

GIORGIO MANGIAMELE:

POET OF THE IMAGE



*Three men having coffee at Don Camillo cafe, 215 Victoria Street North Melbourne.
Photograph by Giorgio Mangiamiele c1955.*

ENVISIONING THE ITALIAN MIGRANT EXPERIENCE DOWN UNDER: GIORGIO MANGIAMELE, POET OF THE IMAGE

by
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The untimely death of Giorgio Mangiamiele in May this year may be rightfully regarded as a great loss to the Italo-Australian community, not only because of the man's standing, his undoubtedly profound humanity, passionate morality and strength of character, but also because the Sicilian born filmmaker remained till the end a largely untapped resource which could have enriched our understanding of the Italian migrant experience and knowledge of the early cinema industry in Australia.

Several articles and obituaries have appeared recently, giving Mangiamiele a well deserved, if 'overdue', recognition of his artistic genius and of the personal courage which is evident in his life-long struggle to be accepted by an industry that was notoriously antagonistic to what it perceived as 'ethnic'.

John Conomos in an article published in 1992 argued that 'Giorgio Mangiamiele's work should be regarded as a mile-stone' and that his films ought to be taken into account as 'foundational' in any enquiry aimed at 'reading Australian cinema in terms of its multiple representations of the non-Anglo-Celtic migrant since the 1920s'.¹ Quentin Turnour in the obituary 'Giorgio' argues that Mangiamiele had a much wider impact on the Australian film industry, suggesting that 'the case for Giorgio as a 'multicultural' filmmaker should not be overstated' as many of the themes treated by him are also commonplace in mainstream society. He identifies innovative traits that were well ahead of the times and which were later to be found in other, better known directors, such as Peter Weir.² More recently Scott Murray in 'Passionate Filmmaker' reiterates a commonplace, if indispensable, observation, considering Mangiamiele as primarily a visual director: 'his films belong to the era of Film as Art, where (mostly) European directors conjured powerful tone poems that are the antithesis of the dialogue-driven narratives of today'.³



Giorgio Mangiamiele, filmmaker and photographer, behind the camera on the set of one of his films, c1975.

The expression 'poet of the image' seems to be now a widely accepted definition which aptly describes the unique aesthetic and lyric power of the Italo-Australian filmmaker. The term is used in the obituary 'È scomparso Mangiamiele, poeta dell'immagine' published in *Il progresso italo-australiano* (July – August 2001, pp 22-23), and in Rob Ditessa's moving article 'Farewell to a Passionate Poet of the Image' which appeared recently in *Italy Down Under* (n. 6, Spring 2001, pp 76-80). The association of Mangiamiele's visual style and poetry, implicit in the phrase, was first established critically in a review of the film *Clay* published in *Variety* (New York, 14 December 1964): '... visually it's frequently a poem brought to life with some breathtakingly poignant and arty shots'. France's *Nice-Matin* also termed *Clay* 'Australian poetry' (Cannes,

22 May 1965) and the journal *La cinématographie française* suggested that 'Giorgio Mangiamiele has painted, in a visual poem, the story of an impossible love' (Paris, 29 May 1965).

Yet, in spite of the numerous accolades, and renewed interest, and with the notable exception of Turnour's article which deals sensitively and critically with the film *Il contratto* in particular, there have been no in-depth analyses of Mangiamiele's films as artistic artefacts. Most critical efforts have attempted to periodise Mangiamiele's production, placing it mainly in the post-war Italian Neo-realist tradition or in the context of Italian migrant contribution. This is the position assumed by Gaetano Rando in his socio-historical study 'Narrating the Italian Experience'. He states: 'Although [Mangiamiele's] role in the emerging Australian film industry has been a relatively minor one, his is the only Italian name included in John Baxter's fundamental work on Australian cinema'.⁴ Rando, in the more recent article 'Migrant images in Italian Australian Movies and Documentaries', reiterates this position with further comments on four short feature films which he highlights as having 'a migrant theme'.⁵

Whilst it is quite justified to view Mangiamiele's work within the framework of Italo-Australian artistic production, it is clearly necessary to move critically beyond the mere labelling of his work as 'ethnic' or marginal to mainstream production. Critical inroads have been made elsewhere in the analysis of so called 'marginal literatures' which could be profitably applied to non-mainstream Australian film. Particularly promising are the approaches that critic Graziella Parati has put forward with regard to Italoophone migrant literature: '[t]his minority... appropriates a space within [the dominant] culture and language, which are consequently both deterritorialized'.⁶ Also challenging are the methodological premises formulated by Italian critic Alfredo Luzi who proposes the concept of 'literature of contact', suggesting a convergence of cultural elements connected intimately with the socio-economic and marginal cultural position of the author.⁷

