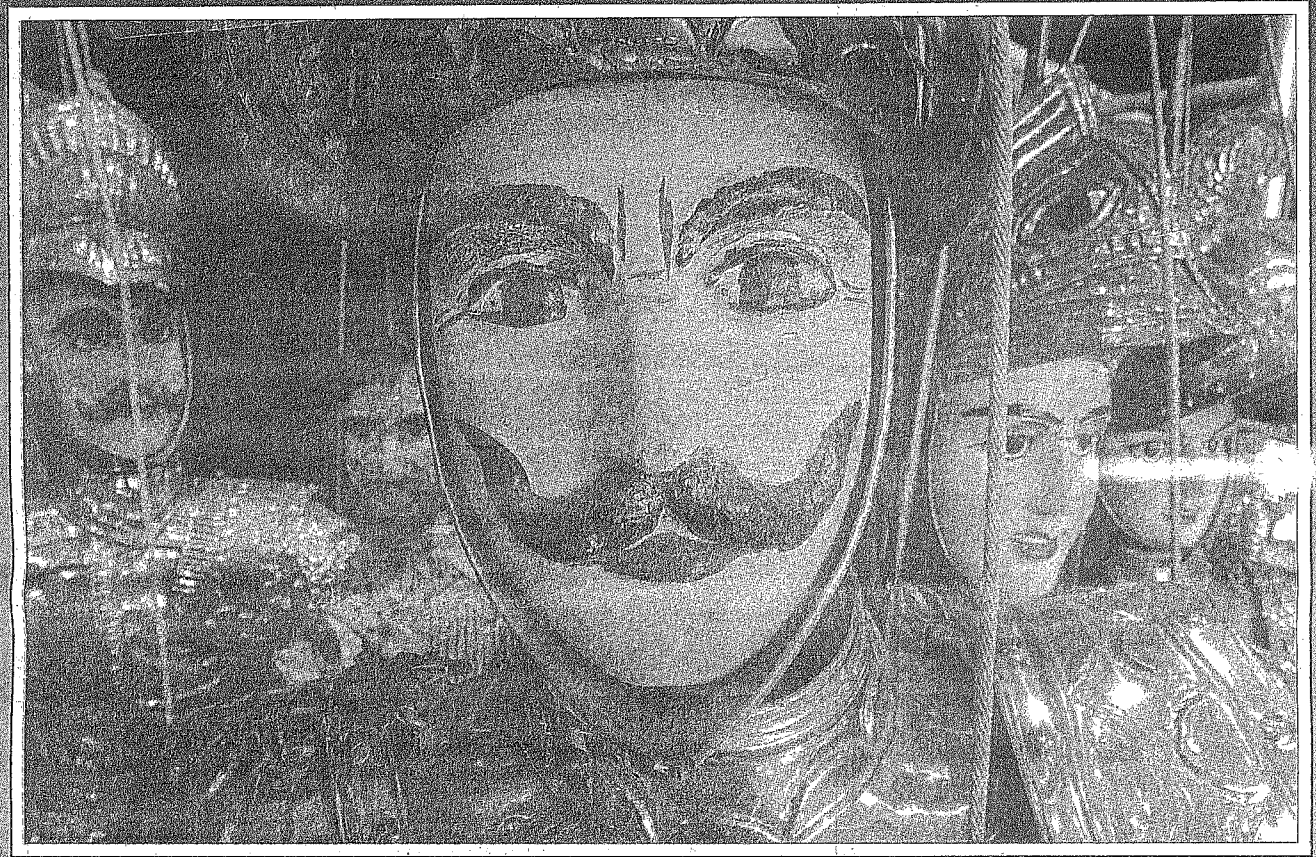
FOOD

A Revival For Root Beer / Page 59

Wednesday New York Newsday Aug. 7, 1991

PART II



Carlotto Martello, a knight, stands guard with the other handmade marionettes at the Staten Island museum

Newsday / Donna Dietrich

Soap Opera of the Dolls

For generations the Manteo family and their marionettes have told a wild saga of blood and valor. Now both are faced with a real-life cliff-hanger.

