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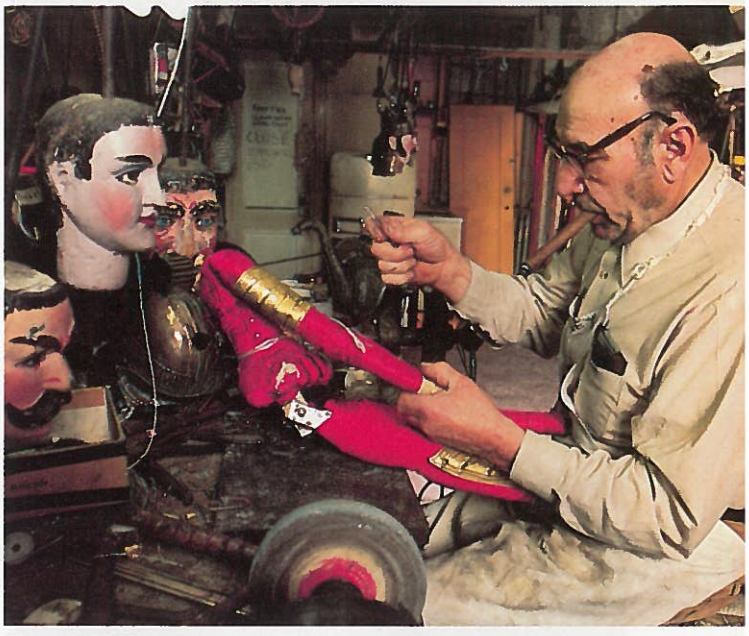
Manteo marionettes: valiant knights of wood and metal (p. 68)

By Donna Lauren Gold

Plucky puppets are the stars in one family's saga

From Sicily to the New World, generations of Manteos have performed a centuries-old romantic epic with their life-size marionettes



"Papa" Mike Manteo constructs new marionettes to add to a family collection that includes about 200.

A stage has been erected in a side room at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The crowd sits hushed in front of the richly painted platform. The curtain rises. A stiff-legged marionette in gleaming armor strides onstage, a feathered plume falling across his wooden face. With grand gesture of sword and arm, the knight proclaims in Italian:

> Angelica, Angelica, my dearest, where are you?
> I've looked everywhere—where is she?
> I've gone through forests and kingdoms,
> And cannot find her. Has she abandoned me?

Backstage "Papa" Mike Manteo is calling out the words, while his sister Aida plays the piano. Tucked behind the stage, sitting cross-legged on the floor, is Michael Manteo, Pino Manteo's boy and Papa Mike's youngest grandchild. On the bridge handling the life-size marionettes, Pino works with his uncles. Several cousins pass the heavy puppets up to the handlers.

The curtain falls. With tears in her aging eyes, Aida plays the finale for a moment longer, then she joins the others in front of the stage. Surrounded by three generations of Manteos and the puppets, Mike talks to the audience. "Without the crew," he says, "there would never be a show. There will always be a family."

During rehearsal, dueling knights leap into the air as Domingo (left) and Pino manipulate them from above.

