he sneers, baiting her in order to learn how she paid for the calliope. Lady wearily asks Nurse Porter to take Jabe upstairs, but Jabe cannot stop talking: he divulges the identity of the vigilantes who torched her father's orchards and wine garden. "We rode out there in sixteen automobiles loaded with coal oil. We set the whole place afire. We burned him out." Magnani underplays Lady's disbelief, quietly asking, "Jabe, did you say 'we'?" As he starts upstairs, she grabs him: "Jabe, did you say 'we,' 'we did it'?" When he confesses, Magnani's percussive scream of "No!" mingles with the calliope's distorted cacophony, then

diminishes into a single, barely discernible word, "Papa." Just as he spewed hate, Jabe suddenly vomits blood; Lady, indifferent to his hemorrhaging, storms out of the store.

Magnani's scream in response to the truth of her father's murder lends more than just acoustics to *The Fugitive Kind*; it represents a turning point in the film's racial subtext. Until now, race has either hovered on the periphery or functioned to augment Val and Carol, to give them identity and purpose: Val jams with black blues musicians and collects their autographs on his guitar; Carol attempts to transform herself into a martyr for justice and civil rights, but when she encounters community blowback, she quits and becomes the "lewd vagrant" of her critics' imagination. While Val and Carol co-opt black aesthetics and political indignation, their acts seem more self-indulgent than genuine. In contrast, Lady's father interacted economically with black people—and suffered for it. Thus, when Lady builds her confectionery behind the store, she not only attempts to right a personal wrong; she scripts her own revenge fantasy. She tells Val:

> There's a man up there that set fire to my father's wine garden. I want that man to see the wine garden come open again while he's dying. Tonight, nothing can stop it. It's just something got to be done to square things away. To be not defeated. I won't be defeated, not again, in my life. You get me? Not again!

Lady has endured the emotional tyranny of southern white patriarchy. Unlike Val and Carol, Lady does not speak in abstractions or make empty threats. This is no mere talk. For Lady, Jabe must die for killing her father.

In *The Fugitive Kind*, Magnani's vocality progresses from blues to vengeance, from defeat to triumph. At some point during her affair with Val, which commenced on the evening of Valentine's Day, Lady conceives. When Nurse Porter drops the bombshell about the pregnancy, Lady responds with her most sustained speech of the film. Her fig tree monologue exquisitely balances astonishment and ecstasy. Like so much of Lady's story, it is rooted in her father's garden:

> We used to have a little fig tree between the house and the orchard. It never bore any fruit. We said it was barren. But one morning in spring, I discovered a small green fig on that tree. It seemed such a wonderful thing for the little fig tree to bear that

> it called for a celebration. I ran—I ran to a closet of Christmas ornaments. I took them out. Glass bells, glass birds, and icicles, and tinsel. And I hung the little fig tree with them because it won the battle and it would bear. Oh, Val, unpack the box of Christmas ornaments and put them on me.

Magnani spins Williams's words into a glimmering blues aria. With Val looking on, she recites the sad history of the fig tree. But when she recounts her realization that the tree can bear fruit, her voice quickens. Her excitement manifests itself in the rapid articulation of "glassbellsglassbirdsandicicles." At the word *tinsel*, Magnani pantomimes the moment she consecrated the fig tree's restored fecundity. Extending her arms by her side, she calls attention to her own victorious fertility; Lady, at last, has "won the battle." The camera lingers on the actress's body, elegantly styled in a beaded black dress. Like the tree of her memory, she is beatified with shadow and light. Magnani shows off Lady's delirious sensuality in a spectacular long take. Laughing for the first time in the film, Lady drapes her body with tinsel that adorns the confectionery. She dances down the aisle to the other end of the room. She turns on the Christmas lights to illuminate the space as well as her body. It is a significant gesture. Brando all but disappears from the action, becoming, like the audience, a witness to Magnani's dazzling performance. Her life, as she says, "is beginning again."

Lady's renaissance is short-lived: Jabe torches the confectionery. As it burns, Lady runs upstairs to stop him. Meanwhile, Sheriff Talbot and other local men with fire hoses burst through the doors; instead of extinguishing the fire, they direct the water at Val, forcing him back into the inferno. Lumet's departure from the play's description of Val's death by blowtorch is critical here: fire hoses were becoming the weapon of choice against civil rights protestors for police departments in Mississippi and Alabama at the time, and their use here further cements the association between Val and black culture. Lady's death occurs when she reaches the staircase, the concrete symbol of her purgatorial existence. A bullet strikes her in the stomach, ending her pregnancy and her old and new lives all at the same time: a cruelly apt coda to her tragic life. Dying on the stairs, Lady sighs one final word: "Val."

The Fugitive Kind marked the last installment in Anna Magnani's United States filmography. Failing to equal the success of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams, in "Five Fiery Ladies," attributed some of the blame to his hipster Orpheus: "Mr. Brando comes at a high price in more ways than one, especially for a foreign co-player, still unsure of the language" (118). Williams remained absolutely confident about Magnani's talent, though he had a peculiar way of conveying his approbation. To him, she was a "monster." The term, which she initially resented, was neither a slight nor an insult. For Williams, the word perfectly described her idiosyncratic voice, look, and brand of female stardom. "I told her that all good artists were monsters," he explained in a column for the *New York Herald Tribune*. "In the sense of departing extravagantly from the norm, sometimes in a conspicuous fashion, sometimes in a fashion that almost escapes public detection, but I think they are always monsters if they have greatness" (qtd. in Lahr 376). For Magnani, Williams created characters who, in their way, were equally monstrous—to their communities, even to their own selves. Embodying Serafina Delle Rose's titanic grief and envoicing Lady Torrance's blues, she squeezed Ellison's "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" from her performances. In an era blighted by racial violence and prejudice, the Magnani-Williams collaboration was never more timely.

Notes

[1] *The Rose Tattoo* followed in the thematic shadow of Hal Wallis's 1952 production, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, which starred Shirley Booth as a middle-aged woman whose dreams and desires are sidelined to maintain the sobriety of her volatile husband (Burt Lancaster). *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Fugitive Kind* were part of a three-picture deal Wallis brokered for Magnani; the second film in the sequence of three was George Cukor's *Wild Is the Wind* (1957), which featured Magnani as a neglected immigrant wife who has an affair with a ranch hand (Anthony Franciosa) who works for her husband (Anthony Quinn). Signing the contracts for *The Rose Tattoo* in Rome, Wallis recalled, "She [Magnani] plied us with large quantities of Johnnie Walker Red Label, the only thing she liked to drink, apart from wine" (qtd. in Palmer and Bray 107).

[2] Unless otherwise noted, quotations of dialogue from *The Rose Tattoo* are taken from Mann's film version of the play.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, quotations of dialogue from *The Fugitive Kind* are taken from Lumet's film version of the play.

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