Pages 56-57

BOOKS: Critic Richard Schickel Takes on Brando / Page 51

Wood and Blood

To the Manteos, the marionettes are more than actors; they're family. And now they're being exiled from their Staten Island home.

BY JONATHAN MANDELL
STAFF WRITER

STAFF PHOTOS BY DONNA DIETRICH

ONCE UPON a time, in a distant land — actually, last month on Staten Island — an evil queen banished the heroes of 10 centuries from their home.

This is how Pino Manteo, a middle-aged man with a defeated look on his face, seemed to view the impending eviction of his family's theater company as he walked among the medieval actors — the damsels in distress, keeping up an elegant front in their lace and velvet, satin and silk; the embattled knights, their helmets made of old lamps or buckets, their armor hammered out of hubcaps picked up on the street, or broken toasters and tea kettles that were donated by members of the audience; the long, sad rows of decapitated heads — all hanging up in a room they have occupied for five years at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

Their faces, as always, were stoic, these 200 nearly life-size, hundred-pound marionettes that Pino, his father, his grandfather, probably even his great-grandfather, and most of the rest of the Manteo family built, rebuilt, painted, repainted, dressed, addressed and brought to life.

"Each one has a story. Each one has a history," Manteo said, as he lumbered past this wooden legacy, the only living example in the United States of a once-popular art form, now imperiled.

The new head of the Staten Island museum, Hedy Hartman, in an abrupt letter to the Manteo family and a press release dated June 26, has given them until September 15th to remove their marionettes, to disassemble the stage with the hand-painted backdrops, and to get rid of the Manteos' backstage workshop, where the family repairs and polishes, hammers and frets over their marionettes.

"Weird person, crazy person," Manteo was muttering emotionally. "She's a Nazi, in my opinion . . ." Before he could bring himself even to mention the latest trouble, he had spent nearly an hour telling stories about the marionettes, and giving a demonstration of his job as a manipulator. He climbed up to the elevated bridge behind the stage, grabbed the two rods and one cord attached to a marionette, and manipulated — the armored figure clomped heavily and noisily about the stage, sword thrust forward, right leg stiff and challenging. "I worked very hard to learn this," he had said after a few minutes, sweat covering his forehead. "It's not easy."

Pino Manteo, above, handles a wooden marionette that his father built. Right, Aida Grillo, foreground, admires Olympia, another Manteo marionette.

The Manteos are used to battles; fighting is a large part of the centuries-old tradition of marionette theater from Sicily known as *opera dei pupi* — opera of the dolls. The Manteo marionettes even had a brief role in the movie "The Godfather, Part II"; a brutal white-suited mobster regards the armored knights clashing on a little stage during an Italian festival in the Little Italy of the 1920s, and says to himself, "Oh, this is too violent for me."

To Manteo, this latest episode in the real life of the marionettes seems just as full of betrayals and deceptions (and even a decapitation — although a metaphorical one) as what his family has made happen for so many years on the stage.

But offstage, the Manteos are not in control. "I'm hoping to get a stay of execution . . .," he said. "I may be able to rally some people but it's not my forte. I'm an electrician and a manipulator. They're taking advantage that we're not politicians. We're artists."

"The bottom line, I wouldn't want to stay here anymore," he said just a few minutes later. "It's an inhospitable atmosphere." If he cannot find a place to move, he said, "I have to break everything down and put it in storage . . . I have to put them away." He said it as if the marionettes are alive and he was saying "put them to sleep."

* * *

It all started with a violent death.

Roland, one of King Charlemagne's knights, was ambushed on returning to France through the Pyrenees from a fight between Christian and Moslem soldiers in Spain. Roland's real death in the Eighth Century became a popular French legend in the 11th, the Song of Roland, where his death is attributed to the treachery of a traitor named Ganelon. Roland became Orlando in the 16th Century when the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto turned the legend into an epic poem, Orlando Furioso. (Orlando is *furioso* — mad — because he is in love with the beautiful Angelica, but she marries somebody else.)

