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1-1-2015

### The Not-So-Anonymous Nutmegger

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#### Recommended Citation

Baron, Jacob, "The Not-So-Anonymous Nutmegger" (2015). *Friends of the Libraries Excellence in Research Awards*. 11.

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Jacob Baron

December 13, 2014

Alberto Zambenedetti

The Cinemas of Italy

### THE NOT-SO-ANONYMOUS NUTMEGGER

In his brief biography of Tony Musante, Hal Erickson wrote, “He appeared to be the archetypal tense, tightly wound street punk” (Erickson). An emphasis must be placed on the word “appeared”—for to describe Musante as truly being a punk through and through, either in life or in his work, would be to tell an easy yet unforgivable lie. Yes, Musante played the punk well, so well that he would earn great acclaim for his portrayal of sleazy, sometimes psychotic characters in such films as *The Incident*, *The Detective*, and *The Mercenary*. But this should say more as to his talent than his personality, or even appearance: Musante was a clean-cut, ruggedly handsome, “well-behaved” family man from Connecticut who was steadily improving upon his craft (Erickson). It took Enrico Maria Salerno’s romantic drama *The Anonymous Venetian* to convince people of that fact, as well as of his general versatility as an actor; but after the release of that film—even if Musante would go on to reprise his early sleazy persona in shows like *Oz*—no one would question either of those truths again. *The Anonymous Venetian* marked a significant progression in Tony Musante's acting career in terms of both his work process and his public persona.

In terms of tone and subject matter, *The Anonymous Venetian* could not have been a bigger departure for all those involved at the time of its release. Co-star Florinda Balkan had been known as a Brazilian bombshell, playing prostitutes and eye candy for male protagonists. It

was the directorial debut of Enrica Maria Salerno, who had hitherto been known in Italy as a famous actor, having provided the Italian voice for Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy; producers had insisted on "telling him 'You're a fine actor, not a director. Why don't you let us give you a part in one of our pictures?'" (Carroll), causing Salerno to spend five years trying to raise the money necessary to make the film. But Musante had been typecast far worse before starring in *Venetian*; in fact, he even started his acting career being stuck into the type of role he would eventually fight hard to win back in this film: "It all started with "Ride with Terror" [the television special which later evolved into the film, 'The Incident'] insists Musante. 'Before that I was never the heavy. I was always the guy next door. When I went to read for the part, they told me "You can't do a heavy." I was one of the unknown unknowns but they finally decided to let me do it. ... Then they started telling me "You can't play a nice guy.",' Musante recalls. 'They kept sending me scripts about hoods with knives'" (Carroll). An ironic twist of fate would force Musante into his image as the smirking, unkempt good-for-nothing. Though this was not an entirely tragic destination for the actor—being repeatedly sent scripts about "hoods with knives" was still a sign that people were interested, that they saw potential in him, and his history in the theater was not entirely ignored. Even The Boston Herald did a rather enthusiastic write-up on his story thus far:

*"Tony Musante, starring in 'The Anonymous Venetian,' a contemporary drama about the relationship between a man and a woman, now at Pi Alley Theater, is one of the fastest rising young American film actors. A native of Bridgeport, Conn., Musante began acting in regional theaters and off Broadway before making his screen debut with Ann-Margaret and Alain Delon in 'Once a Thief.' Since then, he has been busily engaged with appearances on stage, screen and television. In 1967, his portrayal of a New York hoodlum in 'The Incident,' won him the Best*

*Actor award at the Mar Del Plata Film Festival. A rapid succession of film followed. He was seen in 'The Detective,' with Frank Sinatra, 'The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,' 'The Grissom Gang,' and recently completed a co-starring role with George C. Scott in 'The Last Run.'"* (The Boston Herald)

As much as he was appreciated, however, the matter of his not-so-pretty reputation in the United States was still a struggle, and one that would not be overcome easily.

Yet this image seemed to hold out for far longer in America than in his other cinematic stomping ground: Italy. In Italy, Musante had already received acclaim for playing more heroic (i.e. *The Bird With the Crystal Plumage*) and romantic (i.e. *Metti una sera a cena*) characters. The divide between his status at home and abroad was so vast, American producers would forget where he was even from: "When he was cast as an American writer in 'The Bird With the Crystal Plumage,' Musante reports, the comments went something like this: 'What is this new Italian actor doing playing an American?' Producers would look at him in surprise and say, 'Oh, you speak English!' If the Italians had Musante typed as an Italian romantic hero, we had the Connecticut-born actor labeled as a 'heavy'" (Carroll). Musante was cursed to always be misunderstood: he could either be the romantic lead abroad or the punk at home, without any crossover.

