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Violence and Corruption among New York Longshoremen: Jim Longhi and His *Two Fingers of Pride*

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring a still unpublished play by Jim Longhi entitled *Two Fingers of Pride* (1955), and the controversial circumstances that led to its composition. Longhi's dramatic piece featured the tragic story of Pete Panto, a New York stevedore of Italian ancestry who had been murdered by the Mafia controlling the Red Hook docks of Brooklyn, while attempting to put an end to its crooked system of kickbacks and bribes. Panto's story attracted Arthur Miller's attention and, thanks to Longhi's collaboration, in 1951, the playwright wrote a film script entitled *The Hook.* Director Elia Kazan was involved in the venture but, unfortunately, the script was turned down by several producers. Apparently, Longhi wrote his own play as a reaction to both the failure of *The Hook*, and the success of Elia Kazan's blockbuster *On the Waterfront* (1954), somehow inspired by Pete Panto's vicissitudes (even though Kazan never acknowledged his debt, besides replacing the main character with an ex-boxer of Irish descent), and by the dangerous lives led by New York longshoremen just before WWII.

Keywords

Jim Longhi, Red Hook Docks, longshoremen, Arthur Miller, *On the Waterfront,* mafia

Özet

Bu makalenin amacı, Jim Longhi'nin hala basılmamış olan oyunu *Two Fingers of Pride*'ı (*Gururun İki Parmağı*) ve yazılmasına sebep olan tartışmalı durumları incelemektir. Longhi'nin etkileyici yapıtı, İtalyan soyundan gelen New Yorklu liman işçisi Pete Panto'nun Brooklyn'in Red Hook rıhtımındaki komisyon ve rüşvet gibi yolsuzluklara bir son vermeye çalışırken mafya tarafından öldürülmesini konu alır. Panto'nun hikâyesi Arthur Miller'ın da dikkatini çekti ve 1951'de Longhi ile işbirliği sayesinde, Miller *The Hook* adını verdiği senaryoyu yazdı. Yönetmen Elia Kazan da bu maceraya katıldı fakat senaryo birkaç yapımcı tarafından reddedildi. Görünüşe göre Longhi kendi oyununu hem *The Hook*'un başarısızlığına hem de Elia Kazan'ın gişe rekorları kıran filmi *Rıhtımlar Üzerinde* (1954)'ye bir tepki olarak yazdı. Bunu yaparken, Pete Panto'nun değişikliğinden (ana karakteri İrlanda kökenli eski bir boksör ile değiştirmesi dışında Kazan ilham aldığına dair bir açıklama yapmadı) ve II. Dünya Savaşı'ndan hemen önce New Yorklu liman işçilerinin sürdürdüğü tehlikeli hayattan ilham aldı.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Jim Longhi, Red Hook Limanı, liman işçileri, Arthur Miller, *Rıhtımlar Üzerinde*, mafya

Better known for his close association with folk singers Woody Guthrie and Cisco Huston (with whom he sailed as a merchant marine during World War II), Jim Longhi authored an obscure and still unpublished play entitled *Two Fingers of Pride* (composed in the mid-50s) which, so far, has received little critical attention. Conversely, Longhi's dramatic piece deserves an in-depth analysis, since it could cast light on the dangerous lives led by New York longshoremen in the years preceding the Second World Conflict, besides featuring a thought-provoking fictional rendering of the murder of Pete Panto, a stevedore of Italian descent and a political activist whose controversial vicissitudes attracted the attention of Arthur Miller, an acquaintance of Longhi's. This paper sets out to offer a thorough investigation of *Two Fingers of Pride*, whose significance, as it will be shown, also lies in its connection with the *querelle* regarding Arthur Miller's discarded 1951 film script on Pete Panto, *The Hook*, and Bud Schulberg's award winning screenplay of *On the Waterfront,* the well-known blockbuster directed in 1954 by Elia Kazan.