Few attempts were made to draw inferences from Mangiamiele's own life experiences as a migrant which in some ways mirror the struggles and endeavours of many compatriots. If on the one hand Mangiamiele shared the Italian migrant experience in his desire to be integrated and accepted and in his resourcefulness and resolve to succeed with few

means, on the other hand, he was perhaps atypical as a migrant of the post-war generation, in that he was highly educated. Obviously, any attempt to view critically Mangiamiele's work should also take into account the cultural background from which he drew elements for his films and photographic stills, and which includes the Italian literary Canon and popular culture.⁸

Mangiamiele's films, seen in the light of Luzi's concepts, offer uniquely rich interpretative elements, as well as emphasising observations about the two cultures. But it is above all the visual aspect of his films which have been neglected. Mangiamiele's discourse articulates visually through images: the author himself has defined his films as 'silent movies', in spite of the presence of a soundtrack. Images on the screen may be regarded as metaphors of the human condition, sentiments and emotions; they are poetic emblems of human relationships or of alienated states. Films such as *The Spag* and *Ninety Nine Per Cent* should be analysed not only from the point of view of the story line, but also of characterisation, visual background information, general composition, treatment of object sizes, perspective and movement. The film *Clay* should not merely be seen as the depiction of 'an impossible love story', but also as a metaphor of the artist's own yearning to mould human characters in the filmic medium, as the protagonists do using 'clay', and his feeling of persecution. *Clay* has been described as 'a dream within a dream' and as such is considered in connection with subsequent works displaying similar techniques and structures (Turnour, cit.). But *Clay's* oneiric quality should also provide excellent scope for a psychoanalytical examination, one which would no doubt reflect the director's own world view and existential disquiet. Given Mangiamiele's explicit interest in Freud and psychoanalysis (see interview below), such an interpretation seems feasible.

The excerpts reproduced in the following pages were translated from the first of two interviews recorded on Friday, 25 October 1996. It is hoped that the information they contain may provide further elements for a reappraisal of Mangiamiele's personal experience and work, and highlight its individual, artistic and conceptual worth, as well as the filmmaker's attitude towards migrants' issues, the Italian and the host communities, and his art in general.

INTERVIEW WITH GIORGIO MANGIAMELE

I am from Catania (Sicily). I studied there fine arts at the *Liceo Artistico*. Then I moved to Rome... I became a Police officer, I became a specialist in photographs and cinematography, the technical side, because I had already studied cinema from an artistic and aesthetic point of view [...] I never made films in Italy, I used to experiment. I made the first full-length film here.

How was your inspiration born? Was it a consequence of your artistic studies?

I have a dynamic temperament, so that in cinema for me the movement, the camera, the use of lights, are important. It is a very instinctive thing. Even now I think in cinematographic or photographic terms when I look at things in the light... three dimensional effects, objects, etc. Mechanically. It is a subconscious process, natural – it has become natural.



A scene from the film Clay, directed by Giorgio Mangiamiele and screened at Cannes, 1965.

Why did you decide to come to Australia? At what time?

I was in the Police Force just after the end of the War... There were people the Police used to catch... with bludgeons hitting people, all that, the Police at that time. The pay was minimal, wretched. I didn't have...there was no opportunity to plan for the future, we used to live by the day. I did not like this thing as I wanted an in-depth vision for the future, of what my future would be. Cinematography, I found

out information about Australia and also on New Guinea...

What attracted you to Australia? Why Australia and not another country?

Well! There are blonde women here and this is important for me. The ideal woman is blonde – I don't know why, I cannot explain it. There are probably psychological reasons linked to my childhood. Because there are very few blonde women in Sicily. This is one reason. [The other is] the fact that it is a new country where if one has courage and ideas, one can succeed. This is what I dreamt about, one could achieve so many things. But then it is not true. It is worse in the new country. There are jealousies, envies, of this, and of that. Anomalous affections, individuals who cannot communicate with others, not even with one's own husband or wife. I have many friends, etc. The wife has her own car and bank account... there lacks that in-depth feeling which we Latins have in relationships... From an emotional point of view, I missed this very much, because I am one who gives a lot, but I must also receive a lot. That's the fact. In other words, this society does not give a lot. It is full of smiles. It is all fake in order for people to live peacefully with one another. Courteous and cordial, but only on the surface. No in-depth relationships, especially at that time, as I remember it. Only now things are starting to change.

