



Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò. 20 Years of Italian Culture @ NYU

Marina Melchionda (May 25, 2010)



'I want this to become a home for all of those who love Italy in New York". Interview with Professor Stefano Albertini, Director of the Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò', on the eve of the institution's 20th Anniversary. The Casa will close this successful year with two exceptional events and is getting ready to celebrate its important milestone with an exciting, interesting and varied range of initiatives. Read more about it in the article and get ready to live a new intense cultural year in the Italian workshop of NYU!

It's late May and the school year is about to end.

At 11 am the Village is unusually silent, as most of the students of New York University are home preparing their final exams. The same is true for [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [2] - no buzzing around, the atmosphere is quiet and relaxed, and we are enjoying the "[Marrakesh Revisited](#) [3]" exhibit by artist Corrado Levi hosted in its entrance hall and corridors.

The season is almost over, there are only a few events left on the calendar, not too many students



in the library, the garden is bathed in sunshine.

It's the first real day of spring in New York and, as director Stefano Albertini welcomes us into his office, we decide to sit outside and enjoy the warmth while having a chat about this past year at the Casa and the upcoming one.

This year you have hosted a consistent number of events that have attracted the attention of both Italian and American media. The role of this institution as promoter of Italian culture in New York is constantly increasing...

It has been a very intense year for us. We have hosted a number of important exhibits, the first of which I want to recall was the one dedicated to Alberto Burri that we organized in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute and the [Fondazione Burri](#) [4] of Città di Castello. We consider it as part of a commitment to promote great Italian contemporary artists. The displays of the works by artists [Matteo Montani](#) [5] and Corrado Levi are also part of this effort, just as the last exhibit we'll be hosting by Luca Capuano. "Il Paesaggio Descritto. UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Italy" will be inaugurated on June 4 and is a collection of pictures of Italian monuments, landscapes, squares, streets that the UNESCO recognizes as world legacies. It will allow the visitors to take a virtual tour among the greatest beauties of Italy.

You also hosted two series of events that enjoyed great public success: "Adventures in Italian Opera" with journalist [Fred Plotkin](#) [6] and "Genuinely Italian" by [Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani](#). [7] Will you re-propose them next year?

The collaboration with the GRI was maybe the greatest novelty on our calendar. As promoters of Italian culture in New York, we were proud of the partnership proposal they made us. It is true that often Italian cuisine is stereotyped and Italy is mainly considered the country of food and of the "bon vivants", but we can't ignore that cuisine is a strong component of our culture as it mirrors our local and national traditions and is an important part of our daily life. Our aim with GRI is to talk about the issue in a cultured way, keeping the attention of the public high at the same time. I think that so far we have reached this goal in this first edition, and we are committed to do the same for the second one.

The success of Fred Plotkin's "Adventures in Italian Opera", on the other hand, is actually already consolidated. The Opera singers that we had as guests up to now have been great entertainers for our public. Although they are used to perform on world-famous stages such as the Metropolitan Opera, they accepted to come to the Casa to talk with Fred and our public about the path that their personal and professional life is taking. Most of them not only showed an outstanding education and culture, but were also very nice and fun to talk to.

Without a doubt, the Casa has the capacity to attract a more consistent English-speaking public than any other institution in New York that promotes Italian culture. What do you offer more than the others?

First of all, even if we have a fully Italian name, we are actually an American Foundation, part of New York University. Thus we have access or are closer to a public of students, professors, and academics, that are potentially interested in our programs.

Second, one of the factors of most of our events is that they are in English, that works as the lingua franca for both Americans and Italians. Of course we still have some events in Italian and promote it as a language, but we believe that no public should be excluded from our initiatives, especially when they could learn something through them.

As a professor at NYU, you are constantly in contact with students who have made Italy their field of expertise. How do they look at our country?

Their interest in Italy has changed in the last few years, mostly because today our students have many more opportunities to spend some time there, maybe six months or a year, learn the language, and appreciate the Italian life-style. Not only do they like our fashion, food, or cinema but they also learn to appreciate local cultures and traditions. So when they come back they are sort of "Italianized", they are completely in love with Italy, and for us professors it almost feels like we are teaching Italian students.



One other thing that helps them develop a different or wider point of view on contemporary Italy is Internet. They can wake up and read the national news just as if they were there, navigate the web and be informed about everything that they might be interested in. They can create their own, personalized relationship with Italy, and this is something they could never have done before...

Every year, Casa Italiana sponsors and hosts a conference organized by PhD students in Italian. It is an important opportunity for them to focus on an issue of their particular interest and confront with experts they can personally invite. I happened to talk to some of them, and I was impressed by how they feel supported and appreciated at the Casa...

