

Addio, Romano!*

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For over fifty years he had been writing and illustrating Disney comics stories, some of the finest ever made. But on the morning of 23 April 2005 Romano Scarpa did not wake up. He is now “up there” with the other two grandmasters of Disney comics, Carl Barks and Floyd Gottfredson—of whom, with great humility, he used to consider himself simply an enthusiastic fan. To legions of readers around the world he was instead the only other Disney author at their level.

Scarpa, born in Venice in 1927, was an avid reader of the adventurous Mickey Mouse stories (Gottfredson’s, of course) that appeared in *Topolino* when he was a schoolchild. He showed his graphic talents from an early age and his father, a baker, encouraged him to graduate from arts school and to read Architecture at university. His true love, however, was animation: with enthusiasm and determination he set up his own cartoon studio and produced a few shorts including *La piccola fiammiferaia* (1953), based on Andersen’s “The Little Matchgirl” story that he deeply loved. This was a full two years before he started his comics work for *Topolino*. Over the years, even though it is definitely for his Disney comics that he is best known in Italy and around the world, he would regularly come back to animation, producing some little-known graceful gems of cartoons, mostly with his own original characters but very occasionally even with those familiar mice and ducks.

While the grace and elegance of his beautifully rounded pencil stroke was rarely equalled by others, what made Scarpa really great was undoubtedly his storytelling. His extraordinary Mickey stories (“Topolino e la Dimensione Delta”, “Topolino e il mistero di Tapioco VI”, “Topolino e il Pippotarzan”, “Topolino e l’unghia di Kali”...) were so fascinating and well crafted that many readers believed they came from the same creative genius behind the famous pre-war daily strips. In the fifty years since the end of the Gottfredson continuity in the daily strips very few authors could really understand the true, adventurous personality of the original Mickey Mouse and none ever brought the character alive as masterfully as Scarpa.

In too many stories of the average Disney production, Mickey’s character was flattened to that of a predictably infallible detective: an uninteresting constant winner that elicited no sympathies from the readers. Not so with Scarpa: his Mickey was noble but not pretentious, honest but not moralistic: a genuine character whose hard-earned victories were shared by the loving audience. It is no exaggeration to say that Scarpa

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was Mickey: righteous, honest and uncompromising on the big things but also pleasant and relaxed about the little things; and always kind-hearted and genuine. To meet this unique Mickey, go and re-read any of Scarpa's great adventures, from the Fifties' classics cited above to the "strip stories" he wrote in the Nineties.

Scarpa was much more than just Mickey, of course: many of his most memorable adventures ("Flying Scotsman's legend", "Lentils of Babylon", "Colossus of the Nile" etc.) featured Donald and Scrooge. Indeed he was the only complete author (story and artwork) capable of telling outstanding stories with both mice and ducks. Some of his longest adventures, such as the 1988 "Paperolimpiadi" set in Seoul, even merge the two universes. Nothing shows Scarpa's complete understanding of and amazing contribution to the Disney universe better than the "group picture" of the dozens of new characters he created for it. Some, like Brigitta, Trudy and Paperetta Yè-Yè, have appeared in countless stories and have been officially adopted by other authors as part of the Disney universe. But even the ones who only appeared in one story, such as Mr Bunz or Tapioco VI, were carefully and lovingly brought to life: readers who enjoyed the corresponding stories will remember them fondly.

As with all other Disney authors, Scarpa's name was practically unknown to his readers until at least the end of the 1960s. The first interview on record, by Fiorello Zangrando, dates from 1974. Alberto Becattini produced a Scarpa chronology in 1980. Leonardo Gori, with Andrea Sani and Luca Boschi, wrote several insightful fanzine articles that later paved the way for the "Blue Book" (1988), Scarpa's first significant public recognition and, to this day, one of the most fascinating monographs ever written on a Disney author. (An updated edition appeared in 2001 as *Romano Scarpa—Sognando la Calidornia*.)

In 1997 Leonardo and I were working on our second book together, on Floyd Gottfredson; I suggested that Scarpa, possibly the greatest Gottfredson fan alive, might wish to do the cover and say what Gottfredson meant for him. Leonardo, who was on first name terms with him, had no trouble asking; Scarpa responded enthusiastically and both his contributions were beautiful. In his short piece he told us about his first and only meeting, in Burbank in 1977, with the man he considered his inspirer and master: Scarpa spoke very little English and Gottfredson spoke no Italian, but you can see in Scarpa's modest, sincere and moving words how much that brief meeting was worth to him. He wrote of the aura of nobility that, he felt, emanated from Gottfredson: "Had I been the King of England, I would have knighted him 'Sir Floyd'."

Once we received these two priceless presents I asked Leonardo to send me Scarpa's phone so that I could thank him in person. This was the first time for me to get in touch with him—I had written him a long letter years before but, as I then found out, it had never reached him: he had already moved to Spain, while I had sent it to his old Venice address. But now, at last, at the other end of this international phone call was one of my greatest heroes: with due proportions, I was in as much awe as he must have been in front of Gottfredson twenty years earlier. I felt inadequate but, happily, I did manage to say thank you, thank you a million times, not just for the cover and the short essay, but for all the stories. He was modest and kind. And that would be, sadly, the first and last time I interacted directly with him.

People may leave a message about Scarpa—or *for* him—on the nice web site set up by Francesco Spreafico at <http://www.dimensionedelta.net/scarpa/>. The page still accepts new messages at the time of writing but it will soon be locked and forwarded to Sandra and Sabina Scarpa (wife and daughter) as a thank you from so many hearts around the world that were touched by the Master's message. If you wish to say "addio" to Romano, now is your last chance.