Has society changed somewhat since then?

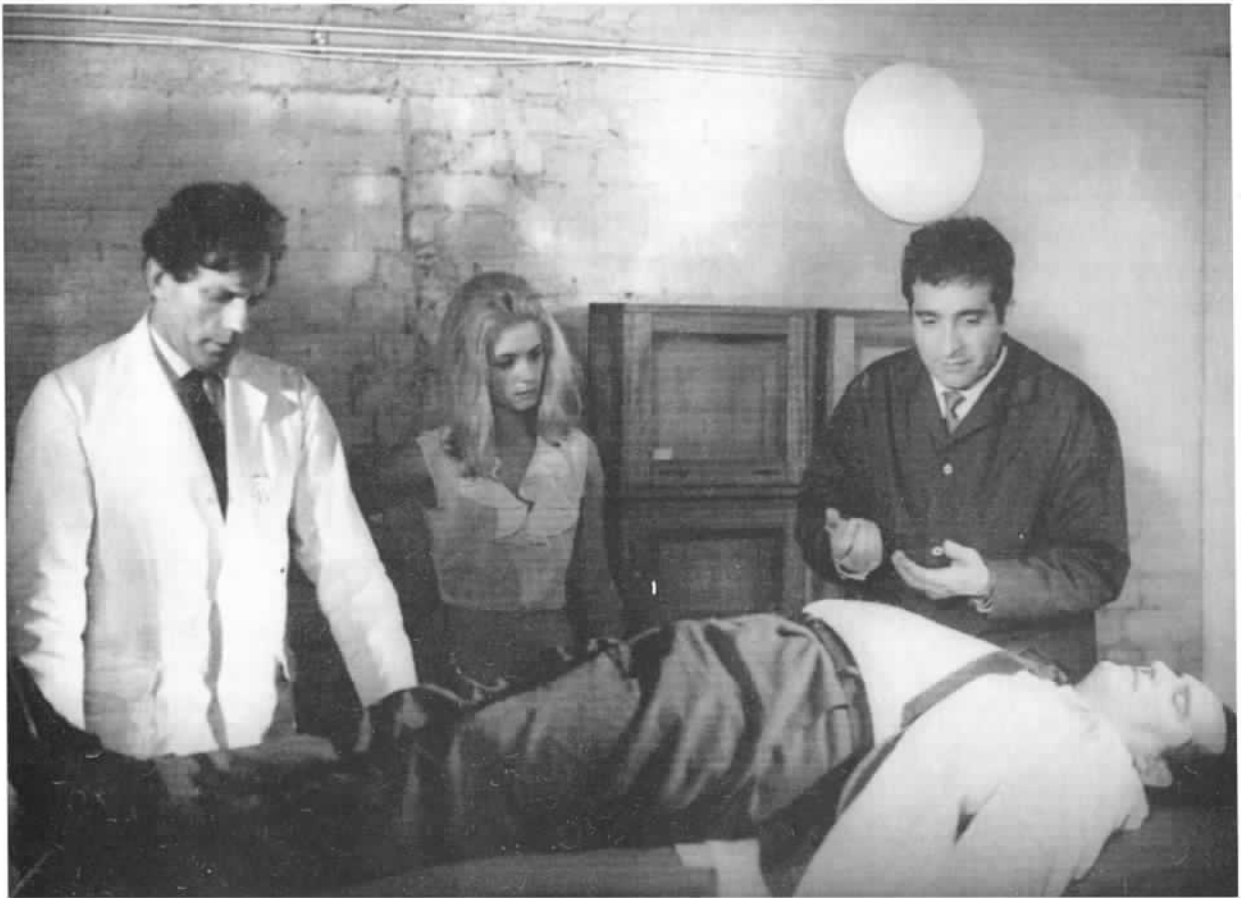
Well, we try to deepen our understanding of life. The problem is that it is a materialistic society, whereas before it was not. What I remember is that I felt at ease in this regard because there was trust. In other words Australia was very different then, much simpler and I like simplicity a lot.

So was a lack of emotions what you found in Australia, or did you feel outright rejection from society?

