



---

## Elvira Notari

---

### **Also Known As:**

Elvira Coda Notari, "The General"

### **Lived:**

February 10, 1875 - December 17, 1946

### **Worked as:**

acting teacher, adapter, co-director, director, distributor, film actress, film company owner, producer, screenwriter

### **Worked In:**

Italy

### **by Kim Tomadjoglou**

According to her son Eduardo, who described her in interviews as having an authoritarian attitude or *piglio*, Elvira Notari was called “The General.” She earned the nickname from the strong will and determination she exhibited as head of the Dora Film Company in Naples, Italy (Masi and Franco 49). Director, actress, screenwriter, producer, and distributor, Elvira Notari is now celebrated as Italy’s first and most prolific film director. Over the course of 25 years in which she made 60 feature films and hundreds of shorts and actualities, she led Dora Film to become one of Naples’s leading production houses.

Working alongside Elvira was her husband Nicola, who was responsible for camerawork, and their son Eduardo, affectionately known as Gennariello from the character he played. The company was named Dora after the Notaris’ youngest child, although she never worked in the business. Like other artisanal family businesses, the Notari business started small, with the opening of a photographic laboratory in 1905. Their specialty, hand-colored moving pictures, distinguished them among others, as did the *Arriverderci ed Augurali*, which were brief hand-colored film titles, also called visual postcards, that they produced to preview coming events and attractions (Bernardini 1982, 119; Miscuglio and Daopoulo 243).

By 1912, Dora Film became a full-fledged production house after the Notaris built a *teatro di posa* (stage set) at their home in the Ponti Rossi section of Naples. In an apartment adjacent to their residence, Elvira founded an acting school for young, aspiring nonprofessionals (Masi and Franco 49; Bernardini 1982, 174). Eduardo’s schoolteacher, the beautiful and sensuous Rosè Angione, was featured as a *femme fatale* in many of Notari’s films. In *A Santanotte* (1922) she played the

role of a lower class café waitress. In contrast to the glamorous and elaborately costumed bourgeois and aristocratic divas of Italian cinema, Angione's natural beauty and fiery, sexual demeanor offered audiences an alternative to the traditional *femme fatale*.

Notari's acting methods merit some discussion as she is generally credited for presenting a realistic form of popular cinema. In interviews, her nephew Armando has described how his aunt, consistent with her nickname "The General," was not only severe, but extremely picky. For example, she forbade players to use glycerin to artificially stimulate tears. Instead, on the set, Notari would bring up a painful or emotionally sensitive episode or detail of a player's private life until an emotional response was achieved, and then she would order the camera to roll (Miscuglio and Daopoulo 248).

Notari incorporated the notion of typeage to create and develop players with regionally distinct facial features and body physiognomies that were codified to display a range of familiar repeated attitudes, gestures, and behaviors. With his slender physique, large, dark eyes and high, bushy hair, Gennariello epitomized the southern subaltern in his role as the good street urchin; local "black boot," or shoeshine; or *'guaglione 'e core* (good-hearted kid). Later he was given a series of his own based on that character. An unsettling figure, he was often the gauge by which critics judged Notari's films as either degenerative displays of lower class vulgarity or artistic works of moral value and truth. Local critic Giuseppe Fossataro emphasized the educative influence of Notari's films by praising Genariello's emotionally convincing performances: "I saw tears in the eyes of those sitting next to me during the fourth part of *A mala nova* where the son of Mrs. Notari confirmed himself a true artist" (Troianelli 74).

In addition to relatives and friends, members of the Naples artistic community participated in Dora Film production activities, including Michele di Giacomo, brother of the illustrious poet Salvatore, who is said to have authored some of Notari's films. In several interviews, however, Gennariello insists that his mother was responsible for directing and writing all of Dora Film's productions, including adaptations:

Contrary to what is written in the general histories, all misinformed, my mother directed all of the films we produced, from the first to the last, including the seventy features. Not only this, she was also the author of the original subjects and adaptations (Miscuglio and Daopoulo 245).

Unlike many Italian women of her time, Notari graduated from high school and was educated in literature and danced as a hobby. She acted in her first films, including *La figlia del Vesuvio* (1912), and directed and wrote short topical subjects. With Italy's involvement in the Libyan War in 1912, Elvira Notari directed a number of films that focused on news events related to the conflict, including *Eroismo di un aviatore a Tripoli* (1912), shot locally but advertised as shot on location. In *Guerra italo-turca tra scugnizzi napoletani* (1912), she cleverly captured Neapolitan children and street urchins, including her then ten-year-old son Gennariello as a fearless bandleader of an Italian street gang engaging in battle with a Turk gang that is dispersed under a

hail of stones. Other films Notari directed in support of the Libyan war effort include *Sempre avanti, Savoia!* (1915), *Addio, mia bella addio... l'armata se ne va* (1915), and *Gloria ai caduti* (1916). Whether she intended these films to be vehicles of propaganda or simply portrayals of newsworthy events is not clear.