That is, of course, until *The Anonymous Venetian*. Rather than a blade-wielding maniac, Tony Musante played Enrico, a dying musician spending one last day with his estranged ex-wife, played by Balkan. This tragic, subdued type was unprecedented in his filmography, and it astounded critics all over the United States. Of course, the transition into this new role was not seamless—such transitions never are. One critic described Musante as a "Sammy Liguori look-alike" who "also looks and sounds exactly like Peter Falk" (Decker), neither of whom are exactly

stunningly handsome or subtle men. Another still saw him in his Italian persona, describing the leads as “an exotically gorgeous couple (Brazil’s Florinda Bolkan and Tony Musante, who is from Connecticut but pretty exotic anyway)” (Parker). A third reviewer was simply unconvinced by this new onscreen behavior, actually preferring Musante’s more manic moments—or, as he put it: “Mr. Musante, on the other hand, is better when he is the conductor, but falls short in his association with his ex-wife” (New Orleans States-Item). But this is purely a case of the exception proving the rule, as the media has always had a tendency to put up a fight when their ideas of celebrities are challenged. One must remember that “pretty boy” Heath Ledger had this same struggle just a few years ago when he was cast as the sinister, ugly villain The Joker in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*, though his struggle was, obviously, reversed.

And just as Ledger won overwhelmingly positive reviews for his big changeover, so too did Musante for *Venetian*, with Sylviane Gold even directly acknowledging the misconceptions of the actor at that time:

*“Remember the word punk? That’s the word that best describes the movie roles Tony Musante has had up to now. He was the punk terrorizing a carload of IRT passengers in ‘The Incident.’ He was the punk terrorizing a kidnaped heiress in ‘The Grissom Gang.’ And he was the punk convict bullying his girlfriend and his driver in ‘The Last Run.’ But sitting in his backyard recently, talking about his newest movie, in which he does not play a punk, Tony Musante didn’t look or sound anything like a mugger, gangster or ex-con. He looked and sounded like an intelligent, college-educated actor who spends his time renovating a brownstone in the Village, bicycling with his wife in Central Park, and playing classical and jazz piano.”* (Gold)

Fortunately, this intelligence and good taste was just as evident in Musante’s performance, with many prominent American newspapers changing their tune about the actor. The Times-Picayune

proudly declared of the two leads, “The two give a real and convincing performance—you can believe they once were lovers...” (Saenger), a great success for a man who would never even be considered a believable lover outside of Italy. Philip Wuntch of *The Dallas Morning News* wrote, “TONY MUSANTE, as the musician suffering from an unglamorous brain tumor, brings sensitivity, vulnerability and understandable self-pity to his enigmatic role. His fear of death and his rage at the inequities of life are finely balanced with courage and human dignity” (Wuntch); sensitivity, vulnerability, and human dignity were quite a stretch from Musante’s character in *The Incident*, who along with Martin Sheen’s character would hold up a subway car full of innocents and minorities. It goes toward his talent as a performer that not only could such an unsavory role *boost* his career, but that he could top it with something so different, a sentiment shared in a review of *Venetian* by *The Morning Telegraph*: “Tony Musante, the Italian-American actor who first came to prominence as one of the subway hoodlums in ‘The Incident’ a few years ago, plays the role of the dying musician with aggressive bravado...” (*The Morning Telegraph*). He was even discovered in countries like Madrid, whose magazines took to him like a duck takes to water...or, like real Spaniards take to a man often mistaken for a Spaniard. This included *C7*, which wrote (and which has been written in a very loose translation to English), “...the gallant revelation of Tony Musante...a Tony Musante that no longer needs to be discovered, but this is his best known suggestion. ...Tony Musante is stated as an actor of exceptional expressive skills” (*C7*). Tony Musante had found worldwide praise, given to him almost like an apology, an apology for ever pigeonholing the man who turned down fame and fortune in a starring role in the TV series *Toma* solely because he craved more variety in his work.

