

The Nobility of Misery

Antonio Griffò Focas Flavio Angelo Ducas Comneno Porfirogenito Gagliardi de Curtis di Bisanzio was known by his stage name Totò and nicknamed *il Principe della risata* aka the Prince of laughter. He was an Italian actor and comedian, and the most popular Italian performer of all time. I grew up watching his movies, and seeing my grandparents' adoration for him.

Totò was fabled to be a Prince, born in the Rione Sanità - a very poor district of Naples where I moved to attend University at the age of 18 - the illegitimate son of Anna Clemelente and the Neapolitan marquis Giuseppe de Curtis. His father legally recognized him very late in life, and as an affront and protest, Totò managed to be adopted by a different marquis, acquiring many noble titles without his father's help.

Totò was a playboy, Totò came from one of the poorest neighborhoods of Italy, Totò was a noble, a marquis. Totò is the face I grew up with, his smile, his voice, his short and curt little body so unthreatening and so deeply Italian. His smile is a safe space and comfort zone. Totò is an extremely smart intellectual too. He loves women and he loves food. Totò is nostalgia: he embodies a quintessentially Italian type of comedy and acting, his movies the picture of a country that no longer exists today. His comicality is made of slapstick and misunderstandings, but also of bittersweet considerations on Italy's social inequality.

The clip is taken from *Poverty and Nobility*, an Italian comedy directed by Mario Mattoli in 1954. In the movie Totò plays the poor Felice Sciosciamocca, a Neapolitan scribe for illiterate people, who pretends to be the Prince of Casador in a twisted love plot starring Sophie Loren. Hunger and the lack of work is central in this movie: as the protagonist spends his time pawing his poor clothes, gags and sensational developments follow continuously one after the other. Which is the true nobility? The one of the name or of the mind? Totò's jokes and lines have made history, working themselves into everyday Italian vernacular. One example is the saying *signori ci si nasce* aka you are born a lord, meaning that nobility is not linked to a title, but to the goodness of one's heart.

Long Live TOTO!

.Marta Fontolan