1. The Story of Pete Panto and Jim Longhi's Interest in It

Scribbled as graffiti along the Brooklyn waterfront, the sentence in Italian "Dov'è Pete Panto?" (where is Pete Panto?) began to cover walls and sidewalks soon after July 14, 1939, when Pete Panto disappeared, lured out of his house by a phone call announcing a mysterious meeting. Panto was a young longshoreman who, like many other fortune-seekers, had arrived in New York from the South of Italy, in the mid-thirties. Dynamic and charismatic, he soon began to hold public gatherings to denounce the corruption of the International Longshoremen's Association (the union that controlled the docks), whose President, Joseph Ryan, and Vice-President, Emil Camarda had evident connections with Mafia leaders, namely with Albert Anastasia, one of the most merciless killers of *Murder Incorporated* (the name the press gave to organized crime groups in those years). In the Red Hook neighbourhood of Brooklyn there were many unwritten rules to follow: longshoremen were actually forced to pay kickbacks to the hiring boss in order to secure their daily livelihood; moreover, they were compelled to buy expensive tickets for balls they would never go to, as well as paying ten dollars for two-dollar bottles of wine, which had to be purchased in designated shops. Deliberately overlooking the intimidating warnings by Camarda and his cronies, Pete Panto was determined to put an end to this feudal and crooked system, which undermined the dignity and the welfare of dock workers. Nonetheless, the Mafia's grip on the waterfront was still too tight to be loosened: Panto all of a sudden vanished, only to be found in the Passaic River (New Jersey), eighteen months after his abduction: tied in a sack, his body was covered in quicklime "a Combination method," in the words of Nathan Ward, "for rendering victims unrecognizable" (7). Hence, the workers' unrest stopped, and the docks became quiet once more, thus turning into a ghastly area peopled by puppets and automatons. Far from being a mere allusion to the disappearance and death of the young hero, therefore, "Dov'è Pete Panto?," as George Crandell has elucidated, was soon interpreted as a heartfelt appeal, as "a rallying cry for those who would take up his cause." (16)

A few years later, Panto's challenging but burdensome legacy was warmly received by a young and talented attorney with literary ambitions, Vincent, or better, Jim Longhi, as he liked to be called, following "an old Irish custom that the Italian Americans took over," according to which "the Vincents become Jim," (*Woody, Cisco, & Me* 17) as he

explained in his autobiographical narrative entitled *Woody, Cisco, & Me*. Jim was the son of an Apulian immigrant, Giuseppe Longhi who, once settled in New York, had found a job on the waterfront, like many other Italians affected by the so-called *birds of passage syndrome*, i.e. the urgent desire "to see America as a place of temporary employment rather than as a permanent home," (115) borrowing Bernie Bookbinder's definition. A rebel, an atheist, as well as a staunch radical, Jim Longhi's father had organized the first strike of dock workers in New York, and he had become so dangerously popular that, as Jim emphasizes, "when I was born, my father had seven bodyguards, seven Italians with ice-picks!" (Ward xiv). Sharing his father's and Pete Panto's dream "of cleaning up the waterfront, get[ting] rid of Joe Ryan, the Mafia,"[1] (Davis 101) Jim became a waterfront lawyer. After bravely serving in the US Merchant Marine during WWII, he ran twice for Congress, in 1946 and 1948: both attempts proved unsuccessful, even though his second political campaign had been backed by celebrities, such as Frank Sinatra (who publicly endorsed him[2]) and Arthur Miller. The latter also has to be credited with prompting Jim Longhi (albeit indirectly) to compose his first attempt at writing for the stage, the play entitled *Two Fingers of Pride*[3] (1955).

2. Jim Longhi, Arthur Miller and *On the Waterfront*

Following the success of his drama entitled *All My Sons* (1947), Arthur Miller was keenly engaged in looking for another provocative subject for a new dramatic piece. As he recalled in his autobiography entitled *Timebends, a Life* (1988), while walking in Brooklyn, near the piers, he noticed the "graffiti on walls and side walks saying 'Dove *[sic]* Pete Panto'" (170). He soon began to piece together the tragic vicissitudes of the young Italian hero, collecting scant and reticent memories from the Red Hook longshoremen who, though many years had elapsed, were still afraid of disclosing the dark details of Panto's unfortunate story. As Miller remarked, "It was a time when the heroic had all but disappeared from the theatre along with any interest in the tragic tradition itself. The idea of a young man defying evil and ending in a cement block at the bottom of the river drew me on" (170). In those very days, Jim Longhi and his friend Mitch Berenson (a dock worker and a social activist) contacted Miller to obtain his political and financial support, which the playwright granted, even accompanying

Jim in his campaign tour of the south of Italy (the tour was aimed at creating bonds with the families of the Italian American immigrants in New York, thus further securing their votes). As Cosma Siani and Mariantonietta Di Sabato have highlighted (73), however, Jim Longhi also asked Miller to write a screenplay on Pete Panto's murder, offering his unconditional help, and promising to share his first-hand knowledge of the dreadful events with the writer.[4] Longhi's wish perfectly matched Miller's aspiration to complete what had turned into a "hopeless [literary] project" (Miller 172), due to a discouraging lack of information: *The Hook* (a reference to the tool used by longshoremen, as well as an allusion to the Red Hook neighbourhood) was completed by Arthur Miller in November 1949; Elia Kazan (his friend and collaborator) was involved in the venture as a director, and Jim Longhi was supposed to play the part of Pete Panto (Di Sabato and Siani 81).