Perhaps that, because this society accepts easily in a superficial manner. There are very few more educated people, etc. Speaking of life acquires a much more intense significance with these people, these friends of mine that I had for many years. This is not the country where I thought I could be happy. In fact, I am not unhappy, I am alive. It is similar to life which is given only once.

This is what we all felt and experienced when we migrated...

Well, those who went to South America after the War [...] those with a university degree were received with affection, a sympathetic attitude



*Giorgio Mangiamele (at right) directing a scene on the set of his film *Beyond Reason*, 1958.*



*Patrons leaving the Palais Theatre at the 1965 Cannes Film Festival after viewing the film *Clay*, directed by Giorgio Mangiamele (centre, third from right).*

and all kinds of help. They were highly regarded and were able to make a contribution to South America at least... they were migrants. Not so here ...

That is true. It would be difficult to name a really outstanding migrant ...

Let's say [that people showed acceptance by means of] mediocre clichés, ready-made phrases, words which do not mean very much. Giving the right impression is what counts.

Not the substance?

Not the substance. If there is substance, there is no need to give the impression [of cordiality] because it is there. It is felt. There is a certain magnetism...

On the subject of clichés and ready made phrases, I remember a scene in *Ninety Nine Per Cent* where school teachers are sitting at a table and repeat 'I would... I wouldn't... I do...'. These really seem set phrases without any real intention of communicating an idea.

There is a historic reason... these people refuse to communicate... of becoming involved. For instance, in Italy [...] they loved someone precisely because he had to face up to difficult things. Here nothing happens. Here he is ignored, perhaps they might even speak badly about him. I am speaking in general terms of course because I have friends who are not like this. At another [educated] level, all men in the world are the same and communicate very well, because they have none of those fears. They have courage and the intelligence to be themselves.

When did you come to Australia?

In 1952 [...] 44 years ago. At the beginning of the great wave of Italian migration.

I signed a contract in Rome. A two-year contract with the Australian government. When we arrived, they told me and two thousand others... that the contract was worthless because there were no jobs. There was unemployment at the time, crisis...

Did you disembark in Melbourne?

Yes, they sent me to Rushworth.

Was it a migrants' camp?

A camp full of snakes... Houses were not houses but huts made of corrugated iron [...] It was hot, there were countless rabbits. Food was terrible because they had asked some Polish people to do the cooking... I stayed there for a month and then ran away. Meanwhile... whilst I was on the ship, I used to take photographs, photos [for migrants] to send back home. I set myself up in a little room. I used to take photos and develop

them. I made quite a lot of money immediately. I was the richest man on board after the captain. When I arrived at Rushworth, I bought myself a motorbike so I could travel to nearby towns to buy photographic materials. The camp was ten miles from the town of Rushworth and people, migrants, many migrants used to walk ten miles to go to town to see what was there, then walk back again.

It sounds like a concentration camp.

Yes, quite so. I went back to see the camp. There is nothing left there, just a platform. What a horrible memory. That was a psychologically difficult moment because we did not know anything about our future. Some of our colleagues had committed suicide. Someone went to Sydney and threw himself from the bridge. There were horrendous human dramas. Some had borrowed money from their families to come to Australia. The family had borrowed from the bank and expected the debt to be repaid. Migrants couldn't send anything and were desperate. The one who couldn't find a solution committed suicide.

Can you mention names or...

With my motorcycle I went to Melbourne to the Italian Consulate. I spoke with the Consul and told him I was experienced in office work. He said: 'What can you do?' 'I can type, I like it, my Italian is good' (it was much better than my Italian now). They all took minutes [of meetings], but no one knew how to type so they had been accumulating work for months. There were letters that should have been sent, but were not sent because nobody made copies. So I began to work there and stayed for a year typing on the typewriter.

Is this how you were able to get out of the camp?

Yes. I met my wife there at the camp. She used to teach English, even though she was German. I was in love and she came to Melbourne ... In my spare time I used to take photographs. I used to go to the churches on Sundays when people also used to go to Mass. I also took photographs in St. George Park⁹, etc. I would take the photo and then I would send it. I had set up a nice little business. In the end, I made an agreement with the priest. I told him 'You have lots of marriages, why don't you send them to me and I will give you a commission'. This was normal in Australia. At that time we also did this in Italy but not so openly [...] So I bought a house in Rathdowne Street and I had a cellar dug up. More than a cellar it was a studio, deep, right under the house. A large studio which had lots of

advantages: it had the same temperature summer or winter, there was no noise and when cars went past, you could not hear them. I also used it as a cinematographic studio. I photographed countless marriages...