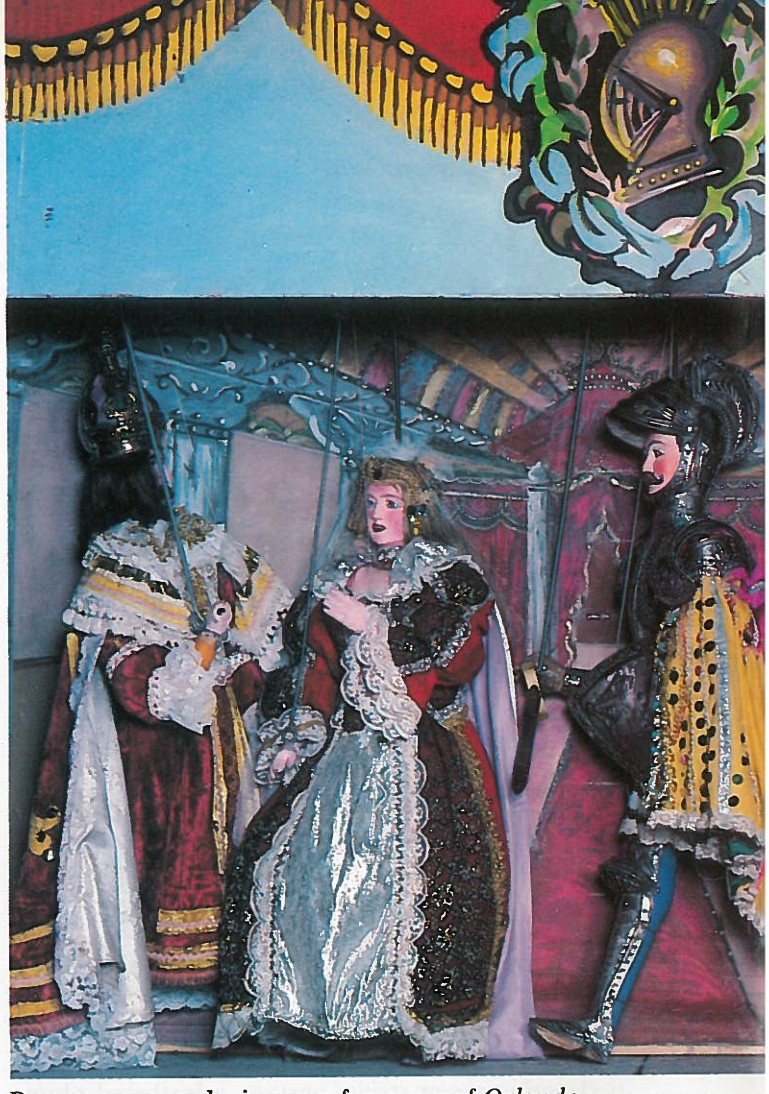
The Manteo saga began when Agrippino Manteo, orphaned at a young age, fell in love with marionette shows in Catania, Sicily. He worked with the puppeteers and vowed to have his own troupe one day. Indeed, when he married and became a father he moved his family to Mendoza, Argentina, in the early 1900s, where he performed in a puppet theater set up behind his bakery. In 1919 the Manteo family emigrated to New York City, where they finally established their *opera dei pupi*—known as "Papa Manteo's Life-Sized Marionettes"—at 109 Mulberry Street.

From southern Italy to the New World, the Manteo family had been performing the chivalric episodes of *Orlando Furioso*. It is derived from the French *Song of Roland*, and was put into verse by the 16th-century Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto. His story is based on the exploits of Orlando, knight of Carlomagno (Charlemagne), defender of the faith and lover of Angelica, who marries someone else. The grief-stricken Orlando goes mad (*furioso*), and wanders through the countryside dragging a dead mare by one leg.

As the Manteo family played their marionettes through the saga, Orlando and his compatriots, Rinaldo and Oliviero, met with saints and pagans, dwarfs and giants, dragons and sorcerers; they also had a goodly share of passionate romance with fair damsels, some of whom were also warriors. The puppeteers improvised from Ariosto's text, ending each performance at the height of suspense to ensure their audience's return the following night. In the show Orlando al-

Photographs by Martha Cooper

Pino carries 90-pound marionette from his father's Brooklyn workshop, now used primarily for puppets.



Puppets onstage during a performance of *Orlando Furioso* are (from left): Carlomagno (Charlemagne);

ways died last, blowing on a horn in a desperate attempt to summon help, while blood spurted from his eyes, ears, mouth—a high point in the Orlando cycle, staged with a specially designed Orlando puppet head and beet juice for blood. Sometimes the cries of the puppeteers were drowned out by the real cries of the audience. The Manteos' version of *Orlando Furioso* lasted 394 episodes.

Ariosto based his epic on the legend of Roland, which celebrates a true incident at the pass of Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees in A.D. 778. According to the legend, the Christians had fought the Saracens in Spain and were returning to their native France when one of their own men, Count Ganelon, betrayed them, sending the enemy to slaughter the knights while they were trapped within the narrow pass. There, Roland (Orlando) and Oliver (Oliviero) are said to have met their end. Historically, the incident at Roncesvalles was only a minor skirmish, and it was probably the Basques, not the Saracens, who ambushed the soldiers. But centuries later, the incident was recalled as one of Charlemagne's great battles for the faith, and so the chivalrous legend of Roland flourished.

The Sicilian audiences knew the stories as well as the puppeteers did, supplying pungent comments if a puppeteer faltered. In New York, where several marionette theaters performed, the immigrants would flock to the shows to watch the tales of their childhood, for the moment forgetting the confusing new world of sweatshops and tenements they had entered.