A single, violent, historically insignificant episode grew into an endlessly elaborate saga with hundreds of characters, played by wooden marionettes in an art form that became immensely popular in Sicily. The marionettes were such an intrinsic part of the culture that Sicilian children imitated their characteristic heavy stiff-legged walk. By the middle of the 19th Century, the *opera dei pupi* had a large audience in Sicily, many theaters, and a corps of committed professional puppeteers.

Aida Grillo's grandfather, *Michele* Manteo, was one of them. Eighty-four years old, Grillo sits in her wheelchair, next to her husband, her two grown daughters, and Olympia, who was abducted by pirates wanting to sell her into slavery, but was eventually saved by Orlando. Aida is making a new dress for Olympia, who towers over her and weighs more than a hundred pounds. The Grillo's first-floor apartment is in Bushwick, near the Maria Hernandez Park, named after a woman who was killed for trying to rid the block of drug dealers.

"My father was born in 1884. He was orphaned when he was only three months old," Grillo begins, speaking an English mixed with a little Italian, a little Spanish, and lots of drama. A stray bullet killed her grandfather, she elaborates; a month later her grandmother died. A broken heart. "When Agrippino was 17 years old, he went to Catania to find his father's partners. 'What are you looking for?' 'I want to be a *marionettista*. My father was a puppeteer.' 'Your father was a puppeteer?' 'Yes. His name was Michael Manteo.' 'Your father was Michael Manteo? I'm going to teach you everything.' "

If the story of Agrippino sounds legendary, it comes a century after the facts, recounted by a woman who has spent her entire life telling and retelling medieval tales of blood and valor, greatly embellished by legend and by art.

By all the many accounts, Agrippino Manteo grew up and left Italy with his wife, his infant child — Aida — and his marionettes, moving first to Argentina and then to New York. There in the 1920s he became known as Papa Manteo and opened Papa Man-

Newsday / Donna Dietrich

A queen is flanked by knights and pagans in a collection of 200 marionettes created by the Manteo family. This wooden legacy is the only living example in the United States of a once-popular art form.

teo's Life-Sized Marionettes, first on Catherine Street in the Lower East Side and then on Mulberry Street in Little Italy.

It was a big success with the Italian immigrants: A 1929 Theater Arts Monthly described the show as "great gulps of passion and endless stage brawls," which the audience "devours." Though it was in Italian, the uptown crowd took to it as well, with such theater lights as the Gish sisters dropping in.

The Manteo marionettes performed two to three hours a night, seven days a week; it took 13 months to put on all 394 episodes of Orlando Furioso, three years to complete the entire cycle of Orlando stories that Agrippino had created in his cardboard notebooks.

The saga is Orlando's adventures with princesses and pagans, knights and dragons, sorcerers and snakes while he searches for his love, Angelica. At the very last episode, Orlando blows a horn so hard, trying to warn his people of impending danger, that he dies. "We had a tube, we used to pour the blood in his head," says Aida. "You see the blood coming out of his eyes." It was beet juice.

Although they worked hard to keep to the Sicilian tradition, according to anthropologist Anna Charetakis, the Manteos subtly adapted the show to America, shortening the speeches and emphasizing the action. The battles with fire-breathing dragons became more spectacular, the knights literally flew into each other in combat, and death almost always meant artful decapitation. The Manteos spent much of their time doing repairs.

The devoted audience, which often knew the stories as well as the puppeteers, came back for it all, lured night after night by the cliffhanger endings of each episode. One night the episode ended with Orlando in prison, his armor off, and his hands tied behind his back. "Mama had prepared the dinner for all of us," Aida recounts. "There was a knock at the door. Papa opened the door. 'Mr. Manteo, please, I can't sleep.'

" 'What's the trouble?' "

" 'It's not right to tie him up all night.' "

"He had to go with the man to the theater, and untie the marionette." The customer said he felt better.

Another time, the traitorous marionette Gano so infuriated a patron that he stood up in the audience and fired two very real bullets at him.

But eventually the show's popularity waned, thanks to a new generation of Italian-Americans less familiar with the language and more interested in the movies. One by one the other puppeteers gave up. Agrippino stayed in business. He would buy the others' marionettes, amassing at one point a collection of about 500.

