

Multilingual poet Antoine Cassar reads in Bari, Lecce

Following a successful performance at the **Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée** in Bari last May, young poet Antoine Cassar was recently invited to return to Puglia to read his poetry in two separate events, in the company of Nabil Salameh, singer of Italo-Palestinian duo **Radiodervish**. For the occasion, Cassar presented the booklet **Mużajk**, a selection of multilingual poems published by Edizzjoni Skarta, now available in all leading Maltese bookshops.

At the end of a year in which contemporary Maltese poetry has continued to garner a greater international presence and thematic scope, through participation in festivals around and beyond the Mediterranean, publications in international journals and anthologies, and the at once local and planetary expression of *Riħ min-Nofsinhar* (a seminal book of poetry on climate change by Immanuel Mifsud and Adrian Grima, featuring essays by a number of contributors), the multilingual verse of Luxembourg-based poet Antoine Cassar is enjoying growing acclaim in a number of countries, most particularly in Italy.

Cassar's *mużajki* or *mosaics*, a poetic work in progress written in an articulate blend of English, French, Italian, Maltese and Spanish (in no particular order) whilst more recently embracing languages beyond the five in which the itinerant poet grew up and studied, have gained broad recognition on the Italian poetry scene over the past eighteen months, notably through publication in Mondadori's literary journal *Nuovi Argomenti*, an exultant performance at this year's BJCEM, and the award of a *Segnalazione* in the international Premio Nosside last October.

On 11th December, Cassar was invited to read a number of poems during the event *Umaniversi*, organised by local poet Enzo Mansueto, within the context of a wider project named *Le porte dell'occidente*, a year-long residential artistic project coordinated by Italo-Palestinian duo Radiodervish. All performances of the project are held at the 13th century Norman castle of Sannicandro di Bari, where Radiodervish are recording their forthcoming album. Also reading at the performance were Puglian poetic duo Marthia Carrozzo and Margherita Macri, who were also successful at May's BJCEM.

Commenting on the event, Cassar exclaims: "I was very surprised, taken aback even, by the warmth of the audience's response. Reading at events in Malta and Luxembourg I generally receive a lot of positive feedback, but in Italy the enthusiasm seems to reach a different level. It could be that the small, tightly-knit societies of Malta and Luxembourg have a stronger preference for local as opposed to global expression, and perhaps rightly so, accustomed as they are to linguistic hybridity, though I still think a greater balance between the two modes of expression is desirable. In Sannicandro, one of the most applauded mosaics was *Ciao amore ciao*, which contains references to traditional and modern Italian love songs, yet the other poems, including those in which I sacrificed Italian for a

'guest' language such as Dutch, Hungarian or Turkish, were also very warmly received."

"I was very honoured to read the *mużajki* together with Nabil of Radiodervish and Enzo Mansueto, who are formidable poets themselves. Valentina de Carlo, the head of production at TeleBari, read the Italian translation of *Gonbidapena*, a Basque-inspired poem celebrating the universality of the word in the world. Hearing the poem come to life in her radiogenic voice was an emotional, numinous experience."



Antoine Cassar reading *Hüzün* with Nabil Salameh of Radiodervish
(photo: Margherita Macri)

The following evening, Cassar was the main guest for the encounter *La poesia mischia lingua* at the Fondo Verri in the historic centre of Lecce. "The space was small but absolutely packed, concealing my nerves was no easy task. It's encouraging to meet people who are familiar with your poetry even though you've never met them. Again, the greatest applause was received by a poem with a more 'local' feel, as was the case with *Roam*, a mosaic which begins and ends in *Romanesco*. After the folk songs of the talented Salentino musician Dario Muci, for the first time, I was asked for an encore. Of course, the most interesting part of any literary evening is what happens after the performance... I met a good handful of poets and made a number of new friends, with whom I hope to have the opportunity to collaborate in the future."