Eventually Americanization and immigration quotas took their toll. The old chivalrous stories were supplanted by the more contemporary celluloid myths. Some second-generation Italians were not as familiar with the language, nor had they the blood memory of the stories. Though old-timers came, their children did not. One by one the marionette theaters closed, their audiences depleted.

As the other theaters gave up, Agrippino Manteo

Articles by free-lance writer Donna Lauren Gold have appeared in Natural History *and* New York.

Alda La Bella; Alessandro (a knight); bold hero of the epic, Orlando; and the menacing giant Morgante.

bought their marionettes. With his sons and daughter to assist with the puppets, and a family electrical business to help support it, "Papa Manteo's Life-Sized Marionettes" was the last theater running. For a time, celebrities and society folk came to see them, brought by Tony Sarg, the famous puppeteer of the '20s and '30s. The Manteos might perform twice, once for the Italians and again, says Papa Mike, for the likes of Dorothy Gish and Irving Thalberg, who had made the little theater one of their highlights whenever they would go slumming.

For the uninitiated, a 1929 *Theatre Arts Monthly* issue ran directions to the theater. "If you are starting from China Town," wrote George Tichenor, "go up Mott Street to Canal and then a block over to [109] Mulberry. . . . Inside is a jovial ribald audience which spits on the floor, whacks one another on the back, laughs long and quite uproariously, an audience of strong emotions rather than nice, which grapples, devours and swallows anachronistic settings, great gulps of passion and endless stage brawls."

In 1938, when 18-year-old Johnny, the pet of the family, was dying of tuberculosis, Agrippino was inconsolable. When he closed his theater, it seemed the end of an era.

But puppets had become the Manteo birthright and even death could not daunt them. Agrippino passed the puppets on to his eldest son, Mike. After Agrippino died, Mike took over as "Papa" Manteo, occasionally performing in schools and churches for the Italian community. Today, though still without a permanent theater, Papa Mike is grooming his eldest son, Pino, to run the show. And Pino looks to the rest of the family, including his son Michael, five years old. "He's got good hands," Pino observes.

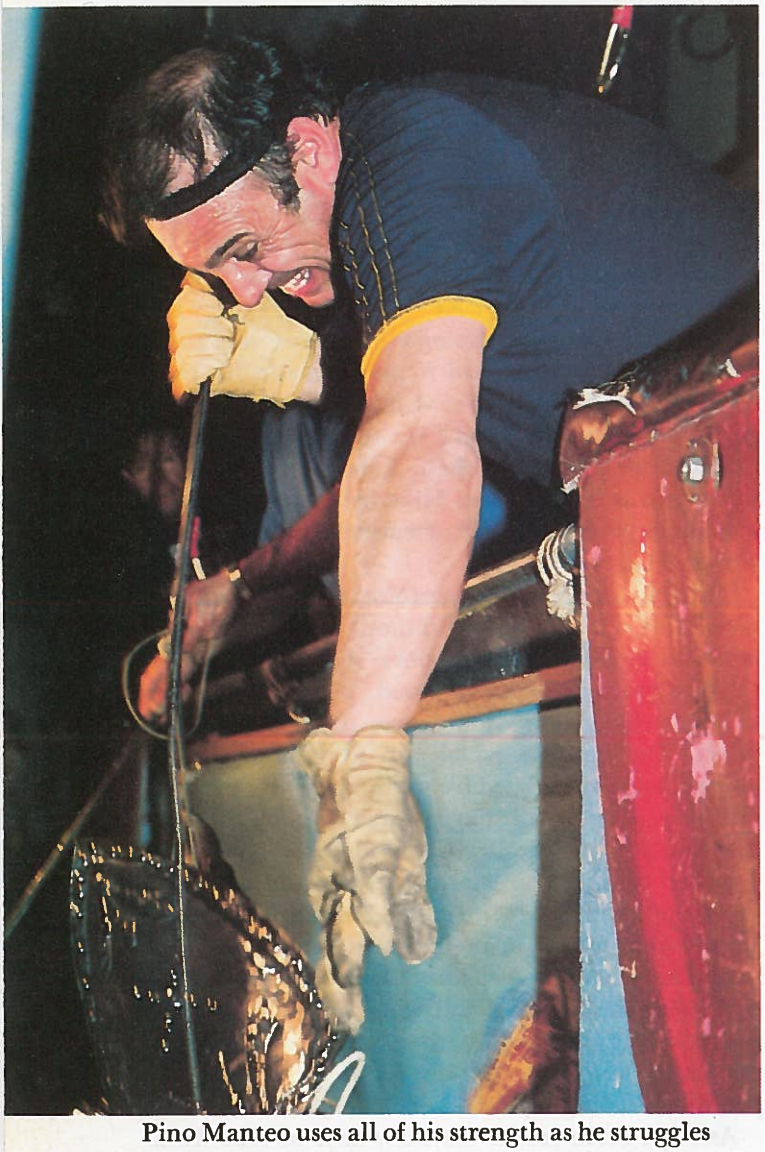
"If one of the heroes dies, I feel bad"

