

## Stories in Transit IV

Workshop in Palermo (Chiesa Santa Chiara, Orto Botanico)

16-19 November, 2017

Report by Marina Warner, written December 19 2017

Writing this in the grey bluster of a typical late November day in England, the events of last weekend and the two days' preparation before feel fugitive and dream-like, hallucinatory in brightness and rhythm, and shifting constantly in mood between exhilaration and anxiety as the light outside changed in sudden fierce storms, huge downpours and glorious sunshine.

The plan was to create a puppet promenade play inspired by the Epic of Gilgamesh and to involve as many young people as we could in the work of making music, masks, scenes, etc.

The deeper aim has been all along to give space to imagination and play, in the sense of invention, improvisation, enjoyable expressivity. This hope evolved in discussion in London in September, with Mercedes Kemp suggesting the format from her previous experience.

The *nessi* (links) came from UK and Italy and our areas of interest and our practices covered some of the skills needed: theatre, music, object-making, scene-making etc. At our maximum we were around 20, and everyone contributed ideas, practical support, and worked with wonderful gusto.

Through the patient negotiations of Valentina Castagna with the Liceo Ferrara, one of the schools where some of the refugees are enrolled, and with the support of CPIA teachers such as Clelia Bartoli, the refugees/minorenni were given permission not to be at school on Thursday and Friday and to come and join Stories in Transit instead.

The schools involved are CPIA Palermo 1, and Scuola Superiore F. Ferrara; CPIA is a school now chiefly attended by refugees who are unaccompanied minors, but it is originally an institution for drop-outs and includes Italian students (and second generation migrants), including some girls. Several teachers came throughout: Nilla Palmeri, Leda Parisi, Lucia Barbera, Nicoletta Campisi, Rosalia Lando, Letizia Gullo and Gianfranco Coppola. We were helped throughout by Valentina's very hard-working team – Maria Vaccaro and Alessandra Impagnatiello.

We spent Thursday to Saturday 16-18 inclusive at the Associazione Santa Chiara, preparing for the event to be held on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup>.

#### Thursday 16 November

- Around 80 minorenni joined us. We played various warming-up games: the web of wool, giving our names, for example. In another, when each of us was asked to think of a place we felt attached to, the young people almost all gave the name of a place they hope to go to... Oslo, Stockholm, Canada. When one ragazzo said Zebrata (zebra), there were gales of laughter.
- Mercedes led a round of passing a squeeze from hand to hand... we began very slowly but she spurred us on, after several tries, to go round the circle in 15 seconds.
- Yousif Latif Jaralla performed a version of Gilgamesh, partly supported by Dine Diallo. This time, he gave the episode of the Flood, which he had left out last time; he laid emphasis on the various battles – between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, between the two heroes and Humbaba. Yousif's storytelling set the scene quite closely for the story as it was taken up in the play, as it happened.

*We missed having it told in different languages –I think it would have been a help to have it translated into French, English and Arabic. Yousif brought in another young man with him, but in the end he didn't participate.*

(We had lunch together, catered by the Moltivolti staff, who continued to provide coffee and cakes, as well as main meals throughout. Recipes included Mafe (a meat stew), Riz Gras, and a delicious fish stew called Cebuggen.)

- After lunch, Dine Diallo and Gassimou Magassouba of the Giocherenda group led a workshop on creating a character. They had been collaborating on devising this with Steve Willey the weekend before, when he had gone out specially to prepare the way. They gave us large pieces of paper with diagrams of the features of Enkidu – his mouth, ears, mouth eyes, etc. – and also his body. We split up into five groups and were all invited to contribute responses, which were then to be assembled into five distinct Enkidus. We exchanged all the notions that had come up – which included eyes that shot flame, half fingers from so many fights, and ears that flapped – and tried to combine them. It was hugely entertaining as well as useful, and I think really led the way to cohering as a band of people all intent on making something together and passing it on to others.
- The discussion and exchanges sparked masses of experimental fun with the Enkidu and Humbaba masks and giant puppets of him and Gilgamesh. As a result, Enkidu turned out very carnival-like and festive, with a mobile tongue and webbed feet.