In both Sannicandro and Lecce, Cassar presented his *Mużajk* project in three phases, explained in detail in the introduction to the forthcoming booklet: personal and philosophical expression, or the mosaic as individual identity; poetry of people and place, or the mosaic as a complex texture of local realities;

and poems of a semiotic nature exploring the more elementary metaphors and symbols of global culture, or the mosaic as humanity itself.

“Explaining the conceptual development behind and within the poetry was extremely important – the *mosaics* are part of a long-term project which is still taking infant steps, a poetic journey going far beyond the mere practice of braiding different tongues into a common music and stream of thought. Having grown up across different countries for better and for worse, until four years ago I found it extremely difficult to decide in which language to write. After a period of experimentation with multilingual verse, I soon found that what had started out as exploration and exercise had eventually evolved into experience, and above all, expression, which is of course one of the more fundamental reasons why a poet puts pencil to paper. Expression can be personal, empathetic, solidary, symbolic. Today I write a lot of monolingual poetry in Maltese, but I find the *Mużajk* project a lot more revealing and exciting, and certainly truer to my composite identity and personal view on the multiplicity of our world. Beyond the claustrophobic confines of political borders and the static notion of nation state, it is a great deal easier to breathe.”

After the Lecce reading, Cassar was invited to remain a further three days in Salento, to visit the phantasmagoric mosaics of Puglian artist Orodè Deoro and to discover two locally endangered languages: Griko Salentino, a language stemming from medieval Greek still spoken in seven towns in the centre of Italy’s heel, and Arbëresh, a language related to Albanian spoken in villages outside Taranto. Deoro’s mosaics decorate a large part of *Vincent City*, the abode of eccentric painter and sculptor Vincenzo Brunetti and a magnanimous temple of art located in the tiny village of Guagnano. “The house was brimming with colour and ideas, much in the same way as the host radiated inspiration and energy when I had the pleasure of meeting him. Orodè’s mosaics, particularly his psychedelic map of the world, offered much food for thought for my own poetic projects.”



Mondoperapocalistoria, a mosaic by Puglian artist Orodè Deoro (photo: fragmentart.it)

“Like the poem *Hüzün* I read with Nabil and Margherita, which attempts to capture the melancholy particular to Istanbul, during my week in Puglia there seemed to be an inherent sadness in everything artistic or quintessentially human. First of all, it was distressing to learn that the *carabinieri* were threatening to close down the metaphysical paradise of creativity that is Vincent City, which has apparently long been accused of ‘*abuso edilizio*’ for illegally using a certain type of wood, the same wood once used in Italian train tracks until they discovered it was cancerogenic. At least, that’s the official story.”

“On the last day, in Corigliano d’Otranto, I had the jubilant experience of conversing with Nicola, an exceptionally friendly 87-year-old speaker of Griko. He was almost overcome with excitement when I asked him about his life and his language, he was very affectionate and kept resting his palm on the back of my hand as a sign of warmth. But his hand was cold, and it was heart-rending to comprehend that I was talking to one of the last individuals who speak Griko fluently, the last to actually think and breathe in the language. I visited one of the local schools where they run an EU-funded scheme aiming to keep Griko alive, but as one of the teachers informed me, the result is that Griko will soon remain purely a literary language, fossilised and idealised in text books reproducing traditional proverbs and songs. One type of Griko song is the *miroloj*, a form of elegy performed only at funerals. The terrorising question is, when the last speaker of Griko passes away, who will be there to sing the *miroloj*?”

Cassar is now working on a cycle of mosaics focusing on languages which find themselves running fast on the downhill slope to extinction. According to UNESCO, around half of the world’s 6000 languages are currently endangered.

Muzajk – an exploration in multilingual verse, the book published by Edizzjoni Skarta on the occasion of the Puglia readings containing a detailed introduction and a selection of fifteen poems with translations in English, is now available in leading Maltese bookshops (€6). Alternatively, Sierra Books offer to deliver the book to any address in Malta or Gozo at no extra charge (tel. 2137 8576). For more information, or to see a number of video recordings of the readings in Bari and Lecce, visit <http://muzajk.info>.

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