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THE NEAPOLITAN TARANTELLA

In southern Italy, in the small town of Baia e Latina near Naples, where my grandparents were born, there is a legend that my grandmother used to tell me. The legend says that the bite of the tarantula inflicts upon its victims the dreaded *tarantolismo*. These unfortunates are doomed to dance the earth forever in a frenetic attempt to rid their bodies of the fatal poison injected by the tarantula bite; that dance was called the *tarantella*. My grandparents immigrated to Canada in 1957, making the transatlantic journey by ship. They landed at Pier 21, in Halifax and then came to Toronto by train, to be welcomed by Zia Agnese, my father's only sister who had sponsored them. My grandparents settled in a rented apartment and as the story goes, all the immigrants from their same town would gather on weekends, to relax from a tiring week of strenuous work in the construction industry for the men, in the textile industry for the women. These gatherings were filled with lots of good Italian food and drink, and most of all, dancing ... the tarantella was danced by all. It was a way of releasing energy, frustrations and reconnecting with their cultural ties. In my grandparents' and parents' family photo albums, there are numerous photos of people dancing the tarantella together. There is a particular picture of my own mother and her cousin, as the tradition was passed onto the next generation.

This cultural folkloric dance was part of my grandparents' lives, as immigrants trying to survive and make sense of their new Canadian identity. The traditional dance served several

purposes -- nostalgia, a reconnection to the old life left in the homeland, a way to unite as a cultural group in the new land. It was at major family gatherings, like Christmas and Easter, special occasions such as weddings, baptisms and communions, smaller family parties like birthdays and “onomastico” or name day celebrations, or simply at their “feste”, often to commemorate Saint days. Celebrations took place formally in large rented halls or informally, in smaller spaces, living rooms or house basements. For the community at large, the tarantella helped to increase the social and cultural interaction among the Italian immigrants, providing an overall community feeling of togetherness and well-being. The tarantella spoke of their culture so Canadians could have respect and knowledge about Italian norms and traditions.

My grandparents immigrated to Canada during the second main wave, between 1950 and 1970, being those “postwar immigrants, who numbered over half a million” and “came to comprise almost 70 per cent of the Italian Canadian population” (Sturino 2). They were those “hardworking people” who “had left the rural towns and villages of southern Italy” (Iacovetta x), had endured challenging years of settlement and adjustment, but who had also shown “a tremendous capacity for hard work, and a talent for enjoying life, and each other’s company, even in adversity” (Iacovetta xi). And that ability to enjoy life, even in hardship, was witnessed through the creation of “ethnic neighbourhoods” where Italians had “settled in sufficient numbers”, “Little Italys with their distinctive shops, restaurants, clubs and churches” that allowed communal gatherings where dance played an important role (Sturino 3). “Numerous new clubs and societies were established around regional, religious, social or sporting functions” (Sturino 4). My grandparents and their relatives did not establish their cultural club, the “Volturno Club” until the early 1980s. They stayed in their original home in Little Italy, bought in the 1960s, and their ties to their culture remained strong through family gatherings and

celebrations with the relatives or “paesani” from their original hometown, who had also settled in their Little Italy neighborhood. They were all in the main Little Italy of Toronto, in the hub of Italian culture, close to the CHIN Radio Station building, the first radio station to give voice to the growing Italian immigrant population community (Jetelina 1) and one to offer cultural events that included cultural folk dancing, like the tarantella. This was all reflecting and shaping the cultural attitudes, ideas and beliefs of Canadians towards the immigrant Italians as the Italian Canadians started to alter “society’s tastes in food, fashion, architecture and recreation, thus helping to bring a new cosmopolitan to Canadian life” (Sturino 5). For the immediate community of immigrant Italians, like my grandparents and parents, their participation in cultural events within their own close-knit community served to keep their ties to their native land alive; the tarantella was included in “a wide spectrum of activities” that allowed Italo-Canadians to express “their ethno-cultural identity” (Sturino 5)

Folk dances do indeed tell stories and reflect a group’s diverse history and culture. The tarantella is cited as “arguably Italy’s most famous folk dances” (Gatto 1) and is discussed “in writing of the Italian experience in Canada” (Servello 8). My mother recalls a pivotal moment that illustrates the importance of the tarantella in our Neapolitan family; she noticed mainly the women engaging in the tarantella dance. She remarked mostly the females holding their noses in the air and dancing with poise and confidence. “The Neapolitan tarantella is a courtship dance performed by couples and featuring cheerful and increasingly faster music” (Wilson 1). However, “the women of Campania (the region that includes Naples) dance with their heads up and a sense of self-pride” (blog.oup.com). According to my mother, it was symbolic that these strong women, who were keeping the families together through their leadership roles in the household, were the ones dominating the dance floor.

If one examines the steps of the tarantella itself, one can understand its significance from another perspective, according to my mother's introspection, an insider-observer-participant for many years. Facing your partner, you alternate putting your right and left foot forward for two sets of six beats. On the third set, you link arms with your partner and circle around with her four times. The pattern is then repeated for the duration of the music, including the sounds of special castanets and tambourines (Toschi 19). My mother affirms that the alternation of putting the right and left foot forward represents the dichotomy of the Italian and the English in the oscillation between the two cultures.

“When you face your partner, it's your new culture and language, a mirror to appreciate the duality. When you link arms with her, you embrace that Canadian culture and indulge in its newness and difference. You take pleasure in the spinning, as you go around in circles, but you go back to your original position, returning to the vacillation of the Italian and English and the balancing act continues.”

I believe my family was and are “dancing for their lives” through the tarantella, not just dancing for the love of it. It stands for a narrative at the crossroads of language, culture and identity -- one which, according to my mother, will continue to help this cultural community cope with the notion of being “cultural orphans” when faced with the difficulties of immigration and assimilation. This analysis gives me a sense of accomplishment and pride, a form of expression to continue in my own dance journey as the tarantella is and always will be a constant presence in my own performance history as I now continue the tradition.

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My mother, Anna, dancing the tarantella with her younger cousin, Antonietta, under the watchful eye of my grandmother. Photo taken circa 1965, in downtown Little Italy, Toronto.