What parish was this, Mr Mangiamele?
St. George.

St. George. Were they Italians?

It was in Rathdowne Street where many Italians used to go.

But the priest?

It was a monster of a priest who used to fight with everybody.

What was the relationship between Italians and the Catholic Church here in Australia at that time?

Look, I do not believe in any religion at all. I believe that it is home-made by man and that it is of no consequence. According to Freud or Jung, man has created God according to a father image. As a child, the father was a god because it could help him. He was strong. When the child became an adult, the father was old and frail and so he created a God, another father that was stronger and invisible. In other words, they are

all creations of the human fantasy.

It seems to me that the Catholic Church has given the Italian migrant community a sense of identity at a time that Italians needed support, especially the Scalabrinians and Capuchins.

Yes, but in the Church of St. George there were older Australian parish priests.

That's another matter.

In matters of religion I have my doubts. Priests then were racist and they showed it openly.¹⁰ When they were speaking to an Australian, they were all smiles and compliments, but when it was an Italian...

I asked you the question on the Catholic Church because in *Clay* there is a very strange character, very enigmatic. At first one cannot understand the function it has in the film. Towards the middle of the film, a priest on a bicycle appears...

It is the opportunistic priest that goes from farm to farm to scrounge. *Clay* is a dream. From the start it is established that it is a dream. Things happen as if in a dream, the way people walk and talk, it is not realistic.



Giorgio Mangiamele and cameraman Simon Mers on the set of the film Sapos which was shot in Papua New Guinea, 1981.

But this priest is an image...

An image... the only person who could show some human warmth, etc. He comes to scrounge. It has a sterile meaning.

The reference to the shadow. Nick asks the priest to move away because he doesn't want his shadow cast over him.

Precisely. [Nick] has killed someone... Religion in this case [instead of forgiveness] gives him condemnation. [...] The priest gives his condemnation by casting his shadow over him.

Look, you have just mentioned Freud. Have you studied him? Is he of interest to you?

Yes. Very much so. I studied Freud. Above all I studied the *Theory of Dreams*. I speak a little German, but I read it in Italian as *La teoria dei sogni*, even though it doesn't work today because of... Then there is *Psychoanalysis*, a powerful and frightful theory, but today it is a theory devoid of any sense, a little like religion which has gone out of fashion.

It has gone out of fashion now, but what about then?

I was very interested then. I also studied psychology and psychiatry. I studied it for two years here in Australia because I made the film *Beyond Reason*. The actors were all mental patients. Each one was a different case and so I had to study well, not so much to be able to identify the various cases, but in order to have my characters act in a realistic manner... [...] the television never bought it.

Television never wanted it?

It never buys anything of mine. I don't know what to say: *blacklisted*. I don't even know why. I don't know if there is a black list or a black book, whatever. When I went to France, that is to Cannes, they invited me. They invited my film and also asked me to take an Australian representative, the main actors, etc., a small group. When I asked Canberra, etc. they said no, they were not interested. They did not send even a government person, etc., a secretary, nothing. *Sitmar Lines* gave us our fare almost for free. We went there by any means available, and in a sense it was sheer luck... out of charity... the Australian film arrives there thanks to the charity of *Sitmar Lines*. When I arrived there I went to the Australian Embassy in Paris... all the employees told me he was busy, the usual stories. I could not get in touch. Luckily, a friend of mine by the name of Peter Hoysten, a clever young man, was in England... I had helped him

to create a theatre group, because he's a theatre director, to enable him to go to England. As soon as he found out I was there (he is a good friend) he dropped everything and came over from England to Cannes. That's the situation. He said: 'I'll stop in Paris on the way and speak to the Ambassador'... [...] He told the Ambassador the story [...] it was a matter of hours but he made it just in time for the screening of the film. I will never forget that man there [the Australian Ambassador] because he behaved like a real gentleman.

So it was a satisfaction.

Yes, of course.

Was *Clay* the first Australian film at Cannes?

Before there was *Jedda*.¹¹ We know it was sent to Cannes and I don't know if it was screened or not. I imagine that it was screened if it was chosen. So that mine must have been second, but this is not important ten years later. I had begun something new in Australia... it is not important to be the first. What matters is to be in it, even after the film was invited, it's not a trivial matter.

Was it invited? How did they know?