Notari made films geared for Neapolitans, especially middle-class women, that were full of cultural references and familiar social settings. She first looked to Neapolitan popular literature, specifically the serial novel form, as a source, as in *Ciccio il pizzaiuolo del Carmine* (1916), *Il barcaiuolo di Amalfi* (1918), and *La Medea di Portamedina* (1919), all based on *feuilletons* by Francesco Mastriani. She also wrote and directed screen adaptations of successful novels, including *Chiarina la modista*, by well-known Turinese author Carolina Invernizio. Women were at the center of these domestic melodramas filled with unsettling depictions of tragic and cruel figures. For example, *Il nano rosso* (1917), based on Invernizio's novel *Raffaella o I misteri del vecchio mercato*, is a story about a deformed wealthy man who becomes enamored with a chorus girl and then depletes his fortune to conquer her affections, only to be betrayed when she leaves him. When he discovers the truth, he kills himself.

Melodrama was also a vehicle for Notari's later "city films," where local street life became the center of stories with criminal settings such as prison cells. Thus they featured representations of deviant behavior, including knifings, suicides, and violent acts of revenge. By the early 1920s, Notari, while continuing this thread, shifted her focus to a new artistic form, the *sceneggiata*, a hybrid theatrical form drawing on popular dramatic songs and the variety stage, producing films geared not only to local Neapolitan audiences, but also to Italian immigrants living overseas. Notari was quick to recognize the marketability of the musical narrative form, which was conventionalized around 1919, around the same time she began producing filmed *sceneggiate*. Songs had been an earlier source for Notari, but the *film sceneggiata* was a distinctly Neapolitan regional expressive form that quickly developed into a trademark genre of companies from the Parthenopean region.

During the 1920s Dora Film distributed their filmed *sceneggiate* to overseas markets with Italian immigrant populations, in the United States, for example, to Baltimore and New York, as well as to South American cities. Often the film prints were accompanied by singers who performed the soundtrack (Bruno 1997, 51). Of the few surviving prints of Notari's entire film career, all are *sceneggiate* or fragments of the form, although *Fantasia 'e surdate* (1925) is incomplete and was reedited by Notari after it did not pass Fascist censorship.

*A Santanotte* (1922) merits further discussion since the film was recently restored between 2007 and 2008 after an American distribution copy was discovered at the George Eastman House. It is widely accepted that Notari's films were refused censorship visas by Roman authorities and were then smuggled into the United States, where they were popular, as many ads verify. However, documents located in the New York State Archives reveal that Dora Film faced similar problems with United States censors. Reports stipulate that violent scenes in 'A *Santanotte* showing the father character, Guiseppone, beating his daughter Nanninella and dragging her by the hair,

should be removed because they were “inhuman, and incite to crime.” Similarly, depictions of physical violence, drinking, and “unacceptable conduct” were cited as reasons for rejecting other films. The two prints used to restore *A Santanotte*, one an Italian, the other an American reissue copy, each contain pertinent scenes, frames, intertitles, and tinting information that, when combined together, provide a clearer picture of Notari’s original film, the goal of the restoration, on which see Pozzi and De Sanctis.

Censorship is only one of the factors to be considered when speculating about Elvira Notari’s departure from the cinema. Masi and Franco suggest that with the increased difficulty of Fascist intervention at home, Notari abandoned her traditional repertoire and made a Hollywood-style sound film *Napoli terra d’amore* (1928) featuring Gennariello as a jazz musician. They claim that the film was a disaster with Notari’s public, particularly because a soundtrack replaced live singers (111-112). While Notari’s *Trionfo cristiano* (1930) is said to have revived the company, the exact date of its release is unclear since a longer title is listed as 1924 or 1925. The 1930 date may reflect the year of its US release while earlier dates may refer to years of production. The film is about the life of the local patron saint (San Pellegrino) and his triumph over sexual temptation, a film said to have been commissioned by a group of Italian-American immigrants from Altavilla Irpina (Masi and Franco 23; Bruno 1997, 53). Masi and Franco think that the religious slant of the film, in which Gennariello undergoes a transformation from *guaglione ‘e core* to holy martyr, suggests that Dora Film had changed its identity (124). But another explanation for the turn to religious themes may have been nothing more than their popularity. American newspapers promoting *Nobody’s Children* (1926) depict a saintly nun, as played by Neapolitan Lyda Gys, wife of distributor and producer Gustavo Lombardo. If we see this as a reference to *The White Sister* (1923) starring a saintly, de-sexualized [Lillian Gish](#) in a similar role, we might conclude that Notari was keeping abreast of market trends as she had always done, whether her audience was in New York or in Altavilla Irpina.

