



The Songs the Ocean Could Not Carry Away

Experiencing Neapolitan Ice Cream: The Musical

By Amy Pigeon

Rediscover

Creator and producer Loredana Cunti gathers the songs that followed Italian immigrants across the ocean and places them inside one young woman's journey towards an unexpected life.

At the June performance of *Neapolitan Ice Cream: The Musical*, the accordionist wandered into the aisle while soprano Reilly Bianchi Nelson carried Caterina's story through songs older than many of us in the room. My Italian is far more cooperative when spoken slowly, and better yet when written down, so entire lyrics escaped me. Even so, I recognized far more of the music than expected. The storyline supplied what my vocabulary could not, making heartbreak and longing perfectly clear. From the control table, creator and producer Loredana Cunti was pressing the buttons for the show's visuals while catching the audience in glimpses: a foot tapping beneath a chair, then shoulders beginning to sway. She had built the musical around

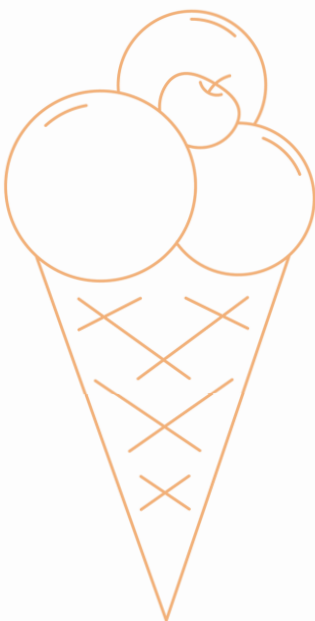


Neapolitan Ice Cream: The Musical creator & producer Loredana Cunti

old Neapolitan songs because she understood how quickly they could find the memories attached to them. "If you bring your nonna and you see that lump in her throat when she hears *Torna a Surriento*, it's because she literally left,"

in Wales without enough money to continue. Trips to Scotland revealed Italian gelaterias whose histories stretched back generations; one in Anstruther dated to 1919. Loredana began wondering how those Italian families had arrived there and

"The ring holds the teenage girl who bought it for herself in Italy, the young man waiting in Canada, and the life they eventually built—one in which their children went to school and always had shoes."



Loredana says. "She left on the boat. She feels that." Her cousins in Italy know the same melody, but they never had to leave the place it calls them back to. Years before Caterina existed, Loredana was living in England and listening to a mixtape of Roberto Murolo because home felt very far away. There, she met an Italian woman from Wales whose great-grandparents had paid for passage to New York, only to be scammed and dropped off

what they built once the journey went wrong.

Those questions became Caterina, a 16-year-old who leaves Napoli to join her beloved Giovanni in Canada. Betrayed during the voyage and stranded in Scotland, she begins again with nothing but a pouch of cocoa from her nonna, local cream, and strawberries offered by a fisherman. Together, the ingredients become the ice cream that gives the musical its name.

Loredana's parents supplied the love story. Her father had already emigrated to Canada when he wrote to her mother, then a teenager in Italy, enclosing 100,000 lire (in a post-war Napoli where they fought to even have shoes) and telling her to buy herself a ring at Mimmo's mother's shop and come marry him. The family in Wales supplied the failed voyage. As Loredana listened to the songs she had known all her life, they began finding their own places inside the story. *Core 'ngrato* gave Caterina her name. *Reginella* belonged to the cousin afraid of being forgotten, while *Torna a Surriento* carried the ache of missing her nonna. "I didn't set out to write a musical," Loredana admits. She cannot read or write music and says she can barely sing. Meeting Reilly changed what seemed possible. The young Canadian soprano did not speak Italian, yet she knew Murolo and sang the Neapolitan repertoire with an understanding that startled Loredana. When she began calling her *paesani* to invite them to a free concert, the unexpected phone calls prompted the same question: "Who died?"