They knew I made films because all the papers talked about it, etc. They asked me if I could send a 16mm

inspection copy. I sent it immediately and shortly after I received word 'You are invited to the next festival; you have a month's time'.

So you made very many films?

I worked on 24 films all told. They are not all mine. I also worked on the films of others, but a heap are mine. I wrote the stories myself and all that. The only thing is that when I came back to Australia... from Europe, from Cannes, there wasn't a dog who rang me up to say congratulations, nothing. Silence, the silence of a tomb, typically Anglo-Saxon. They have ignored me for years. I was really trying to get some help.

Nevertheless you persisted and you have never...

In conclusion, we are still there. I don't manage to gain anything. Just yesterday I went to see one of the Italian ministers and he is trying to do something. I don't know, you see, it's hatred they have towards the migrant, because I went to Cannes at a time when Australians did not produce a decent film. These are petty, stupid things. Here [the film industry] is dominated by



Giorgio Mangiamele behind the camera during the shooting of his film *Beyond Reason*, 1958.

the American production. They were all American films. At that time they were trying to destroy me and have attempted with all means. In the case of *Ninety Nine Per Cent* there was someone who wanted to distribute it. He wanted to buy it and distribute it. [...] American interests stopped him. The film was bought by Channel 2 of the ABC and it was screened in some Australian cities, but not in Melbourne. In conclusion, small things, childish ones [...] they are the same emotions, the same passions that children have.

Which film do you cherish the most?

From a sentimental point of view, and this is a personal thing, *The Spag*. It is not at the same level technically as the other films, but my heart is in that film.

Why, which are the aspects?

There we are: the persecution felt by the child because of racism, etc. That's what I saw then. And that is what persists today, we are still there today. That woman¹² who speaks out now [in Parliament] against migrants, and again against the Vietnamese, the Asians and all that. This is a mentality that is unchanging. Even the humanitarian, the priest, the philosopher, whoever he might be, he says nice things in public on humanity, but he is racist deep down, and on occasions the poor migrant suffers. □

Notes

¹ See 'Cultural Difference and Ethnicity in Australian Cinema', *Cinema Papers* 90, 1992, 12.

² Turnour, for instance, judges that *Clay's* dream-like atmosphere was not well received in 1965 because it was too innovative at a time when 'Australian film culture was still possessed by the dominant post-war idea that literary realism was the only mode of film art address'. In his view, it was ironic 'that, of course, the dream landscape of *Clay* is almost that that Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) was later to penetrate'. See Quentin Turnour 'Giorgio' now in *Senses of the Cinema* (online) at http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/mangiamele_quentin.htm

³ 'Giorgio Mangiamele – Passionate film-maker, 13 Aug 1926 – 13 May 2001' now in *Senses of the Cinema* (online) at http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/mangiamele_obit.html

⁴ See Stephen Castles, et. al., *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society*, St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1992, 199.

⁵ Rando asserts that of his productions four short features – *The Contract* (1953), *The Brothers* (1958), *The Spag* (1961) and *Ninety Nine Per Cent* (1963) – are on a 'migrant' theme. See *Altretalia*, vol. 16 luglio-dicembre 1997, http://www.italians-world.org/altretalia/16_altretalia_contenuti.htm#Saggi

⁶ Graziella Parati (ed.) *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration Literature in Italy*, London: Associated University Presses, 1999, 18.

⁷ Alfredo Luzi 'La letteratura italo-australiana in lingua italiana', *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Macerata* XXI, Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1988, 127-43.

⁸ Few commentators are aware that Mangiamele named the protagonist of his film *Clay* after a fictional character in *Albi dell'Intrepido*, a film that was popular in Post-War Italy. It is hoped that more cultural elements may emerge from the transcript of this interview.

⁹ Contemporary maps of inner Melbourne do not show a park or a Catholic church by this name, and I have been unable to confirm the accuracy of this reference as yet.

¹⁰ Mangiamele's view on the attitude of the Australian Catholic Church towards Italian migrants seems to coincide to an extent with the findings of Caroline Alcorso, et.al., in 'Community Networks and Institutions' in Stephen Castles et. al., *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society* op. cit., p 107.

¹¹ The Australian Film Commission on its web site lists *Jedda* (1955) by Charles Chauvel as the first Australian film to be selected and screened at the Cannes Film Festival. See <http://www.afc.gov.au/>

¹² Mangiamele may have been referring to the emerging *One Nation* party.