And he kept his family as committed to the craft as he was. Marionette theater, Aida says, has always been a family business: even the name, she says, comes from a young French couple who were puppeteers — they were named Mario and Annette.

From the start, Agrippino had enlisted his five children: his four sons and his daughter, Agata, renamed Aida (nicknamed Ida). They each had a role, and a particular place on the bridge, where they remained, never switching, their entire lives.

From the age of 5, Aida had sewn costumes, painted scenery, and played the piano. When she turned 18, her father asked her to assume the voices for the female parts — and to get up on the bridge and manipulate the marionettes. She was one of the few female manipulators ever, but that was how the Manteo family always worked — nobody was wasted. Indeed, a professional singer named Angelo (Bill) Grillo went to the Manteo theater one night and took a seat reserved for someone else. Ida started arguing with him. "Look," her brother Leo said finally (as Bill tells it) "let's not argue. Come on the stage."

"It's 55 years now," Bill says with a grin — 55 years he has been a Manteo manipulator, and Ida's husband.

If Agrippino lavished affection and care on his marionettes, his attitude toward his family was more complicated. "He was very strict, I was afraid of him," remembers one of his granddaughters, Joan Lauria, who can still hear his barking *'Llave de manos.'* Wash your hands. "All he had to do was look at us and I . . . ." Lauria shudders. "He never kissed, he never hugged."

"He would kiss them when they were asleep," her mother Ida Grillo says.

Papa Manteo kept the theater going until 1939, although he did not make a living from it; for that, he and his sons had jobs as electricians during the day. "They worked [the marionettes] for four years without a night off," his grandson Pino says, "each performance lasting until ten o'clock. And the next morning, electrical work. You had to be made out of steel."

But then, Papa Manteo's youngest son, Johnny, died of tuberculosis, at the age of 18. "When Johnny died,

Please see PUPPETEER on Page 73

A Legacy Of Wood and Blood

PUPPETEER from Page 57

that was it," says Bill Grillo. They gave up their theater, and would never perform on a nightly basis after that. Eight years later, Agrippino himself died.

"When my father died, it was a big tragedy," says Aida, clearly moved. "For many years, the marionettes were silenced. Whenever a death come, it all was sort of mellowed. But then we pick up and go again."

Responsibility for the marionettes fell to the eldest son, who from then on was called Papa Mike. He did not let the family down. Under Papa Mike's just as painstaking but more benevolent direction, the Manteo marionettes were eventually revived, invited to museums and street fairs, schools and concert halls, Italian clubs and coliseums, TV shows and universities. They received many honors. Candice Bergen visited the Manteos after seeing one of their marionettes in the Smithsonian, next to the smaller Charlie McCarthy, her father's old dummy. Jim Henson paid homage to them, and performed with them, before creating Sesame Street.

Papa Mike's influence extended beyond the famous. Derrick Hunter first saw the Manteos perform at JHS 51 in Park Slope when he was a student there. "I was amazed at the show. What impressed me was, I tried to pick up the marionette and I couldn't. It was too heavy." He accepted an invitation to visit their workshop — and stayed eight years.

"It shaped me, more or less. It got me away from negative things, like crime. I was young and black in Brooklyn; I had a lot of energy. This took up a lot of it. I don't think I'd be as creative now."

Hunter not only worked his way up to manipulator; he also became an electrician. Now 26, married and the father of 6-month-old twins, Hunter is the night electrician for Banker's Trust Plaza and the World Trade Center. "The Manteos gave me my first break.

"I was close to Papa," he says. "Everybody was. I remember Papa saying to me 'No matter what, we'll be friends til the end, pal. Always.' He always said 'pal.' "

* * *

In interview after interview, Papa Mike would always express two dreams — that the marionettes *would live on beyond his death*, and that they would someday be housed in a permanent, traditional theater.