*After this, we split up into groups and tasks and each group picked an episode to concentrate on. We decided on five scenes from the Epic, broadly speaking.*

- Lee (Shearman) set up his animation table and began working on showing the young people how to articulate silhouette puppets for stop frame filming. Several were attracted and kept very busy and focussed.

Friday and Saturday we continued the process

During a rehearsal on Saturday, Lee recorded the sounds and the music by Stevie, Alice and the boys, which he later used with his group for the soundtrack of their animation.

When the young people went to prayers on Friday, we went to reconnoitre the Orto Botanico/Botanical Garden, and Mercedes was able to choose the setting for the different scenes.

*Some of the young arrivants came every day, but some couldn't because they have other commitments and calls on their time. The random attendance is an intrinsic difficulty, but the voluntary character of the work is also an essential element in our ideals of free play of creativity.*

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November

The morning began with a powerful storm, so we were worried that the puppets and the splendid boat the group with Peter and Wafa had made would be destroyed; they were too big to fit in anyone's car. But the sky cleared suddenly

and the wind softened, and when we reached the Orto Botanico, the birds were singing madly with joy at being so deliciously bathed, and the leaves on the trees and plants shone in their newly washed freshness and the light was entirely beautiful, the colours of the greens and yellows bright and vigorous, and the whole marvellous place felt like Eden.

At the start, as we tried to muster the ragazzi and gather together the props and the instruments and the audience etc., and there was una grande confusione to begin with – musicians were missing etc. But eventually the band was gathered together and set up in two answering choruses across a stretch of the garden, and the performance began.

*The need for a story box/cart as explored at the Ruskin in Oxford in September was never clearer: we needed to be able to put everything together on a vehicle, and wheel it about from scene to scene.*

### Scene 1: Gilgamesh incontra Enkidu (Gilgamesh against Enkidu)

Staged by one of the greenhouses.

Roberto (Cavosi) had joined us from Rome on Saturday, with Loredana Ottomano, and he had a small amount of time to rehearse with Dine and Maga. They approached each other holding their puppet/effigies, set them down and then squared off to each other, with a collapsed and crumpled up paper bag as the trophy over which they were fighting, like gang members in a hood. They growled

and roared at each other but eventually... recognition! They hugged each other and became friends and fellow adventurers.

### Scene 2: Humbaba il Custode della Foresta Sacra (Humbaba, guardian of the Sacred Forest)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu attack Humbaba and desecrate the forest... this brings doom on them, and Enkidu eventually dies.

Mercedes chose the avenue of Chorisia trees, with their bulbous, spiky trunks and glorious rose and yellow lily-flowers. Humbaba was played by Dauda Bari, who had made a leaf mask like a Green Man, with fallen leaves from the trees in the courtyard and from artichokes bought in the market, which were also standing in for the trees of the sacred forest.

### Scene 3: La Taverniera Siduri Consola Gilgamesh (The tavern owner Siduri consoles Gilgamensh)

A small wooden summer house up a slope by a twisting path made a perfect tavern for Siduri, the tavern-keeper. The mask made in May was still in good condition; because none of the young women with whom Alice had worked could come or were too shy to play her, in the Orto Botanico, Ester (Gendusa) took on the part. Gilgamesh here was performed by Ibrahim; the dialogue prepared on the previous days by a group of girls led by Alice and Mercedes stressed the importance of happiness in the here and now, since mortality is ineluctable.

#### Scene 4: Gilgamesh Attraversa il Mare della Morte (Gilgamesh crosses the Sea of Death)

Gilgamesh does not submit to this destiny but travels to the ends of the earth, across the Sea of death, to meet Utnapishtim, the only survivor of the Flood, to ask him to help him discover the secret of immortal life. Peter and Wafa worked with a group of ragazzi and, spontaneously and unprompted, they made a boat on the Thursday night at home, and brought it in, began painting and decorating it, added a flag and continued to create an illusion of water and waves on a groundsheet.

After rowing across the sea (standing inside the boat and walking as the boat was tugged along on its watery sheet), they met Utnapishtim, leaning on a stick (played by Djibrina), as he stood under one of the trees, beside with a painted house, cut out of cardboard behind him. His son takes pity on Gilgamesh and reveals to him there exists a plant of eternal youth, and gives him instructions how to find it.