Yes, Tony Musante was a man who was far more dedicated to his craft than to what his craft could provide him in terms of money and notoriety. He had, after all, formerly trained in

both the classical and method styles, committing himself to an understanding of the art without necessarily committing himself to a particular school of acting; as he put it:

*“In the broad sense, I would consider myself a method actor. I don't have any particular allegiance to any school of acting. I've more or less developed my own approach to a role. Although I've studied with method people, and studied with classical people too. My approach to acting, whether it's on-stage or on film, has over the years developed into my own personal approach. I think most actors eventually develop a technique that works for them individually.”*

(IMDB)

Musante never allowed his talents to be limited, restrained by either the concept of a recurring role or an unbending loyalty to a proven technique. Rather, he seems to have simply picked up aspects of his style along his journey, accumulating them in a snowball effect that proves rolling stones might just gather moss after all. His progression as an actor can be seen quite clearly not only onscreen, but behind the scenes as well. Musante kept a personal notebook on the set of each of his films, scribbling down technical notes, character analyses, and general observations and discoveries as the shooting schedules wore on. Each notebook offers an absolute smorgasbord of actor's insight, but they not-quite-coincidentally offer insight into Musante's personal and professional transformations as well.

*The Incident* and *The Anonymous Venetian* were two of Tony Musante's most career-changing films, two works that could not be more different from each other—and the notebook Musante kept on the sets of these films parallel this distinction. Both are written in the language of a highly trained, highly competent actor with years of theatrical experience, with constant mentions of “objects,” “triggers,” and “a priori” to be interacted with both internally and externally, as well as unrestrained bursts of self-criticism as to Musante's ability to properly

convey feelings and moods. However, the criticisms Musante lobbed at himself in his notebook for *The Incident* appear much more panicky, sometimes taking up entire pages, whereas the criticisms in the notebook for *The Anonymous Venetian* were brief reminders to avoid repetition of ill-advised actions. The tangible nervousness in the first notebook reveal a younger actor desperately wanting to make a good impression while shooting for his first major film role, and kicking himself when he failed in doing so. Early entries include snippets such as “MASS IMPROVISATION: What a disaster!!”, which would give way to a back-and-forth between the angel and devil on Musante’s shoulders: “I MAY have learned more about the film because the improv was not a ‘smash’ than if it were. BUT I was depressed because: 1) NOT A COMPLETE SUCCESS – 2) MY EGO → I wanted the others to DIG me as an actor—PERHAPS it’s a good thing that this was deflated at this point” (Notebook 7). While Musante was still a seasoned artist at this point, he sounds frightened here, torn between a desire to improve and the despair of not meeting expectations. Such fear is not present in his *Venetian* notebook, having been replaced by a sturdy and organized professionalism that looks for and finds patterns in Musante’s character, as opposed to the often rambling, broad, relatively unstructured thoughts found in the *Incident* notebook.

“Rambling” is not meant to be used negatively, however, simply objectively—Musante’s analysis of his role as Joe Ferrone in *The Incident* is much more free-flow, looking at the part subjectively rather than from a distance like Musante would do with Enrico in *Venetian*. This subjectivity leads to the feeling that Musante was still performing with something of a “method actor” mindset: in his writing there are frequent manic capitalizations and underlinings, his notes frequently sounding like the diaries of the knife-wielding hoodlum Joe Ferrone. For example, certain scribbings which stand out in particular include: “I AM THE LONER...I use Arty. But



that's it. I USE HIM. He is on a string, I can pull on him whenever I want him"; "I WOULD DIG + CUT + SLASH ALL THE HARDER AT THESE BLOBS"; "YOU STUPID ASS!!!!!"; "I WAS DARING HIM, SAYING TO HIM—'GO AHEAD! CUT ME'"; not to mention frequent aggressive uses of the words "pus," "nigger," "queer," and "fag"—though this could simply be due to the less politically-correct vocabulary of the 1960s (Notebook II). Musante did not hold back from disturbing aspects of his character, but rather plunged into them head-first, analyzing the weaknesses of the different characters he would abuse so that he could better intimidate them when it came time to shoot his scenes. There is an energy present in this notebook, not just a nervous one but an excited one. He talks about notes given to him from other actors—i.e. "Marty's suggestions" (Notebook 7)—as he looked for guidance among his peers, and would list off discoveries freely as they came, sometimes amounting to entire pages rivaling the size of his lists of self-criticisms. There is even one page whose only title is "THOUGHTS. SCRIPT. RANDOM" (Notebook 7).