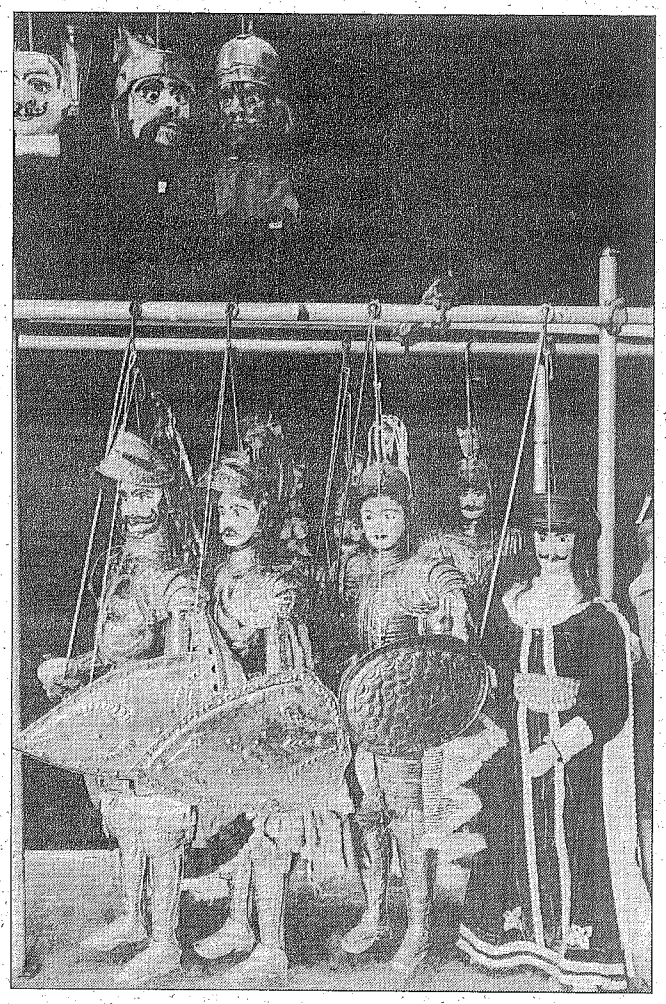
"Papa and I had a private vision not shared by many people to re-create the old theater," says Patricia Michael. Michael had been recruited in the mid-Eighties to head the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences. Her recruiter knew the Manteos. "I visited their electrical shop in Brooklyn," Michael recalls. "Papa Mike had sectioned off about half of the shop for the marionettes. They had been in storage for ten years. There was this huge collection of heads." She fell in love. "I thought it was important for us to get involved."

In 1986, in a "very informal arrangement," Michael gave the Manteos and their marionettes an entire room in the William T. Davis Education Center, the annex of the museum she now headed. The Manteos performed on occasion and would go in whenever they could to make repairs, but the collection served primarily as the focus of a popular lesson for visiting schoolchildren from all over the city. The arrangment made sense for the borough's large Italian-American population, and for Papa Mike, who had moved there.

He could now focus on passing on the tradition. One by one his brothers had died, and his sister Aida got arthritis and needed a wheelchair. Mike himself "was indominable," says Patricia Michael. "He got hit by a truck . . . he tried to take the cast off. He said it was getting in his way."

Still, increasingly infirm, Mike relied more and more on his son, Pino Manteo. "I was the first and the only grandson," Pino explains. "All my uncles had girls. Whether I liked it or not I had to carry around this," he says, waving at the batallion of marionettes. "Growing up I had a strange relationship with the outside world. How could a ten-year-old explain these things? Even as an adult, you can't explain it, you have to see it."

Candice Bergen once said that she experienced sibling rivalry with her father's dummy. Throughout the years, a few members of the Manteo family must have felt powerfully ambivalent about the heavy



Newsday / Donna Dietrich

Knights and decapitated marionette heads hang in storage at the museum.

presence of these hundreds of medieval characters, the burden of continuing the tradition (although they do not say this in public.)

"Not like that," Papa Mike is seen impatiently scolding Pino, a man already in his late 40s, in a 1981 documentary about the family called "Knock On Wood."

A few years later, they performed at the Egg in Albany. "At the end of the performance, he came up to me," Pino recalls. " 'You're a good manipulator now.' Finally."