They do everything alone, from deciding the general theme of the conference to defining the most specific particular, and they do it with enthusiasm. Last year's conference, entitled "Speaking up in Modern Italy", had somehow more media resonance than this year's which was focused on the Italian Middle-Ages and the Renaissance. This is because contemporary issues are more attractive to the general public ;, but if we see it from the academic point of view, I can say without a doubt that they are doing an ever better and more interesting job.

Generally speaking, we believe in the principles of "academic freedom" and "pluralism", might it be cultural, political, or pedagogical. Our Institution is based on these two beliefs. Although we are part of a private university, we have no masters that tell us what to do and who to invite, either on the American or the Italian side.

We have been fortunate enough to have a founder like the Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli Marimò who has perfectly understood that the most precious patrimony an academic institution can have is cultural freedom

You were nominated Director of the Casa in 1998, 12 years ago. Is there a goal you feel you still need to accomplish?

I have fulfilled many of the aims I had in mind. The Casa is nowadays a renowned place both in New York and beyond for the important exhibitions and events it hosts and I am proud of it. One more step I would like to take is to transform this place into a real home for those who come, just as the name suggests. I would like to see it become a forum, a workshop, where everybody can feel at ease and express their ideas and opinions .

It can be both a physical and virtual home. I was deeply impressed by the results of a recent survey we at the Casa sent to our audience. Not only a significant percentage of them responded - which shows that a large portion of our age-heterogeneous public is internet literate - but they also sent us critical comments, both good and bad , about our program and organization. We found out, as an example, that more than 12% of them has attended more than 10 of our events, while another 11% feels we could improve the way we distribute the informative material regarding our programs. The results of the survey show that they feel like they are a part of the Casa , and that they can actively contribute to change and improve it as active members. They know that they can make the difference.

To conclude, let's talk about next year's celebrations for the Casa's 20th Anniversary. What are you organizing for this special occasion?

The celebrations will be held on November 4. There will be a concert at the [Skirball Auditorium](#) [8] with Maestro Marco Armiliato conducting the [Steinhardt Student Symphony Orchestra](#) [9] followed by a fund-raising gala dinner that will take place at the [Kimmel Center](#) [10] (NYU). The aim of the evening will be to collect the funds necessary to finance our activities and programs that will be very rich next year.

During the evening we will also present a book on which we are working in collaboration with [Edizioni Olivares](#) [11], a publishing house based in Milan. Aside from the official history of the Casa, readers will find a collection of anecdotes by artists and men of culture that have supported our foundation and contributed to its growth. The work will also feature a special insert by our founder the Baroness, in which she writes about how she first conceived the idea of the Casa and why she decided to invest in an institute aimed at promoting Italian culture in New York.



An anticipation of next year's events calendar?

Our 2010/2011 program will be very rich in attractive appointments for our public, with exhibitions, lectures and conferences. Our flagships will be the new editions of both the "Adventures in Italian Opera" and Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani's "Genuinely Italian" series and the exhibit dedicated to the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, organized in collaboration with the [Museo Vittoriale](#) [12] of Brescia. This display was not a choice made by chance: since our 20th Anniversary falls in the same year as the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy, we decided to honor one of the most patriotic poets in the history of our country, the one that more than anyone else speaks about the idea of "nation" in his works.

Talking about literature, let's not forget one of our main events that has contributed to enhance the prestige of the Casa as a cultural institute both in New York and in Italy: the Premio Zerilli-Marimò/ City of Rome, organized in collaboration with the [Casa delle Letterature](#) [13] of Rome, now in its 9th edition.

The rest of the calendar is still to be fully defined, as we will be working on it during the summer. In the meantime, we are getting ready to end this successful year with two events that we have been waiting for and which will both take place on June 4: the opening of the exhibition "Il Paesaggio Descritto. UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Italy" by Luca Capuano and the round table that inaugurates the 2010 edition of "Open Roads", the film festival organized by Prof. Antonio Monda. For the occasion we will welcome popular and talented Italian actors and directors including Carlo Verdone, Paolo Virzì, Rocco Papaleo, Giuseppe Capotondi, Pierfrancesco Favino, Giorgio Diritti, Gabriele Salvatores, Alessandro Angelini, Alessandro Aronadio, Susanna Nicchiarelli, and Valerio Mieli

i-Italy will certainly be there to cover both these exclusive events and interview their protagonists for our readers. So stay tuned, and if you can, join us on June 4 at the Casa, a true Home for all of us Italian New Yorkers.

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[5] <http://www.i-italy.org/node/13644>

[6] <http://www.fredplotkin.com/>

[7] <http://www.gruppo.com/>

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