In his notebook for *The Anonymous Venetian*, Musante has not entirely detached from the method mindset, but has rather began focusing on different characteristics of it. There are pages upon pages of extensive research done on parts of his character that lazier actors would have deemed irrelevant to their process. Musante thoroughly studied the brain cancer his character Enrico was suffering from, reading and citing several books on the subject (including Cameron's 1956 Truth About Cancer, Sutton's 1968 Cancer Explained, and Goldman's 1958 There Is an Answer to Cancer). He learned not only the physical symptoms—which he divided into "vision, motion, digestive, consciousness, and pain"—but facts and statistics on the matter also: "Symptomatic disturbances of brain tumors are dependent upon WHERE in the brain," as well as "In USA, less than 2% of cancers attack the brain and/or central nervous system" and "Brain

cancer is one of 4 most common cancers in children (?)” (Notebook 11). Musante kept notes on how to play, maintain, and carry an oboe and its reed (which he would only need to keep in mind for the closing scene), as well as general facts about the city of Venice, which Enrico held dear to his heart: its famous citizens (ex. Marco Polo, Vivaldi, and painters like Titian, Veronese and Tinoretto); prisoners (ex. Casanova and Silvio); its basic geography, such as the number of islands, canals, bridges, and churches; and major moments in its history, from its founding in 811 A.D. to its Zenith of power in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These facts have little to do with the actual plot or dialogue of the film, but that’s the magic of Musante’s process: anything and everything can and will enrich the acting process.

These technicalities extend to his actual acting in the film, however. Musante would frequently make notes on how the camera should be seeing him, what the mood of each scene should be, and certain facts on film acting to stay aware of. He kept a detailed, minute-by-minute schedule of the day over which the plot takes place, listing off events and locations. The nature of the *Venetian* notebook is far more technical overall compared to the emotional chaos of the *Incident* notebook, as though Musante was insisting on looking outside-in this time, as opposed to inside-out. His diary entries are in his own voice rather than his characters, with additions like “Does it read that I want to screw?” revealing a dichotomy between Musante as a serious actor and a lighthearted man; the serious actor was far more prevalent, however, repeating questions like “Is walk consistent?” and “Does this read?” (Notebook 11). The scathing criticisms are still there, and if they have changed in confidence then they have certainly not changed in their power; for example, on one particular day, Musante gave the director an insufficient take “BECAUSE 1. I wasn’t listening; 2. I wasn’t taking my time—ASSHOLE!”, and later on in the day he would even overanalyze the good moments: “This scene felt very good. Simple. Relaxed.

Loving. IT DID NOT FEEL PAINFUL. Is this right? This is something which bothers me about the scene” (Notebook 11). It seems Musante was always bound to be his own worst critic, though in *this* notebook he seems to at least be able to calm himself down with reassurances: “I worked very hard to be precise when I was practicing BUT once I was playing the scene—I DIDN’T WORK ANYMORE. Just as in all other phases of acting WHAT’S DONE IS DONE. WHAT AIN’T GONNA GET DONE AIN’T GONNA GET DONE IN THE SCENE. PLAY + RELAX” (Notebook 11). There seems to be a much tighter grip here on the acting profession, which naturally stems from the three year duration between the two notebooks.

Musante did not completely do away with the emotional aspects of Enrico, however. He makes sure to pay attention to emotional realities even during physical challenges, like playing the oboe:

*“I didn’t worry about what would come out of the oboe. I tried to play THRU the instrument to reach my listener—this way the instrument was not so much an obstacle as an extension of my feelings. I loved this approach both when I played + when I feigned playing.”* (Notebook 11)

Miniscule details would be focused on for several lines, details like the emotional baggage in glances at his ex-wife and even his character’s thought process during solitary, silent scenes like when he waits for his ex-wife at the train station at the beginning of the film. He would openly ponder on what it means to be a husband and father, asking questions about what it is like to be a father, whether other fathers have stupid ideas like Enrico’s, and whether Enrico himself could then be considered a “good” father. An entire backstory for his character was written, from his first meeting his now ex-wife (1956) to their first time in bed (3:30 to 4:00 in the afternoon) to his graduation and their marriage (1958)—from the birth of their son Giorgio (1960) to their eventual split (1963), as well as the span of his career as a musician. Musante left no stone

unturned—it's just that this time his turning of the rocks was more methodical, and he lingered on what rocks he believed really counted.

There is a dialogue exchange in the latter half of *The Anonymous Venetian* where Enrico reveals his disease to his increasingly frustrated and confused ex-wife Val that has some pertinence as to Tony Musante's image and career: Val shouts at him, "You're a clown, a clown!", and Enrico calmly replies, "Maybe. But I'm dying." Val's stubbornness is much like that of the American media when it came to Musante, and Enrico's response might well represent Musante's own: yes, I may not appear to be serious, but deep down I am more serious than anyone else. If reviews of the film and Musante's personal notebooks are to be believed, Musante was telling the truth.

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