Undoubtedly, Fascism played a decisive role in the eventual closing of Dora Film. The discovery of more prints and further research into censorship documentation from Italy, the United States, and other countries where Notari’s films were distributed will help us to determine the degree to which her pictures were altered. Although her husband and son remained active in the film industry in the 1930s, Notari apparently lost her momentum and left the cinema to retire in Cava dei Tirreni, where she died on December 17, 1946.

## Bibliography

---

Aprà, Adriano, Aldo Bernardini, Vittorio Martinelli, and Partrizia Pistagnesi, eds. *Napoletana, Images of a City*. Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1993.

Bernardini, Aldo. *Cinema muto italiano. 1905-1909*. Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1981.

----- . *Cinema muto italiano. 1910-1914*. Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1982.

Bruno, Giuliana. "City Views, the Voyage of Film Images." In *The Cinematic City*. Ed. David Clark. London and New York : Routledge, 1997. 46-58.

-----, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map. Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. Advertisements. (1918-1920, July 1921, Sept 1924): n.p.

Masi, Stefano and Mario Franco, eds. *Il mare, la luna, i coltelli. Per una storia del cinema muto Napoletano*. Naples: Tullio Pironti, 1988.

Miscuglio, Annabella. "An affectionate and irreverent account of eighty years of women's cinema in Italy." In *Offscreen, Women and Film in Italy*. Eds. Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti. London and New York: Routledge, 1988. 151-164.

Miscuglio, Annabella and Rony Daopoulo, eds. *Kinomata. La donna nel cinema*, Bari: Dedalo, 1980.

Pozzi, Celine and Marianna De Sanctis. "Analisi del restauro di 'A Santanotte.'" In *Non solo dive. Pioniere del cinema italiano*. Ed. Monica Dall'Asta. Bologna: Cineteca di Bologna, 2009. 149-158.

Scialo, Pasquale, ed. *Sceneggiatta : rappresentazioni di un genere popolare*. Napoli: Luogo, Editore Alfreda Guida, 2002.

Troianelli, Enza. *Elvira Notari, pioniera del cinema napoletano (1857-1946)*. Rome: EURoma Editrice Universitaria di Roma – La Goliardica, 1989.

### **Archival Paper Collections:**

Cumulative Catalogs of Motion Picture Entries. [Library of Congress, Copyright Records Reading Room](#).

Motion Picture Script Collections. [New York State Archives](#).

## **Filmography**

---

### **A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:**

#### **1. Elvira Notari as Director, Screenwriter, and Producer**

'*A Santanotte/The Holy Night*. Prod./dir./sc.: Elvira Coda Notari (Dora Film Co. Italy, 1922) cas.: Alberto Danza, Rosa Angione, Eduardo Notari (Gennariello), si, b&w/tint, 35mm. Archive: [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

*E' piccerella/The Little Girl's Wrong*. Prod./dir./sc.: Elvira Coda Notari (Dora Film Co. Italy, 1922) cas.: Rosa Angione, Alberto Danza, Genariello, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#).

*Fantasia 'e surdate*. Prod./dir./sc.: Elvira Coda Notari (Dora Film Co. Italy, 1925) cas. : Eduardo Notari (Gennariello); Geppino Jovine, si, b&w/tint, 35mm. Archive: [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#).

*L'Italia s'è desta*. Prod./dir./sc.: Elvira Coda Notari (Dora Film Co. Italy, 1927) cas.:Eduardo Notari (Gennariello, Gennaro Santoro, E. Pensa, Elvira Notari, Giuseppe Tosorone, si, b&w/tint, 35mm. Archive: [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#) [**Note:** incomplete].

*Canzone filmata* [Misc. footage of Notari's films]. Ed. Eduardo Notari (Gennariello); si, b&w/tint & tone, hand-colored, 35mm. Archive: [Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna \[ITB\]](#).

