

Magazine



Isabella Carloni is the writer, director and interpreter of *Viola di Mare* a one of a kind play that opened the third edition of In Scena! The Italian theater festival in New York at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo'.

Viola di Mare is based on the novel *Minchia di re* by Giacomo Pilati and it tells the story of a forbidden love. A woman who is in love with a woman, must become a man in order to be free to do so.

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This is the story: on a Sicilian island, at the time of the Italian Risorgimento, Pina falls in love with another woman. In order to live this forbidden love, safe from the



rage of her father and the judgment of the town, Pina decides to become a man...she will do so for the rest of her life. So she becomes Pino, a "man" who inherits his father's powers and who rules a bunch of workers.

Appearance is what dictates the rules of the game...

Isabella Carloni penetrates in this reality, a reality where Sicily is a wonderful place but also a harsh place that does not accept, does not have room for what is different. We asked her a few questions.

How did you discover Viola di Mare and how did you decide to bring this story to the stage?

I read the book *Minchia di re* by Giacomo Pilati and I was immediately enraptured by this incredible story, a real story that took place in Sicily during the Italian Risorgimento. Using Italian History, History with a capital H, as a backdrop, to be specific, a historic moment when people were working on building a national identity, I tell a Sicilian story, a story of identity set in a harsh and sunny Sicily, where Pina decides to become a man because of her love for another woman.

Yet, regardless of all historical references, Pina's story is timeless, as it talks about human condition, our present, our restlessness, our universal search for freedom and love. I think that the first impulse that brought me to stage this story, even before thinking about the topic itself, was my desire to wear a different skin, to become a man just like Pina does because of her love for Sara. And then I was attracted to all the contradictions, all the conflicts and all the different points of view - there are several characters and I portray them all, therefore my body undergoes many different transformations. At first I did not think of the play being a monologue but the more I worked on it the more I realized that was the way to go: Pina is alone on stage and she has decided to tell everybody the truth. But all the surfacing memories have their own effect on her, the event becomes a sort of judgment day and, in the end, she makes a different choice.

How difficult was it to detach yourself from the literary text and tell this story with the language of theater?

Before I started writing I went to visit the wonderful Island of Favignana, the setting of the story. The colors, the island's different smells, its scenery and tufa queries were essential in giving me inspiration and helping me dive into my work. I believe that images inspire the creative process both in writing and in acting.

My body immediately became both voice and space, both voice and rhythm: I had to find Pina's body which is also Pino's body and the body of all the other



characters that take part in the story. It was necessary from the very beginning to find the appropriate dramaturgical idea that would help the story present itself: the protagonist is waiting for a painter who is going to paint her portrait and unveil her true identity. I had to detach myself from the literary text in order to find the right language.

I had to find direct and specific words that give life to the different characters of the play, each with their own characteristics, vacillating between the most poetic moments between Sara and Pina, between the most crude and cruel moments between her father and her mother and with Cecé, the old man who gives Pina, as if he were giving her a gift, her new identity... that of the sea purple, that fish that changes its color for love (this is a male fish who, for love, becomes female, lays eggs, and then becomes male again). The play tells a story but not in a naturalistic language, but rather epic-narrative where the body becomes stylized and symbolic, almost like a dance.

How did you succeed in diving into a Sicilian reality and how was it different back then compared to now?

I know Sicily really well and for a long time, thanks to local friends but also to my theater work. What has been crucial in order to work on this project was the collaboration and the closeness with the book's author, Giacomo Pilati. When I was rewriting the story for the theater I could reach out to him and ask him any question I had – mostly when I was looking for a word in Italian because it exists only in Sicilian dialect. If you say "tuppulio" instead of "busso" (knock) or if you say "ciàuro" instead of "odore" (smell) things just are different: because you feel those words with your whole body, you almost touch them and you know that they're better conveyed that way. Regarding Sicilian reality back then and now, I can say that yes, forms of oppression and negation of freedom have changed but the constraints of the social rules we undergo, the difficulty of living in freedom or living according to our own diversity are still present. Maybe they're more subtle but not less powerful and at times our society is as intolerant as back then.

Appearance vs. identity, who wins?

Complexity wins! Because life in all its forms is in a continuous flow and it cannot be crushed into some



sort of confine. Our definitions, the labels that we attach to people are only a mirror of our fears or of our desire for order... but life cannot be bossed around easily. Pina will learn this at her own expense. In the end she will accept to coexist with the different aspects of her identity and she will learn to escape the trap of roles. This will cause her a lot of pain but it will also give her hope for the future.

How important was it to you to bring your show to the US? How was it received and how did audiences react, here vs. Italy?

The opportunity to open the festival with my show in such a prestigious place like Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, has made me incredibly proud. Performing in Italian, with only some inserts in English, has been a real challenge, but also a great emotion and a real enrichment.

The audience in New York is very attentive and aware, some are particularly interested in the dramaturgical aspects, others in the themes and the emotional aspects of the story but it's hard to say more because each person has his/her own take on the show, everyone is touched differently. In Italy, actors can tell the audience's appreciation by the number of times they have to come back on stage... I was told before the show this does not happen here so I knew what to expect... I got one applause, but it was long and warm-hearted. I am looking forward to my next two performances, one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn... different audiences... different alchemy.

