



THE
SPARROW

A NEW MUSICAL

ARTISTIC STATEMENT

THE
SPARROW
A NEW MUSICAL

BASED ON "STORIA DI UNA CAPINERA" BY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview and Vision

Set in the Sicilian countryside against the backdrop of the 1854 cholera outbreak, *The Sparrow* is a profound musical adaptation of a classic Italian novel. It follows Maria, a young woman raised in a convent, whose brief return home awakens unnamable desires and memories. When the epidemic wanes, she is forced back into a life of strict obedience.

The musical captures the quiet, irreversible conflict between a life shaped by others and the true self within, transforming a nineteenth-century tale into an urgent exploration of identity, agency, and control.

Core Themes and Contemporary Relevance

The narrative operates on multiple, deeply relevant levels, speaking directly to modern audiences without needing to update its historical setting or language.

- **The weight of expectation:** The story examines how family, tradition, and society impose roles that individuals absorb unconsciously. The tragedy stems not from rebellion, but from obedience hardening into identity.
- **Feminist critique:** The piece highlights the limited options historically available to women, illustrating how female obedience is heavily praised while personal agency and desires are quietly erased.
- **Faith vs. institutional control:** Faith itself is treated with sincerity and respect, offering comfort and structure. The true antagonist is the rigid institutionalization of belief, which flattens complexity, discourages doubt, and turns virtue into a trap.

- **Modern urgency:** The underlying mechanisms of controlling women's choices remain familiar today. Maria's story is a stark reminder of how easily authority becomes internalized and how rarely harm announces itself as explicit violence.

Dramaturgy and Musical Landscape

Adapting a passive, highly internalized protagonist for musical theater required an innovative structural and musical approach:

- **Flashbacks and memory:** Unlike the original novel, the musical introduces flashbacks to Maria's ten years in the convent. The past acts as an active force, mirroring her psychological cycle of testing boundaries only to slip back into conditioned obedience.
- **Music as psychological space:** Because Maria's struggle is internal, song gives voice to an intense inner life that spoken dialogue cannot sustain. Distinct musical languages (prayer, folk, domestic song, and lyrical introspection) coexist and clash, structurally carrying the emotional architecture of the story.
- **A continuous system of control:** The narrative bridges two connected worlds: the rural exterior governed by communal gaze and reputation, and the convent interior governed by institutional rules and discipline. Together, they form an inescapable, continuous system of surveillance.

A Flexible Cast and Layered Symbolism

The decision to work with a reduced cast serves both practical and structural purposes. In *The Sparrow*, role doubling is never just a logistical convenience. It acts as a bridge between the outside world and the convent, visually reinforcing the idea that Maria faces similar systems of expectation and control in both environments.

Actor Track	Characters Played	Symbolic Meaning
The Protagonist	Maria	The center of the narrative.
The Father	Giovanni	They represent paternal and erotic love. Neither can exist within the convent.
The Lover	Nino	
The Controllers	Rosalia & Abbess Alma	They both exercise rigid control without recognizing their own cruelty.
The Alternatives	Giuditta & Marianna	They serve as mirrors to Maria. They embody the paths she cannot take.
The Pragmatists	Salvatore & Fr. Anselmo	They both clip the wings of the young in the name of duty.
The Witnesses	Annetta & Filomena	They are observers inside and outside the convent, offering kindness when needed.

The narrative hinges on three physical symbols: a **silver rosary** (sincere faith mixed with doubt), a **rose** (the possibility of another life), and a **lock of hair** (a quiet act of rebellion during her vows).

The Message

The Sparrow is not a conventional tale of redemption or survival. It is a tragedy built on the quiet violence of living "correctly." Maria's wasting away is not an active choice to die, but an inevitable physical and emotional collapse. Within this decline, her only true moment of clarity and agency is her conscious surrender to God.

The audience leaves not with comfort, but with a profound responsibility: to question the systems that shape our lives quietly, and to scrutinize the virtues, like blind obedience, that we so often praise without thought.

INTRODUCTION

What is The Sparrow?

The Sparrow is a new musical inspired by ***Storia di una capinera* by Giovanni Verga**, set in the Sicilian countryside during the cholera outbreak of 1854.