## **B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:**

### **1. Elvira Notari as Director, Screenwriter, Producer, Cast, and/or Distributor**

*La fuga del gatto*, 1910; *Maria Rosa di Santa Flavia*, 1910; *Arpino. Pittoresco*, 1911; *Buferà d'anime*, 1911; *Carmela la pazza*, 1911; *Maria Rosa di Santa Flavia*, 1911; *Eroismo di un aviatore a Tripoli*, 1912; *La figlia del Vesuvio*, 1912; *Maria Rosa di Santa Flavia*, 1912; *I nomadi*, 1912; *Ritorna all'onda*, 1912; *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta*, 1913; *Povera Tisa! Povera madre*, 1913; *Il tricolore*, 1913; *Fenesta ca lucive*, 1914; *Addio mia bella addio . . . l'armata se ne va*, 1915; *Brilla il sole della redenzion*, 1915; *Figlio del reggimento*, 1915; *Sempre avanti, Savoia!*, 1915; *Carmela la sartina di Montesanto*, 1916; *Ciccio, il pizzaiuolo del Carmine/Ciccio 'o pizzaiuolo d'o Carmene ovvero errore giudiziario*, 1916; *Gloria ai caduti*, 1916; *'E scugnizze/Mandolinata a mare*, 1917; *Funerali a Pessina*, 1917; *La maschera del vizio*, 1917; *Il nano rosso*, 1917; *Il barcaiuolo d'Amalfi*, 1918; *Gnesella*, 1918.; *Pusilleco addiruso/Rimpianto/Pusilleco addiruso ovvero Rimpianto*, 1918; *Chiarina la modista*, 1919; *Gabriele il lampionaio del porto/ Gabriele il lampionario di porto ovvero Rosa la pazza*, 1919; *La Medea di Portamedina*, 1919; *'A mala nova*, 1920; *A Piedigrotta/Guappo cu guappo*; 1920; *'A legge/'O Festino e 'a Legge*, 1920/*'O festino e 'a Legge*, 1921; *Gennariello il figlio del galeotto/ Il figlio di galeotto*, 1921; *Gennariello poliziotto*, 1921; *Luciella/Luciella la figlia della strada*, 1921; *'O munaciello*, 1921; *Brother's Heart*, 1922; *Cielo celeste*, 1922; *Cielo 'e Napule*, 1922; *The Motherless Girl*, 1922; *The Vow of Our Lady of Mount Virgin*, 1922; *Il miracolo della madonna di Pompei/Il miracolo della Madonna di Pompei ovvero Maria 'a pazza/Mary the Crazy Woman*; 1922 -1923; *Core 'e frate/Brother's Heart/Destino/Fate*, 1923; *'O cuppe' d'a morte*, 1923; *Pupatella/Waltzer's Dream*, 1923; *Reginella*, 1923; *Scugnizza/Orphan of Naples*, 1923; *Sotto il carcere di San Francisco/ Sotto San Francisco/'N galera/Beneath the Prison*, 1923; *8 e 90/ Otto e novanta*, 1924; *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta*, 1924; *Bad Life*, 1924; *Buried Alive*, 1924; *Canzone triste*, 1924; *La fata di Borgo Loreto*, 1924; *Piange Pierrot/Così piange Pierrot*, 1924; *'Nfama/Voglio a tte*, 1924; *Mettete l'avvocato/Mettite l'avvocato*, 1924/1925; *Fenesta ca lucive/ Fenesta che lucive*, 1925; *The Holy Year in Rome*, 1925; *Passione di popolo*, 1925; *Il segreto della morte*, 1925; *The Sins of Madame X*, 1925; *Sposalizio fatale*, 1925; *Two Orphans*,

1925; *Under Suspicion*, 1925; *The Acrobats*, 1926; *Lucia la fanciulla di Posillipo*, 1926; *Nobody's Children*, 1926; *The Son of a Convict*, 1926; *Er fattaccio*, 1927; *La leggenda Di Napoli*, 1928; *La madonnina del pescatore*, 1928; *Napoli terra d'amore*, 1928; *The Spectre of the Guillotine*, 1928; *Duie Paravise*, 1928 or 1929; *Napoli sirena della canzone*, 1929; *Passa 'a bandiera*, 1930; *Trionfo cristiano /La vita di San Pellegrino ovvero Trionfo cristiano*, 1930.