In January 1951, both Miller and Kazan went to Hollywood with the intention of selling the script to a producer; *The Hook* was turned down by Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Bros, while Harry Cohn (the founder and president of Columbia Pictures), influenced by the witch-hunt atmosphere of McCarthy's America, demanded a substantial change to what he viewed as an anti-American text: the gangsters and the corrupt unionists had to be portrayed as wicked communists. As Jeffrey Meyers has underlined, "Miller flatly refused to falsify his script and turn it into propaganda" (2); hence, in the words of Jim Longhi, "he threw [the manuscript] in a trunk" (Ward 191). The legendary *On the Waterfront*, based on a screenplay by Budd Schulberg and directed by Elia Kazan, came out three years later, and in 1955 it was awarded eight Oscars. Even though Schulberg and Kazan claimed they had been inspired by "Crime on the New York Waterfront," a Pulitzer prize-winning series of articles for the *New York Sun* penned by Malcom Johnson and collected in a volume in 1950 (Rapf 7), it might be inferred that the memory of Miller's *The Hook* still lingered in Kazan's mind. In 2004, journalist Stephen Schwartz forcefully defended the director against a possible charge of plagiarism in what Di Sabato and Siani have defined as "un aggressivo articolo," (84) an aggressive article, fraught with prejudices against Arthur Miller and his writings. In Schwartz's excessively enthusiastic and partisan opinion, *On the Waterfront* was "very possibly the greatest labor film ever made in America" (379), and its characterization, its dialogue, and its action were "so authentic it seems more a documentary than a dramatic motion pic-

ture" (379). Conversely, Miller's *The Hook*, "a quintessentially Stalinist composition" (380), betrayed the author's "status as a tourist among the Italian-American dockworkers of Brooklyn" (381): "Miller's longshoremen are *lumpen* proletarians on the edge of the gutter, while Kazan and Schulberg's are authentic workingmen" (381). Schwartz pointed out the differences between the two scripts, while expressing harsh criticism towards Miller's text:

> In reality, *The Hook* has no more in common with *On the Waterfront*, in terms of authenticity of observation, quality of writing, or insight into the lives of the working class, than any two Western, war, science-fiction, crime, noir, or other genre films have with one another, and to accuse Kazan and Schulberg of stealing the waterfront labor corruption theme from Miller is as ridiculous as accusing Martin Scorsese of stealing *Goodfellas* from Francis Coppola. A reading of *The Hook* reveals it to be a middle-class intellectual's fantasy of the lives of people he only knows from a distance: Miller's proletariat is made up of incoherent, inarticulate, stumbling, groping men who can barely understand why they have a union, and who are the pawns of abstract, even mystical urges, rather than real social forces, in their confrontation with corruption (380).

The journalist did not spare words of sharp rebuke even against Longhi, viewed as "a model of the leftist dilettante" (387), whose "career as a sycophant of stars from the Stalinist milieu" (387) had already started with Guthrie and Houston.

Despite Schwartz's strenuous defence, however, as Kenneth Hey (671-672) and Robert Schulman have suggested (30), it could be argued that the exploitation of the pro-informer theme was probably the real, patriotic aim of *On the Waterfront*. Both Schulberg and Kazan – two repentant communists who had testified before the "House Committee on Un-American Activities" in 1951 and 1952, respectively – actually wished to justify and legitimize their taking part in McCarthy's political crusade. Their *naming of names*, therefore, was somehow mirrored in the courageous and honourable decision on the part of Terry Malloy (the protagonist of *On the Waterfront*) to testify against the corrupt union-boss, thus breaking the *D&D* [deaf and dumb] *rule*.

3. *Two Fingers of Pride*

Jim Longhi perceived Kazan's film as a betrayal: the figure of Peter Panto, whom he regarded as "a young labour leader, a rebel, an uneducated Jesus Christ" (Ward 214), had thoroughly disappeared from the picture, replaced with an Irish immigrant, a crooked ex-boxer who gained his (still questionable) moral status only at the end of the movie. Consequently, Jim decided to redress wrongs by writing his own script, *The Geep, a Play in Two Acts*, whose main character, Pete Mello, was his fictional portrayal of Pete Panto. Staged in 1955 at Ogunquit Playhouse (Maine),[5] *Two Fingers of Pride* (that was its final title) never reached Broadway, as in the original intentions of the producer. In fact, its success faded very rapidly when *On the Waterfront* began to collect major prizes and nominations.