It follows **Maria**, a young woman raised in a convent from childhood, whose brief return to her family home reawakens **desires, memories, and doubts she has never been allowed to name**. When the epidemic ends, Maria is forced back into a life of obedience that no longer fits.

The story unfolds at the moment when **a life shaped by others comes into quiet, irreversible conflict with the self within**.

Why this story

This is a story Nicholas first encountered at school in Italy. Like many Italian students, he studied *Storia di una capinera* as part of the curriculum, and the novel stayed with him ever since. Years later, it was that early encounter that prompted the idea of adapting it for the stage.

What drew him back to the story was its ability to operate on **several levels at once**, each of which still feels deeply relevant.

On one level, it offers a **clear critique of forced monastic life** and, more broadly, of the **limited options historically available to women**. Maria is denied any real agency over her future, and there is an unmistakable feminist undertone in the way her obedience is valued while her desires are quietly erased.

On another level, the story explores the **conflict between faith and desire**, between spiritual duty and human longing. This tension gives the narrative much of its emotional weight, without ever turning belief itself into something to be mocked or dismissed.

The level that resonated most strongly, and ultimately drove the decision to adapt the novel, is the question of expectation.

How do we live with the roles that others choose for us?

Expectations imposed by **family, tradition, or society** shape us from an early age. Sometimes they are explicit, sometimes absorbed almost unconsciously. Do we have the strength to resist them, or do we internalise them so deeply that they begin to govern our choices even when the external pressure has faded?

In this sense, *The Sparrow* becomes a cautionary tale about the **quiet violence of living correctly**, and about what happens when **obedience hardens into identity**.

This tension extends beyond Maria.

All the main characters in the story are **caught between what is expected of them and what they truly want**. Nino is pushed toward a respectable career in law, even though he dreams of a simpler, rural life. It is assumed, socially and within his family, that he will one day marry Giuditta, and he is eventually forced to do so.

Rosalia is expected to embody maternal care, yet her jealousy and emotional rigidity ultimately cost her the happiness of her marriage. Giovanni is expected to protect his daughter, but his inability to stand up to his second wife leads to Maria's loss. Even Giuditta, the only character who seems to fulfil what is expected of her, ends up carrying the weight of knowing that Nino's love will never be truly hers. **There is no clear victory, only different forms of compromise and regret.**

MEMORY, TIME AND SPACE

Maria's Early Years in the Convent

While the novel moves steadily forward in time, the musical does not. We introduced **flashbacks**, absent from Verga's original text, to explore how Maria became who she is. Her present cannot be understood without returning to the ten years she spent in the convent, years that shaped not only her behaviour, but her desires and her sense of self. Through memory, **we witness punishments and rewards, moments of tenderness, fleeting rebellions, and lessons absorbed by heart**. The past is not a backdrop, but an active force that intrudes upon the present.

In the **present timeline**, Maria briefly experiences freedom, tests the boundaries she has internalised, and begins to **question the teachings that have defined her**. Yet she repeatedly **slips back into obedience**. The structure of the piece mirrors this cycle, moving between past and present to show how difficult it is to escape a formation that has shaped the very way one thinks and feels. Maria's tragedy does not stem from a single choice, but from a lifetime of choices made on her behalf, and from the discipline that continues to govern her even when the walls of the convent momentarily fall away.

The World Inside Maria

Maria is often described as a **passive heroine**, and we chose to embrace this rather than correct it. Her conflict is internal. She rarely acts, but her inner life is constant and intense. She thinks, remembers, longs, questions, and quietly resists.

Writing Maria was **the greatest challenge of the piece**. Musical theatre tends to privilege action and decision, while Maria's struggle unfolds almost entirely within. Our task was to make that interior life dramatically active without altering who she is. Song becomes the space where thoughts she cannot voice are finally heard.

The other characters are not simply figures around her. They are the **voices that shape her inner world**. Advice, warnings, prayers, and expectations linger long after they are spoken, slowly becoming part of her own thinking.