#### Scene 5: Il Serpente Afferra la Pianta dell'Immortalità (The serpent takes the Plant of Immortal Life)

Gilgamesh descends to the bottom of the sea and picks the plant of immortal life/eternal youth. Back on the surface, he is very tired, and falls asleep by a tree – a snake seizes the precious plant.

This was performed twice, first by Jaja who deftly handled a traditional Palermitano puppet, a snake whose jaws can be opened and closed by the puppeteer, to slither up to the sleeping Gilgamesh and his companion, and pick up the plant in its mouth, and carry it off. The action was then performed by one of the young people, crawling convincingly along the ground behind a painted, undulating serpent on a cardboard flat he had made with a group of friends again,

unprompted, on Friday, after they had finished their boat and the house of Utnapishtim.

All scenes were accompanied by music - rhythm and percussion, mainly strings and drums, and the crowd was given maracas-like eggs to shake and other instruments to beat and blow.

We then moved on to the primary school Ferrara in Piazza Magione and repeated the sequence in the forecourt, which was set with stools for the children, and decking under the shade trees, making for natural stages.

There was a large audience here, as the school was holding a festival: many small children and their parents. One little girl, aged around 7 or 8, said to me, 'That isn't a plant of immortal life. It's an artichoke!'. Her mother responded, '*Tesoro*, artichokes are a bud, you see, and they open up into something else, so they can give a sense of hope.'

We then walked on to the Museo Internazionale Pasqualino delle Marionette – about 15 mins away. The young men carried the boat and the puppets to the sound of drums and sticks, singing one of their own songs as they walked. Nobody stopped us, or gave us disapproving looks. We reached the Museum, where the benches in the theatre upstairs had been set in a large circle. Two of the young people who had been trying out puppetry with Yousif and Carmelo Mimmo Cuticchio showed us a scene between Angelica and Charlemagne, while the young woman Hajar recited the story. Then we adjourned to the exhibition space next to the theatre as it can be darkened, in order to see a projection of the animation film made by several young arrivants, guided by Lee. This dramatized very vividly

Gilgamesh under the sea, with a particularly successful close-up articulated figure of his hand picking the plant, to a musical score.

*The drawbacks were:*

- *lack of rehearsal time. The performing needed more work on every aspect – voice, delivery, action.*
- *lack of workshop time for preparing costumes, props and masks.*
- *lack of workshop time on the story, the structure of the plot, the connections between scenes, the words for each episode, the possible lyrics for song as well as instrumental music.*
- *confusion during the performances, with many audience members stepping into the scene to take photos and record.*
- *In May, the story of the poem inspired more reflective dialogue, on eg the necessity of death, the concept of divine justice, the ideals of a good life. It is not quite clear why the ideas in the story were buried and lost this time.*
- *During the discussion in September some comments were made about the ratio of visitors to young people, and so we cut down the number of nessi. But this was felt, as we were short of people working with them on making puppets and on crafting the shape of the scenes.*
- *Yousif had told me that the apprentice puppeteers had worked on the scene when the Goddess Ishtar solicits Gilgamesh and he upbraids her for all the sorrows that fall upon human beings, and bitterly rejects her. For some reason, they didn't perform this, and they seemed to be at a bit of a loss during the scene they did perform – though handling the serpent earlier Jaja had been fully in charge.*

- *We had asked the Museum for help in getting permission to process in the streets, as our original idea had been to emulate a religious feastday celebration, station to station through the town, but they had had no response. Valentina feared we would be fined if we made a noise in the streets, but it all passed off all right!*

Overall the event was an achievement, and it bore fruit in important ways:

- *It attracted many young people and the numbers grew in the course of the days. Some of the young men said that they enjoyed the preparation and the performance and that they would like to study drama.*
- *The very few young women did become involved, working with Alice and Mercedes, and growing in confidence. Zena, who appeared for the first time during this workshop, agreed to take the role of Siduri at the primary school, and though there was no time to rehearse, managed to play the part. She seems to be a friend of Dauda and Mariam, who was with us last year at the hostel, and came every day, but couldn't be persuaded to speak or take part, preferring to take photographs.*
- *There was an audience and a lot of attentiveness; an atmosphere of high spirits and delight grew.*
- *We had discussed in Oxford and London in September the need to involve the locals, and we did.*

We are still aiming at handing over the project to the young people themselves, under the aegis of Giocherenda.