

The Museum of Modern Art

ANNA MAGNANI

Born on March 7, 1908, in Rome, Anna Magnani was raised by her maternal grandmother in modest circumstances in the city's ancient quarters. At a young age, Magnani studied voice and piano and, in her late teens, entered the Rome Academy of the Dramatic Arts, where she remained for less than two years.

Magnani left the Academy to take a job in a touring theater company, playing ladies' maids and other bit parts. For her work she was paid twenty-five lire a day, the equivalent of less than one dollar. In 1929 the loss of one of the troupe's leading ladies gave the actress her first break: she played a dramatic, emotional scene for which she earned rousing applause from the audience.

During the thirties, Magnani alternated dramatic roles with singing and clowning in comic revues. In 1935 she married director Goffredo Alessandrini, who had been attracted to one of her fiery stage performances. Magnani initially devoted herself to the marriage, but soon returned to the stage. Alessandrini discouraged her interest in film and advised her to continue to work on the stage where her natural talent was appreciated. Unlike the glamorous stars of the day who fit the public's standards of beauty, she was considered too earthy and, ironically, too provincial for the popular screen. Magnani felt acting should be "as natural as life," that movies should be about ordinary down-to-earth women like herself. She and her husband later separated.

For several years Magnani played minor roles in films that received very little critical notice. Her first role of any importance was in Vittorio De Sica's Teresa Venerdi (1941), where she played a music-hall queen with delusions of glamour and refinement. To all of these second-rate roles,

however, she brought her smoldering wit and tumultuous temperament, enlivening what was otherwise dreary wartime entertainment.

In Mario Bonnard's Campo de' fiori (1943), her role as a blunt-spoken produce vendor in love with the fishmonger at an adjacent market stall anticipated the kind of earthy characters that would endear her to the Italian public. It was the release of Roberto Rossellini's Open City (1945) and the subsequent birth of Italian Neo-Realism that made Magnani a star in Italy and abroad. The actress's special vitality and strength symbolized the national spirit of her homeland during the postwar years; it also anticipated a more naturalistic style of acting worldwide.

Approaching middle age and having just emerged from relative obscurity in her homeland, Magnani was an unlikely star. Yet, she won the National Board of Review Award for the best foreign actress of the year for Open City; the Venice Film Festival Award for the best performance by an actress in any category for Luigi Zampa's The Honorable Angelina (1947); and the Silver Ribbon for the same two films, as well as Rossellini's Love (1948).

In the seven years following Open City, Magnani made a dozen pictures ranging from timely farces to bleak melodramas to comic stories of working class hopes and deprivation. Although she had never appeared in an English-speaking film, she was rapidly becoming a cult celebrity in America. Tennessee Williams created the role of Serafina Delle Rose in the The Rose Tattoo expressly for Magnani's American stage debut, a role she declined because she felt her English was weak. In 1949 The New York Times Magazine and Life each published feature articles about Magnani's achievements. On the occasion of the actress's first visit to the United States in 1953, Bette Davis pronounced Anna Magnani as "the greatest actress I have ever seen."

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As the American fascination with Magnani accelerated, her popularity in Italy began to decline. Luchino Visconti's Bellissima (1952) was her last Italian film to achieve commercial success. Having no professional reasons to stay in Italy, Magnani went to Hollywood in 1955 to make the screen version of The Rose Tattoo, directed by Daniel Mann and also starring Burt Lancaster. Magnani conquered Hollywood on her own terms; she was rewarded with an Oscar for her performance in The Rose Tattoo and was nominated two years later for a second award for George Cukor's Wild is the Wind (1957).

In Italy, Magnani's emotional film performances were an uncomfortable reminder of the harsh post-war years. Moviegoers in the more prosperous fifties were interested in flirtatious comedies featuring a provocative younger generation of female stars. Directors failed to find roles for Magnani; parts that might otherwise have been hers were given to rising actresses like Sophia Loren. She did make a few films of distinction, including Sidney Lumet's The Fugitive Kind (1960) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's Mamma Roma (1962). A quartet of television films brought Magnani one more burst of acclaim before her death in 1973. Her funeral in Rome prompted a public outpouring of grief; thousands of mourners threw flowers and accorded her a final burst of applause in an emotional farewell. She is survived by her son, Luca Magnani.