"Why do we love it?" asks Mike. "I don't know. If I ask you what makes people go into drugs—you find life monotonous, you find life dull, you want excitement? I got all the excitement I need with the marionettes. And then the stories, they're so intricate. When I manipulate the puppets I get interested. And if one of the heroes dies, and I have to kill him, you know I feel bad. I live the stories still. . . . A knight is onstage and my father is giving out the voices."

Mike Manteo is a large man, with strong features carved into his thick face. At 73, he has the energy and mischievous clowning manner of an oversize child. While Mike's passions lead to the dramatic, his sister Aida celebrates the tragic, as if the world were one great, sad story. Her head bent to one side, wearing thick glasses beneath red hair, Aida's response to any emotion is tears. Aida and Mike inevitably improvise a dialogue when they talk, creating scenes as if they were still onstage.

Though the Manteos perform only sporadically now, Mike is often at his workshop repairing old puppets and constructing new ones. The bodies of the puppets are carved out of wood, then padded with soft materials. Later Aida dresses them in satin and velvet. The puppets, which can weigh close to 100 pounds, are manipulated from a bridge above the stage by means of upright iron rods—one through the body that hooks to one through the head. The hook can be detached during the performance, allowing for death by decapitation, a favorite method of execution. They gesture and fight with the aid of a thinner rod that holds the right (sword-wielding) arm and a thick string that holds the left arm. But when the puppets fight, which is every few scenes, they make no pretense at remaining stage-bound: they go at each other like pendulums swinging in midair.

As Papa Mike recalls the early days in New York: "They may be marionettes, but when somebody died,



Pino Manteo uses all of his strength as he struggles with puppets who are fighting a no-holds-barred battle.

and my father and my sister would put on a beautiful scene—with such sadness, my father crying, my sister crying, and the people—you could hear them sniffle, too." He sniffles. "Beautiful. You see, you forget they're marionettes, you think you're looking at the real thing. One night, it was very exciting, and 'one of the boys' that happened to be in the audience, he gets mad, he draws out his gun and takes two potshots at the marionette—two shots! Could 'a' hit me in the shins."

Still, performances are calmer now than they used to be, and neighbors near Mike's Brooklyn workshop help out with costumes by leaving broken appliances and old clothing on his doorstep. Some of today's marionettes have shiny new breast plates made from toasters or hubcaps since, as in any battle, the knights' armor gets scarred and dented in the heat of the fray.

A second Manteo grandson, also named Michael, sometimes joins his grandfather in the workshop. "They're my pride and joy," he comments. "I love them, my grandfather loves them—it's our tradition, a family tradition. I used to make little puppets and take them to school with me. It made me feel special, prouder, to have the marionettes. Now we go to the workshop and he sits at his bench and I sit at mine and we go to work on the puppets."

In June, Papa Mike Manteo received a National Heritage Fellowship for an outstanding contribution to American culture. An exhibition at the National Museum of American History, entitled "Our National Heritage: The National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowships," features a Manteo marionette—one of Charlemagne's knights called Agricane di Taria—and an original backdrop handpainted by Agrippino Manteo in 1923. (The exhibit closes September 6.) The Manteos have also performed at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife.

Reflecting on why this French chivalric legend came to be so important to the southern Italian island of Sicily and its transplanted American population, Pino says: "Orlando was a superman. Superman flies; Orlando has Durlindana, his magic sword. Orlando has the Achilles heel, Superman has kryptonite. There was no Superman back in the 19th century and there is no chivalry now. The people would come every night to watch the good guy give it to the bad."

And every night Mike, Aida, their brothers and their father would be sure that the bad guy got it good.

"For me they are like bread and wine, *sono cose come pane e vino per me*," adds Aida. "I know the stories since I am four years old."

Learning family tradition, five-year-old Michael gets some pointers from his grandfather, Papa Mike.