It was their final big production. Less than a year later, in September, 1989, Papa Mike died, at the age of 80.

"In thirteen to fourteen months, I lost my in-laws and my father and my mother," Pino says, standing amid the marionettes. "It took us a year to get over the deaths. I could not come here. I stayed fifteen minutes and I cried." He interrupts himself. "That's Count Gano," he says, rushing over to a large marionette, the traitor. "You just look at him and you know he's bad."

Later, Pino says, "I must lead the family, whether I like it or not."

* * *

Hedy Hartman has a reasonable-sounding answer for every question about why the Manteos are getting kicked out of the museum. "It was a very tough decision," she says, half wry and half pained, as if trying to explain an unfortunate fact of life to a disappointed child.

Hartman became head of the Staten Island museum about a year ago, when Michael left for a job in Tennessee. After many months of negotiations with the family and their supporters, Hartman says "the staff and the directors agreed unanimously" that the Manteos should leave. (Actually, all but one of nearly a dozen staff members contacted at their homes said they were never consulted, although they did not seem at all outraged at the decision.)

As Hartman explains: The Institute instituted a policy of favoring its own collections, it did not own the Manteo collection, and when it asked the family to donate the collection — which is worth several million dollars — the Manteos ultimately declined. The museum plans to replace the marionettes with an exhibit culled from its permanent collection, to be entitled "From Cicadas to Chagall: A Century of Collecting."

"They're evicting them to exhibit crickets! Crickets," said an outraged Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, NYU professor and president of the American Folklore Society, referring to the cicadas.

Michael, contacted at her new job at the American Association for State and Local History in Nashville, said "it's horrible what's going to happen," but she did not seem to blame her successor. "When you have limited exhibition space, you're not going to spend it on something you don't own." She also said that the family "is very hard to deal with. They were nervous about people — they had been exploited before."

Even some of the family members do not seem especially upset. "It's her job," Pino's cousin Joan Lauria says.

But what about Pino calling her a Nazi, etc.?

"Pino's hurt because of the way they approached it," she says. (Later, Pino himself says "I was just angry.") "We're not worried about it," Lauria says, "something will come up."

The family didn't donate the collection, she says, because there were no provisions discussed for the family's continuing involvement; the museum was planning to hire professional restorers.

"The family's still interested," she says. There's a fourth generation actively involved, a fifth generation eager and in training, a sixth already born and curious about the giant dolls that are part of the family. "I think my granddaughter, who's a year and a half, is beginning to notice that one of the adults never moves," says Lauria's sister Susan Bruno, who, like most of the family members, usually has at least one marionette hanging around her home.

"When I was younger, I thought 'Oh, pretty dolls walking,' " Lauria says, imitating her bored expression. But she grew to appreciate them as she got older, roping in her husband and her children. Her sister Susan and her husband and children are also actively involved, as is Pino's 13-year-old son, Michael. "The marionettes will never be abandoned," Lauria says. "We only need the means; we need help. It's going to go on. It has to go on."

The Manteos would not think of selling any of the marionettes, which could be worth up to $30,000 each. "If you love something," Bill Grillo says, "you don't sell it."

"Each marionette has its own character," says his daughter Joan. "There's a reason for each one." Her favorite is Pepeninno, close to 100 years old, smaller than the others. "He's not part of the original story, but he's a symbol of Sicily. I like him because he's a troublemaker." Her sister Susan's favorite is Count Gano, even though he's the bad guy, the "recurring nightmare. I look at the marionette," Susan says, "but I think of my uncle's [Mike's] voice." She also likes Mafasa, the Woman Warrior, because she's a strong woman and she fights. "She's a lady. But I've never seen her perform on the stage."

"Like a real person," says Aida Grillo, the oldest living Manteo, other than the marionettes. "They walk. They dance. They cry. They laugh. When the princess she goes crazy, I cried for real. We feel it inside."

They are all part of the family, and they will not give them up. Aida sits next to Olympia, saved by Orlando, while Don Chiaro, whom Orlando chops in half, stands guard in the corner of her Bushwick apartment. "*Es arte, capito?*" Aida says. It's art, do you understand? / III