The World Around Maria

The story unfolds between **two closely connected worlds**. Outside the convent lies the **Sicilian countryside**, a landscape of fields, shared courtyards, and families living in close proximity. Here, **community** is not merely a backdrop but a constant presence, a collective gaze. Reputation matters, and privacy is almost impossible. This pressure is not the loudest force in the show, but it is steady and pervasive, shaping behaviour and reinforcing conformity.

Inside the convent, the logic is different but no less constraining. The gaze becomes institutional rather than communal, governed by **rules, schedules, and ritual**. Individual identity is dissolved into discipline, silence, and repetition. If the outside world watches and judges, the convent trains and internalises that judgment.

Together, these two spaces form a continuous system rather than opposing realities. Whether inside or outside the convent walls, Maria is never truly alone, and the possibility of escape feels unthinkable not because of a single authority, but because **surveillance, expectation, and control are woven into every environment she inhabits**.

CAST AND CHARACTERS

A Flexible Cast With Layered Meaning

The decision to work with a reduced cast is both practical and dramaturgical, allowing each character to carry greater symbolic weight.

The actors playing **Giovanni**, Maria's father, and **Nino**, the young man she falls in love with, do not double other characters. They represent two unique forms of love in her life: paternal and erotic. Neither can exist within the convent, and both are irreplaceable.

The actress playing **Rosalia**, Maria's stepmother, also embodies **Abbess Alma**. Both are harsh and controlling figures. Their authority is exercised through rigidity and emotional pressure, and their actions cause real harm. Yet neither sees herself as cruel.

The actress playing **Giuditta**, Maria's younger sister, also plays **Marianna**, her friend from the convent. Marianna chooses freedom and never returns to religious life. Giuditta is joyful, frivolous, and very much a girl of her time. They are mirrors of what Maria is not and wishes she could be.

The actor playing **Salvatore**, Nino's father, doubles with **Father Anselmo**. Both are pragmatic men who, in different ways, clip the wings of the young. One does so in the name of family, the other in the name of God. They are two faces of the same authority.

The actress playing **Margherita**, Nino's mother, also plays **Sister Agata**. The link

is subtle but essential. Margherita rarely contradicts her husband openly, but she offers Nino a quiet, private form of encouragement, gently urging him to listen to his own desires. In a similar way, Agata, though raised and formed under the strict discipline of the convent, eventually allows herself to follow her heart.

Annetta and **Filomena** are smaller roles, but vital. One inside the convent, one outside, they observe more than they speak. They care for Maria, notice her fragility, and offer kindness where they can. They are witnesses rather than drivers of action, and their presence matters.

Onomastics

Symbolism permeates the entire piece, including names. **In the novel, only a handful of characters are explicitly named:** Maria, Nino, Giuditta, Annetta, Filomena, Agata, and Marianna. This absence of names for several key figures opened a **space for interpretation in the adaptation**, allowing names to carry additional meaning rather than functioning as simple labels.

Giovanni carries his name as a direct homage to **Giovanni Verga**, the author of the novel. The choice of the name Rosalia is not incidental; Verga himself once fell in love with a young woman named Rosalia, who was being educated in the same monastery where his aunt was also a nun.

Margherita, whose name in Italian refers to the **daisy**, is deliberately contrasted with Rosalia, whose name evokes the **rose**. The rose carries thorns and suggests rigidity, while the daisy conveys simplicity, openness, and quiet joy.

The etymology of the characters' names serves as a **tool for irony and contradiction**. Salvatore ("saviour") offers restraint instead of rescue; Alma ("soul") hollows out the inner lives of others; and Father Anselmo ("protected by God") wields an authority so absolute that protection is traded for imprisonment. Through these names, the adaptation reinforces the tension between a character's stated moral role and the actual consequences of their actions.

MUSIC AND SYMBOLS

Music as Psychological Space

This story needs to be a musical. Music functions as psychological space, allowing the audience **access to Maria's inner life in a way spoken dialogue alone could not sustain**. Song becomes interior speech, giving form to thoughts, doubts, and desires that remain unexpressed in conversation.