Set in New York just before the Second World War, Jim Longhi's play is focused on Pete Mello, a young Italian American longshoreman. Tired of being oppressed and abused by "the Combination" (the criminal organization that controlled the waterfront), he turns into the daring leader of a revolt that never takes place on stage, since the rebellious dock worker is shot dead by one of Don Filippe's goons. The title *Two Fingers of Pride* is probably a bitter reference to the recruitment system of longshoremen adopted by corrupt hiring bosses, who pointed their two fingers in exchange for a bribe; as Fats, one of the stevedores, emphasizes, "you know how Filthy Louie picks, with two fingers pointin' […] … two fingers for two bucks" (I.2.32). Allusions to kickbacks and bribery are scattered throughout the play: Pete says that the boss "wanted two bucks kickback for the day's work" (I.1.19), which he proudly declined to pay; Pete is also expected to buy two expensive "tickets for a banquet" (II.1.6) he will never have the chance to go to: even in this case, he refuses to comply with unreasonable and aggressive demands, thus digging his grave even deeper. Old-Timer, another longshoreman, is forced to purchase "kickback wine […] pa[ying] ten bucks for that vinegar so that [he] could work two days" (II.1.10) on one of the piers; he justifies his undignified behaviour by saying "it's no special shame" (II.1.10): every stevedore has to bow his head in order to survive. Indeed, dock workers are constantly humiliated and reduced to the rank of beasts: as the working title of the play clearly indicates, they are first of all "geeps" (from *goat* and *sheep*), a slang word that combines the sheepish attitude of the longshoremen with the sacrificial quality of a scapegoat. They are also compared to horses and donkeys, for their en-

durance and their reticence to protest; just to quote one of the most striking examples, after refusing to pay "two bucks kickback" (I.1.19), Pete recalls that the hiring boss felt his muscles "to see if [he] was strong enough to hire anyway... like he was buyin' a horse" (I.1.19). Other times, longshoremen are associated with chickens (for their fearful nature[6]), and to worms (II.1.12), for their debased and vilified character. Conversely, mobsters and Mafia bosses are assimilated to predatory animals: the money lender is a "loan shark" (II.1.9), and Don Filippe becomes a vicious tiger ruling the jungle; as he remarks, "I learned to fight like a tiger… and I learned to grow claws like a tiger…" (II.3.38).

Don Filippe even believes he is a sort of pagan demigod, who managed to defeat misery with his shrewdness and guns (he had arrived in the US as a poor immigrant, just like Pete's father). He regards himself as an obscure deity, who created "order out of chaos" (II.3.39) by imposing his arbitrary and ruthless rule over a muddled community, incapable of self-government. Jim Longhi revealed to journalist Nathan Ward that, when his body was rescued, Pete Panto "became a saint, like they carry on St. Anthony's Day" (Ward 15). In *Two Fingers of Pride*, Pete is actually depicted not just as a hero, but as a Christian knight fighting for a just cause, who is able to attract and inflame so many fellow-workers that "Columbia Street looks like it's Saint Anthony's day" (II.1.3), as it is highlighted in the play. Pete is also implicitly connected with the figure of Christ, who sacrificed himself for the salvation of mankind; Nino (his brother and a petty criminal) mockingly observes that "all he's got is a cross…a big cross he thinks he's gotta carry up an' down this river" (II.1.14), as if Pete was somehow doomed to face a *via crucis*. Towards the conclusion of the play, after unsuccessfully tempting him to join his gang, just before sentencing him to death, Don Filippe calls him "a martyr" (II.3.36): as it is possible to gather, in fact, Pete had been betrayed by Fats, a Judas-like follower, enticed with the prospect of an easier life.

Yet, the end of the drama also marks the symbolic resurrection of Pete Mello: his spirit continues to live in those who loved him, and his brave actions will prove to be a constant source of inspiration for every longshoreman in Red Hook. Maybe, with his play, Jim Longhi wished to answer the question "Dov'è Pete Panto?," thus providing a different, more optimistic solution to the tragic riddle of his disappearance. Quoting the words Old-Timer, pronounced in front of Pete's mourning friends and family, during his wake,

> He doesn't die with these candles!... When we found him last night a part of him went into each of us and each of us became a little bit like him… […] (to Nino) and we'll remember Nino that the pride of being a man burned hard in him… As long as that pride burns in one of us, your brother will live… Pete will live! (II.3.49)

Notes

[1] Longhi's own words are quoted in Colin J. Davis's volume.

[2] A recording of Frank Sinatra's speech can be listened at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd1OKRvzaIo (December 1, 2015).

[3] Still unpublished in English, an Italian translation of the text by Cosma Siani and Mariantonietta Di Sabato, with a preface by Elisabetta Marino, will be released in Italy, in 2016.

[4] Longhi's stories also inspired Miller to compose *A View from the Bridge*, originally called *An Italian Tragedy*: "I had the bones of the story from Vinnie Longhi" (Miller 350).

[5] Twenty-five-year-old Steve McQuinn played the part of Nino Mello, Pete's brother.

[6] Old-Timer believes that longshoremen have to fight together against the Mafia, otherwise they will "all go floppin' around like a bunch of drunken chickens" (II.2.21).

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