

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Amelita, Opera Singer

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 27th, 2019

A few weeks ago, as a journalist of the Hollywood Foreign Press, I interviewed Danny DeVito about his role as circus owner Max Medici in *Dumbo*, directed by Tim Burton, a reimagined live action version of the beloved 1941 Disney animated movie about a flying baby elephant.

DeVito had worked with the director before, he played the Penguin, leader of the Red Triangle Circus Gang, in *Batman Returns* (1992), and Amos Calloway, another circus owner, in *Big Fish* (2003). So *Dumbo*, he says, completes their circus trilogy. He admires Burton as a filmmaker and considers him an artist, “Tim communicates in a visual way, and on his sets you always feel like you’re inside a drawing or a painting, as part of his paintbox.”



Danny DeVito, photo by Elisa Leonelli (c) 1981

As for other favorite directors he worked with, DeVito mentions Milos Forman (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 1975), Barry Levinson (*Tin Men*, 1987), Penny Marshall (*Renaissance Man*, 1994). He also admires Lina Wertmuller, Fritz Lang, Eric Von Stroheim and Billy Wilder.

I remind Danny of when I photographed him in his Hollywood home in 1981, and he expresses his love of Italian opera, of legendary singers like tenors Beniamino Gigli and Enrico Caruso, sopranos like Maria Callas and [Amelita Galli-Curci](#). I am not familiar with the last name he mentions, so I ask and he replies, “Look her up on YouTube, listen to this woman, and you will thank me.” So I did and this is what I discovered.



Amelita in 1918

I first researched her life story, which I found fascinating.

Amelita Galli was born in Milano, Italy (November 18, 1882) in a musical family, her grandmother Carlotta was an operatic soprano, her grandfather was an opera conductor, her mother Enrichetta was a good pianist. She studied piano and languages, harmony and composition. She was encouraged to sing opera by composer Pietro Mascagni, a family friend, she made her Italian debut in 1906 as Gilda in *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi. In 1908 she married the painter and nobleman Luigi Curci. She made her American debut at the Chicago Opera in *Rigoletto* on November 18, 1916 (her 34th birthday). She sang Violetta in *La Traviata* by Verdi at the Metropolitan Opera in 1921.



Amelita with Yogananda
1927

In 1920 she divorced her husband and married her American accompanist, Homer Samuels, remained with him until his death in 1956. She became hugely popular in the US and worldwide thanks to her recordings, that displayed her facility with coloratura soprano roles, such as Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* by Giacomo Rossini. Her “trill” (gorgheggio) was much admired, so were her sustained lyric lines. In 1935 she underwent surgery to remove a thyroid goiter, [a nerve to her larynx was damaged](#), resulting in the loss of her ability to sing high notes. She retired from singing in 1937. Fortunately Amelita had other talents and interests and lived a full life. She was a follower of Yogi Paramhansa Yogananda, wrote the introduction to his 1929 book, *Whispers from Eternity*, and when she could no longer sing, she started to photograph and to paint.

Then I searched YouTube, and found early mono audio recordings of many of her arias accompanied by beautiful photographs. No videos, unfortunately, since the [technology of synchronizing sound with film](#) was not introduced until Warner Bros produced *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, and not until 1951 were opera performances filmed for television. Fortunately, after [Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877](#), and Emil Berliner the gramophone in 1893, the first opera recordings, of tenor Enrico Caruso, were made in 1902. The system was perfected by the [Victor Company](#), and Amelita signed an exclusive contract with them in 1916 that lasted until 1930, when she stopped performing in operas to focus on recitals.



Amelita as Violetta

[Click here](#) for “Un bel di vedremo” from *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. 1922.
[Here](#) for “Sempre Libera” from *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi. 1919
[Here](#) for “Una voce poco fa” from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* by Giacomo Rossini. 1927
[Here](#) for “Caro nome” from *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi. 1927

But I wanted to listen to her singing with the best possible sound quality, so I purchased one of her CDs, “Lo! Here the Gentle Lark” with songs and arias recorded from 1917 to 1928. When it arrived 2 weeks later, shipped from Germany via Amazon, I was enchanted by the sweetness of her voice and by the perfection of her technique.

Also available are other CDs, her complete acoustic recordings 1916 to 1920, 1920 to 1924, the Victor Recordings 1925 to 1928 and 1930.



That’s when I went back to YouTube and found [this KFC radio interview](#), taped shortly before her death, on November 26, 1963, at age 81, in La Jolla, California.

Amelita talks about the difference between acoustical and electrical recordings (when the microphone was introduced in 1925), then about her painting. “When I couldn’t sing anymore, after the operation, I thought, my soul is still the soul of an artist, I can change tools, try another field and have some fun there.”

That is why, like DeVito said to me, I say to you, “Look her up and you will thank me.”

Read my article about another great soprano, [Maria Callas](#).

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