Different musical languages coexist within the score. Prayer, folk music, domestic song, and lyrical introspection sit side by side, but they never fully reconcile. Each reflects a different pressure acting on Maria, and the tension between them mirrors her internal conflict. Sacred musical language is treated with seriousness, not irony. It offers comfort and meaning, but it can also impose order and silence complexity.

Music is not decorative in this piece. It is structural. It carries memory, belief, and expectation, **shaping the emotional architecture of the story**. The real conflict of *The Sparrow* lives within the score, long before it can be articulated in words.

Symbols and Their Meaning

Verga's story hinges on **three objects**: a silver rosary, rose petals, and a lock of hair. We retain them, reimagined.

- The **silver rosary**, given to Maria by Marianna before leaving the convent, represents her bond with religious life and a faith that remains sincere, even as doubt grows;

- The **rose**, offered by Nino, stands for the possibility of another life and another kind of love;
- The **lock of hair** is taken by Maria herself during the ceremony of her vows. It is a small, almost invisible act of rebellion at the very moment she renounces everything.

Together, these symbols tell Maria's entire story.

There is one more symbol: the **sparrow**. Verga drew inspiration to write *Storia di una capinera* from a story of two children who overfed a caged bird until it chose death. In our musical, the sparrow appears within the story itself, but it does not die. It flies away at the end of the show. Maria does not survive, but in her embracing death, freedom is reclaimed. The sparrow's flight is a moral assertion: **freedom exists, even when it is denied to the protagonist.**

Faith, Authority, and Obedience

The Sparrow does not mock belief, ritual, or prayer. **Faith is treated as sincere, meaningful, and often beautiful.** It offers structure, comfort, and a sense of belonging, especially in a world shaped by uncertainty and loss. For Maria, faith is never a lie she is forced to live, but something she truly believes in.

The tragedy emerges when faith is **administered through rigid systems and turned into a tool of control.** Institutions claim to protect, educate, and guide, but in doing so they flatten complexity and discourage doubt. Over time, Maria absorbs these structures so completely that they no longer need to be imposed from the outside. The most dangerous authority she faces is the one she learns to reproduce within herself.

For this reason, Maria's struggle is not faith versus freedom. It is **selfhood versus obedience.** The conflict lies in the slow erosion of the self, in the inability to recognise one's own desires as legitimate. Obedience becomes virtue, and virtue becomes a trap.

tone and relevance

What Kind of Story This Is

This is not a redemption story in any conventional sense. *The Sparrow* does not offer salvation through endurance, nor does it reward suffering with survival. It is a tragedy built not on weakness or transgression, but on obedience.

Maria does not choose death. Her body has already been failing her; the result of a long, unnoticed erosion of self, an **illness no one has named** and no one has truly seen. What she chooses, at the very end, is **how to meet what is already upon her**.

For the first time in her life, the choice is hers alone.

Maria's final moment is therefore not framed as defeat, but as **the first and only true act of agency** in a life shaped almost entirely by others. It comes too late to alter her fate, but not too late to matter. Hope, in this story, does not lie in survival, but in the existence of choice itself... even when its cost is irreversible.

The audience is not invited to leave comforted or reassured. Instead, they are left with a sense of responsibility: to **recognise the systems that quietly shape lives**, to question the virtues we praise without scrutiny, and to ask what is lost when a life is lived correctly, faithfully, and without room for selfhood.

Why Now?

Beyond its historical setting, *The Sparrow* speaks directly to the present. We still live in a **world deeply invested in controlling women's bodies, choices, and narratives**. The language may change, and the structures may appear more subtle, but the underlying mechanisms remain familiar.

Maria's story feels urgent because it is not about an exceptional injustice, but about a system that functions as intended. She does everything she is asked to do. She behaves correctly, faithfully, obediently. And still, her life collapses. *The Sparrow* asks what it means to live well within a system that offers no space for selfhood, and **what is lost when conformity is mistaken for virtue**.

This is not a historical cautionary tale meant to reassure us of how far we have come. It is a reminder of **how easily authority becomes internalised, how quietly expectation shapes identity, and how rarely harm announces itself as violence**. By placing this story firmly in its nineteenth-century context, we are able to look at these questions without modernising the language, and to recognise their persistence without softening their impact.

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