

Report on Small workshop in Storytelling and Animation

April 13-16, 2018

Report by Marina Warner, written May 14 2018

This four-day workshop was planned to keep up continuity, and we were only four *nessi*: two animators (Joan Ashworth and Lee Shearman) and two writers (Selma Sabbagh and myself – Selma could only come for the first two days as she needed to be back in London).

The plan was twofold:

- build on Lee's animation sessions in November 2016, which had been such a hit with participants
- concentrate on variations and invention of stories and on their structure and *dramatis personae*.

In order to achieve this, we set out to gather material for inspiration by going for a walk through Palermo, and Saifoudine ('Dine') Diallo performed the fable ('The Huntsman and the King's Son'), which he had first told us at one of the earliest workshops. Our hope was to translate the story into an animated film; this would involve drawing the characters and dramatizing the episodes and then transferring the material to black card and cutting out these figures and scenes from black card to create silhouettes for the kind of shadow puppet film made memorable by Lotte Reiniger.

All in all, the four days were exciting and productive, with large numbers (we reckoned around 80 on Friday and Saturday, fewer on Sunday, and an increased number again on Monday) of young people.

Friday 13th

After the school day had ended and many of them had been to the mosque, we set out from Ballarò to go on the walk through the old city of Palermo, each of us equipped with pencils and a blank exercise book. The idea was to gather sights and sounds, food, smells, gestures, animals, overheard conversations, plants and encounters on the walk, stirring memories and thoughts and creating attachments and associations with those places and the city in general. We asked them to draw, write, note down anything that appealed or was of interest. Some protested that they couldn't draw but this turned out not to be the case (some draw truly rather well). Several of the Giocherenda team led us in loose groups, and at first it was difficult to get everyone moving, but eventually, this loose, large gaggle left Moltivolti and began to *flaneur*. Many of them had never been to parts of the old city it turned out, which is still heavily scarred by the heavy bombing in 1943 during World War II. Inhibitions about drawing were pretty much overcome and many began sketching doorways, inscriptions, statues, people, pet animals, etc. The red bench in Piazza Bologna was a favorite, and some very interesting drawings of street signs were made ('Zona Pedonale' painted on the paving). Our first destination was the Vucciria, one of the old markets, and the mysterious statue of the Genio di Palermo, a sixteenth-century Renaissance monument, now much damaged and vandalized, showing an old man, wearing a crown and nursing a serpent coiled around his legs and body as it seems to be biting the old king's breast with sharp fangs. This is the totem of the city, devised by humanists to provide citizens with a classical counterpoise to Santa Rosalia, the popular patron saint, virgin and martyr. There are several variations of this guardian of the city, and we ended the walk around 7 pm at the Piazza dell'Indipendenza, where the Genio stands on top of a rocky mound and a fountain, and is looking up at heaven, symbolizing hope. The inscription here celebrates the revolution of 1848 (?) and one or two of our flaneurs copied it out carefully. The fountain itself is mossy all

over, but the water is stagnant and very foul. The Genio presents a variant on the myth of Cronus devouring his children, and is an allegory of time and history, but the Palermitan interpretation identifies him with hospitality to strangers, interestingly enough. Our plan was to use him as a prompt towards inventing a legend – technically a myth of origin, along the same lines that Ovid follows in the *Metamorphoses* and, even more so, in the *Fasti*, where he provides all kinds of fanciful explanations for features of the landscape and the city of Rome). *Later, Amadou came up with one and then proposed a legend – an aetiological myth of origin – for this very odd couple.*

Building the country of words involves *competing* stories and memories – we are going through very fierce contests now, as can be seen in the current struggle over statues and legacies. The maps of cities carry, almost unconsciously, an account of the past, as Walter Benjamin considered very thoughtfully; and he has numerous progeny now in his quest for unearthing the layers of meaning in the streets: Rebecca Solnit is a supreme chronicler of walking and writing, and has compiled atlases that are albums cum maps of personal experiences in San Francisco, New Orleans and New York. Literary imagination here reconfigures the territories by reviving memories of this site or that.

Saturday April 14

We met at Santa Chiara. We set up four tables for making the maps, and large sheets of paper. The results, made by lunchtime, gave their makers a great sense of achievement, rightly so, and seemed to inspire that sense of belonging we were hoping for: these were charts of a city they knew, and through knowing, could feel at home in at least a little.

We had lunch at Moltivolti and afterwards, Lee Shearman and Joan Ashworth set up tables for animation work, with Lee's inspired portable, easy-to-assemble rostra. The young people began drawing and cutting out silhouettes in black card. Joan bought spices and seeds of different colours, sizes and textures at the nearby market and showed them Arcimboldo images, to assemble figures and create effects with e.g. tiny pieces of dried carrot. This was very inspiring, and one young man, Abdou, could not be torn away from the task of drawing and colouring in a pineapple.

In the late afternoon, Dine told us his story. He gave it in Italian (before he had told us in French) with some interesting new scenes and thoughts since he had first remembered it.

Sunday April 15

In the morning, Selma and I worked on the story: she broke it down into scenes, objects, characters and actions, and we asked the participants to think up names for the characters (now included in the text), and laid them out on a long table and distributed some of the existing drawings as possible starting points for the animated film.

The process began, but animation requires time and we had rather little. Lee made a number of rostra and the students took them away with them and we are hoping they can continue, with the help of the teachers and Giocherenda members, and Clelia and Valentina's guidance and encouragement, until Lee and Joan return in September for Stories in Transit V (Sept 26-30).

Monday 16th

Selma had left, so at my table, I tried to turn to the Genio figure and his possible story; Amadou devised one, which connected to the Plant of Immortality in the

Epic of Gilgamesh. Around six young people began busily drawing scenes and characters, firmly directed by him. Joan had brought to the workshop in Oxford in May 2017 a traditional Punjabi story telling box, the kavad, used by wandering story tellers; they have multiple panels which unfold to reveal painted episode and the teller opens one at a time as he recites the story. This prototype/ structure may be used by Giocherenda

Lee, Joan and I left on the Tuesday. Selma, Lee, Joan were indefatigable and patient and inspiring throughout; Valentina, Clelia, the storyteller Yusif Lateef Jaralla (he has worked with shadow puppets before), and all the teachers from CPIA who came in the course of the workshops at the weekend, were a tremendous spur and catalyst to the participants. The young women came every day, and arrived punctually in the mornings. The women tend to hang back from taking part, showing more inhibition than the young men; when it came to making their map, they refused to draw and used only lettering (very boldly, all the same).

We were very happy with the attendance and the enthusiasm especially as we *nessi* were few in number. Valentina, with never failing support from Maria Vaccaro, organised the programme superbly well, as before.

All in all, it was a hugely rewarding visit, at least I found it so – many of the young people become so engaged and interested and show such willingness to try and learn and do things independently, that I found the whole endeavour immensely heartening.

We continued to enjoy the generous support of the Metabolic Studio and we are very grateful indeed to them for this funding and the encouragement it gives us.