

Report on Stories in Transit II

Workshop in Palermo, 5th-7th May, 2017

Report by Marina Warner

The current flight of thousands of people from the Middle East and Africa is creating large new diasporic societies. Travelling texts, in the form of ‘intangible heritage’ (stories, histories, songs, poems) can play a vital part in these newly forming communities. The project *Stories in Transit*, which began with the support of Metabolic Studio last year, aims to make space for the imagination, and prompt exchanges and invention of stories, poetry, songs, proverbs, cultural legacies, etc., among communities of refugees. Through local contacts, including Dr Valentina Castagna of the University of Palermo, we worked with the 170-strong community of young refugees – 18 and under – living in an ‘emergency camp’ (a converted hostel). Our team of 18 *nessi* (the word for ‘links’ in Italian) was made up of visiting writers, musicians, artists, scholars, and speakers of various languages. We joined school teachers, led by Clelia Bartoli of the government-sponsored initiative Polipolis, mentors and workers for the refugee community, as well as local artists, storytellers, and puppeteers.

We held workshops in storytelling using varied materials and methods, on the first day at the hostel, the second in the Puppet Museum (Museo Internazionale delle Marionette G. Pasqualino), and on the third day in the community centre of Santa Chiara, in the traditional multi-ethnic part of the city, Ballarò. On that final day, a group of around 30 young people were directly involved in staging a vigorous puppet rendering of Gilgamesh - unexpectedly good and lively, given time constraints etc.

The three days went well, on many levels: there was warm interest and involvement from the young people; we made contact with over 100 of them and worked closely with around 40; the collaborative group sessions were fruitful.

The aims of the three days were threefold, in order to respond to the situation of the young people with whom we are working:

1. The puppet play – the ambition to put together a performance on the Sunday of a version of Gilgamesh using Sicilian traditional methods and themes – calquing one story onto another, e.g. Orlando/Gilgamesh.
2. The ‘story box’ or tool kit for diffusion in camps etc. to inspire creative narratives
3. Workshops for the young men leaving school – ideas for making objects for ‘story boxes’. This is Clelia Bartoli’s chief preoccupation at the moment, because the young people in her current class are about to turn 18 and leave the school. The problems for them then start – or intensify – as they are no longer *minorenni* (under age). However, if they are employed or in training they are less likely to be transferred to an adult detention centre in another part of Italy (which would tear the delicate threads of friendship and society they have begun to make).

We didn’t know how many young people would join us and how they would respond, what they could do, what they might want to do.

Day One

- We confirmed the outline and framework of the Gilgamesh story, picking out key episodes which might especially appeal to the young people.

Day Two

- The young people watched a puppet play in the traditional Sicilian style and then were invited up to try handling the puppets themselves – they took to this with relish.

Day Three

- We continued to do group work on the scenes and make puppet characters for the Gilgamesh play, and then we held a run-through. Against all the odds, it was surprisingly good, full of ideas and energy and thought.

The annual puppet Festival di Morgana takes place this coming November, so the plan now is to put on a performance on the fringes of the official programme (see next workshop!). To that end we are planning to hold a three-day workshop before it starts, and go back to Palermo in early November.

Fruits of our visit

One fruitful result was the forming of a small workshop to make objects for the eventual ‘story box’ (e.g. story dice, masks, and other prompts for story-making) with a group of the keenest young people. This project is called *Giocherenda* after a Fulu word meaning Unity, Solidarity, Negotiation rather than strife – close to South African Ubuntu (by pure chance it echoes the Italian word for play, *giocare*).

The NGO Bibliothèques sans Frontières has begun operations in Sicily as a direct result of our inviting them there in September; the Mayor of Palermo has promised to allocate a space for their work with their ‘Ideas Box’, a digital classroom, in effect. The Giocherenda group has been promised space alongside theirs to

continue our practical hands-on, creative process of developing creative activities and skills.

The mentors, lawyers, teachers who work with the communities of young people were enthusiastic about the process we were exploring and lent us their full support and cooperation.

The *nessi* who came from UK and elsewhere each contributed whole-heartedly with their different expertise.

I would not have been able to organize any of this without the tireless work of Dr. Valentina Castagna, who gave of herself with unfailing efficiency and spirited generosity.