Room Five: Little Italy

Italian Theater

Italian Opera was brought to San Francisco in 1851. Soon other forms of performance art graced San Francisco's halls, as the city became a prime destination for performers, both Italian-born and American. The first major figure in Italian theater was Antonietta Pisanelli, who was the first established professional entertainer in the Italian community. Not only did Pisanelli sing and act, she molded the various amateur drama groups in the city into a professional theater company.

Just as it did to most of the pillars of the Italian colony, the 1906 earthquake devastated the Teatro Bersaglieri, which was the center of the San Francisco theater scene. Pisanelli opened three nickelodeon-type theaters, and it was in one of these, the Bijou, that the *Stenterello* character emerged. By this time, the *Stenterello* character had evolved from a xenophobe who favored Italian unification and independence to a man on the Florentine man on the street, a living connection between Little Italy and the mother country. This character's popularity faded as a new attempt to be identified as American emerged in the colony.