## **2. Elvira Notari as Co-director, Screenwriter, Producer, Cast, and/or Distributor**

*Arrivederci e augurali*, 1906-1912: *Alla Luigi XIV*, *Arriverderci movimentati a colori*, *Ballerina e buffoncello*, *Ballo delle farfalle*, *Bebè in giardino*, *Bebè in salotto*, *Bebè va a letto*, *Bebè vi saluta*, *Buona sera piccante*, *Buone feste*, *La campagnuola*, *Il cherubino*, *Cineattualità*, *La ciocciaretta*, *Colombi e biricchino*, *Colombi viaggiatori*, *Cucù settè*, *Cuoco sansone*, *Coscritto*, *Finali*, *Folletto di fiamma*, *Fra le stelle*, *Fotografia a sorpresa*, *Musica 'a ballo*, *La preghiera di Bebè*, *Scugnizzo napoletano*, *Sui fili telefonici*, *Tarantella*, *Titoli e sottotitoli*, *Valzer d'amor*; *L'accalappiacani*, 1909; *Capri incantevole*, 1909; *Posillipo da Napoli*, 1909; *Il processo Cuocolo*, 1909; *L'incrociatore corazzato "San Giorgio" incagliato alla Gaiola/ La nave San Giorgio/ La corazzata San Giorgio*, 1911; *Preparativi guerreschi a Napoli*, 1911; *Capri pittoreco*, 1912; *Cattura di un pazzo a Bagnoli*, 1912; *Guerra italo-turca tra scugnizzi napoletani/Caratteristica guerra italo-turca fra i nostri monelli napoletani/Caratteristica guerra italo-turca tra i nostril scugnizzi napoletani*, 1912; *Rivista navale dell'11 novembre 1912*, 1914.

## **3. Dora Film Company as Distributor**

*The Life of Saint Genevieve*, 1923; *Sister Theresa*, 1923; *Pupatella*, 1924; *The Bridge of Sighs*, 1927; *Angel of Love*, 1928; *The Little Baker of Venice*, 1929; *I Beati Paoli*, 1931.

## **D. Streamed Media:**

Excerpt from 'A Santanotte (1922)

# **Credit Report**

---

Filmographic information was derived from filmographies published by Giuliana Bruno, Enza Troanelli, and Annabella Miscuglio and Rony Daopoulo, whose findings derive from each other and from lists compiled by Edoardo Notari and Judita Hribar, along with trade journals of the period. Other sources used include *Catalog of Copyright Entries, Motion Pictures, 1912 – 1939* and New York State Archives Script Collections. Since many of Notari's films were released and possibly re-released in both Italy and the U.S., the date of their actual production and release varies and is noted for each film. In addition, according to NYSA scripts, documents and copyright description information, many of Notari's films distributed in the U.S. were actually published at a later date in the U.S. Alternate title variations and English language version titles are: *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta* (1924): *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta*, 1923 and *A Marchiaro*, 1925; *O munaciello*, 1921: *O munciello*, 1920 and *Munacillo*, 1922; *Core 'e frate* 1923:

*Core 'e frate ovvero Destino*, 1921; *Mettete l'avvocato*, 1924; *Mettite l'avvocato*, 1925 or 1926; and *Trionfo cristiano/La vita di San Pellegrino ovvero Trionfo cristiano*: 1924, 1925, or 1930. Several titles were remade: *Il nano rosso* (1917) was remade as *La fata di Borgo Loreto*, 1924; *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta*, 1913 was remade twice: *A Marechiaro ce sta 'na fenesta* (1924) and *La madonnina del pescatore* (1928). The author states that *Addio mia bella addio* (1915) was remade as *Fenesta ca lucive* 1925 or *Fenesta che lucive*, 1926. Cynthia Felando lists *Fenesta ca lucive* as 1914 in her entry on Notari for *The St. James Women Filmmakers Encyclopedia* (1999). Bruno does not list that date for this title, so it is not clear if 1914 is an incorrect date for that title, or if *Fenesta ca lucive* was made in 1914 and if it is related in content to *Addio mia bella addio* and its subsequent remakes. Monica Dall'Asta notes that Aldo Bernardini, in *Archivio del cinema italiano. Vol. I Il cinema muto* (Roma: ANICA, 1991), confirms both *Fenesta ca lucive* and *A Marechiaro* had two versions, both being first released in 1914. Dall'Asta proposes that *Addio mia bella addio* did not have anything to do with *Fenesta ca lucive*, since the three titles correspond to three different songs. Dall'Asta also suggests that *Er fattaccio*, 1927 is the first title of *Fantasia 'e surdate* before it was reedited. The author queries if *The Feast and the Law* (1927) is a remake, a rerelease, or the US release of *A legge/Festino e a legge* (The Feast and the Law), 1920. The New York State Archives lists Nora Films as the production company for *The Sins of Madame X*, (1925). *Canzone filmata* is a reel of film fragments of Notari's film edited by her son, Eduardo. It was donated to the Cineteca di Bologna by Vittorio Martinelli.

## Citation

Tomadjoglou, Kim. "Elvira Notari." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. <<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-elvira-notari/>>