Loredana found a biscotti sponsor, found a venue, and hoped Neapolitans would support Reilly. Once she sang, doubt vanished. People cried and shared stories of their ocean journeys and those left behind. The first scene came soon. Loredana invited Reilly and accordionist Michael Bridge,



Loredana Cunti's Mother, Father, Grandfather, Great Aunts and Uncle and cousin.

pushing her to write the idea down. "It was literally, 'Hey Google, how do you write a libretto?'" she laughs. She wrote Caterina begging her father to let her cross. Reilly sang "*O mio babbino caro*," Michael replied as the father, and Loredana felt the same goosebumps she had that day. Her Italian identity took longer to form. Childhood meant harvests before the school year, weddings with kids asleep on chairs, and a mother calling "John"... "Gian" from the soccer field. Sometimes, Loredana wished it was less obvious. Even in her twenties, she made vague excuses to leave work early instead of saying she was making tomato sauce at home. Italy's 1982 World Cup victory cracked that reserve open when her father took the family downtown to celebrate. "It was the first time we were cool," she says. Having children made preservation feel more urgent. She began making struffoli at Christmas even when the kitchen chaos made the tradition feel ambitious. She now prepares the family's sausage meat and freezes it in bags, skipping the labour of stuffing the links. Her children may eventually ask a butcher to add extra fennel, she reasons, and the flavour will still find them. She jokingly calls it "fighting the

gabagool in the third generation," an effort to pass down something richer than the caricature. During our conversation, Loredana slips her mother's engagement ring onto her finger and holds it to the camera. It is ornate and unmistakably of its era, set with a small imitation stone. Although people have suggested replacing it with a diamond, she never will. "They could never afford a diamond," she says. "I will never replace the stone because it is a reminder of where I come from." The ring holds the teenage girl who bought it for herself in Italy, the young man waiting in Canada, and the life they eventually built—one in which their children went to school and always had shoes. Another object is waiting to enter the musical. Loredana wants to add a moment drawn from her own family: her nonna lifting her daughter's pillow after she had gone ahead to Canada and breathing in the scent that remained. Loredana pauses when she describes it. Onstage, the pillow will have to do the talking.





The longer she lives with Caterina, the more Loredana recognizes her mother and nonna in the character. Early versions emphasized how difficult migration had been. Now she notices Caterina's pride in what she created after the journey changed course. "It was hard," Loredana says, "but this is a great life, too." The production remains intimate, just over an hour of soprano, guitar and accordion, followed by, of course, gelato. Loredana has imagined an innovative, immersive future for the musical, although we will leave the details unspoiled. Whatever shape it takes, she is protective of the closeness that already gives the production its force. She wants a nonna, her daughter and her grandchild to be able to sit together, each recognizing something different in Caterina's journey. People already leave thinking about the relative who should have been sitting beside them, and who they will bring next time. When the ship's horn sounded, Caterina's old life seemed to recede with it. For a moment, the distance between Napoli and the life waiting across the ocean entered the room, along with the quieter distance between the person who leaves and the family that remains.

My Italian allowed me to catch pieces of the Neapolitan lyrics, but not all of them. Reilly's expression and the shape of Caterina's journey filled in what I missed. Sitting in the audience, I felt the other side of the small reactions of toes tapping and shoulders swaying: live music reaching the body before the mind has finished translating it. Unadulterated joy. After the last spoonful of gelato, Loredana hopes the conversation continues at home. Her advice is to begin with the old songs.

Play them for the relative who remembers when one person in the village owned the radio and everyone gathered to listen. Before long, they may remember where they were, or even what they wore, when the melody first reached them.

"They'll tell you a story," she says. For the length of the melody, the person sitting across from you is young again, still in Italy and unaware of the ocean ahead. You get to meet them there. **—VV**

Footnote: Keep an eye out for the next performance featuring Bruno Monardo in collaboration with Villa Charities on November 13, 2026 at the Columbus Centre, Toronto



