

Bianca Mastronimico & Pina Cipriani

My Mother's Song

My mother, Pina Cipriani, has been a professional singer for over thirty years and in 1972, with my father Franco Nico, musician and singer-songwriter, she founded Teatro Sancarluccio in Naples, a fringe theatre company with a strong history of experimentation and artistic endeavour.

Whilst being a wife and mother of two, she has pursued a well-respected career as singer and performer, but over the years she has also managed to deal with the creative and financial challenges of running a theatre.

As a child I followed my parents' regional, national and international tours, and then was involved in many different ways in my mother's performances, ultimately as director of several of them.

What follows is a conversation about her experience as a singer and woman in theatre. Now that I am living in Britain, following my own artistic path, I feel the urge to open a new kind of dialogue between us, through which I also aim to understand more about the way she passed on her professional practice to me.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I was born near the end of the Second World War, in a provincial Southern Italian village near Naples. I was one of a family of nine and had a Catholic upbringing. My mother was a house-wife; my father had a bakery and traded in wheat. We were quite well off until my dad made a bad investment in the building sector, and this, together with his passion for cards and horse racing, brought the business to the point of collapse. I was six at the time and at the age of twelve, to escape this difficult situation, I decided to enter a Benedictine nunnery, where I stayed as a postulant until I was eighteen, and there I was taught Gregorian chant.

You have told me that your love for singing dates back much earlier...

At home we listened to the radio continually and I was very

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quick to learn the songs. When I was six, I remember on Sundays we opened the front gate and in the courtyard, on a huge table for twelve, which we used as the stage, my little friends and I played 'theatre'. My mother used to invite all the neighbours, who brought their own chairs, and I presented and sang the most popular songs of the day. At the end we took a basket round for a collection and went to buy ice creams.

Where did these Sunday shows come from?

They came from my mother's determination to distract her five daughters from poverty and to lift our spirits. Also, in the 1950s, in a small village where there was no theatre or cinema, this was a moment of recreation for the women.

And there were also indoor performances at home...

That's right - on winter evenings around the fireplace, Mum would say, "Shall we play theatre?" She was a natural storyteller and invented tales creating the words and music. And then she encouraged us daughters to be the orchestra: "Let's get the pans and make the music" she would say, and we used ramshackle pan lids and wooden utensils to beat on empty tomato cans.

How strange, I invented a percussion instrument made from an empty tomato can! Tell me more...

When there was a storm and the lights went out, she invented dark, surreal nursery rhymes that scared us to death, after which, in front of the candles on the mantelpiece, my father used his hands to entertain us with shadow puppetry.

What other pastimes in your village were connected with singing?

Between two and three o'clock in the afternoon in our street, the barrel organ passed by, playing the musical scores of the songs of the day. I put the words I knew to them and sang.

An old time karaoke...

Precisely. Another opportunity was when cousins married. For *Peppenella* (little Josephine), as my mother called me, any occasion was good to sing.

Where does your passion for songs come from?

My mother. While she sewed she sang Neapolitan love songs "I'd like to kiss you..." She had a beautiful voice. I listened and learned the songs from her. She woke up every day at five o'clock to feed the animals, which we had in the courtyard, and even at that time of day she started singing. Around seven her singing woke us up: "Oh Maria" interrupted by, "Wake up, don't sleep anymore, you have to make your beds, to tidy your room" - a bit of another song and then, "You have to go to school!"

Can you tell me about Gregorian singing in the convent?

Once in the nunnery I was entrusted as a postulant to the teacher nun, who practically became my 'mum' and who was also in charge of teaching us how to sing Gregorian chants. Like the other postulants, I went through a singing audition with the nun who played the organ, and was chosen as leader of the choir, being the only mezzo-soprano. For two hours, every morning after breakfast and before Vespers, we studied or rehearsed all the songs and for every festival we learned new ones.

What about the songs you had learnt from your mother and from the radio?

In the convent I couldn't listen to music and



Pina Cipriani. Photo: Bianca Mastronimico

it was prohibited to sing anything other than Gregorian chants. If I sang a song I remembered to myself, I had to confess it as a temptation. I confessed to the priest that I had committed a sin and he reprimanded me: "Don't do it again, sing the convent songs, I exhort you; don't think about the outside, it no longer belongs to you." As for the radio, it was switched on only to listen to the Pope's messages or religious services.

Did you ever transgress these rules consciously?

One afternoon, a barrel organ passed by the convent walls, playing my 'outside' songs. I tried to resist, but they were there in my heart, in my memory and in my mind, so I sang them, then next morning I confessed.

What did these songs represent for you?

The nostalgia for my home, for the courtyard, for the 'theatre' which my sisters and I made with my mother.

Then, when you were eighteen, you rejected the convent...

As I was growing up I started to feel a sexual drive. During the night I got up with the wish to pray to Jesus, but it wasn't just a religious relationship, it was the unexpressed desire of my senses. I couldn't manage to cancel my personality and deny life, as they asked me to do.

Once out, did you start singing again immediately?

I started to listen to the radio again, and this time to records as well, and then I began singing Schubert's *Ave Maria* at church weddings. The priest suggested to my mother that I should study singing, but as I had just left the convent, she thought it would be shameful. She feared comments from people in the village and said to me "If you want to sing, you'll sing at home".

But finally she was convinced and you were sent to singing lessons with Dad, who in that period was already a well-known singer...

Well, initially he didn't want to take the responsibility for giving lessons to a young girl who had recently left a nunnery. He found it bizarre and illogical! But eventually he did help me, and then sent me to study with Nino Campanino, an excellent Neapolitan teacher who was the pianist for the great Italian tenors, Caruso and Beniamino Gigli.

What was the difference between these lessons and your Gregorian training?

With him it was technical study: how to place the voice, how to breathe, diaphragm contraction, scales and arpeggios. Good advice like "Don't eat before a concert to keep your diaphragm light". In contrast the Gregorian structure is simple and free, but

you need to understand the psalm and it was the teacher nun who guided us in the use of the breath, indicating each point of the psalm where we had to inhale.

How do you learn a new song?

First I start singing the tune, with my eyes closed, approximating the words. Then I learn the text by heart as if it was a poem, visualising the words, and then I add the music, using the punctuation to establish where to take the breaths.

When you sing on stage you're not physically still, nor do you create choreographed movement, but you seem to respond with precise actions to the text as well as to the music. How do you arrive at this?

Once I know the text by heart very well, I start to speak it aloud, to listen to the words and from there my body's response to the text arrives. I do this work in front of a mirror, trying to observe myself with detachment. It's a bit like trying on a dress and seeing where the defects lie, and where it fits well.

Do these physical scores change in your performances?

I have my reference points, but then there is the work I do for every single show. I believe that the bravura lies in transforming on stage what you have fixed in rehearsal, adding something more whilst retaining the natural way, but this very much depends on the atmosphere and the audience's level of attention.

What songs are in your repertoire?

Old and contemporary Neapolitan songs, traditional folk songs, and for years your father and I have been researching the

dialectal poetry of Southern Italy, especially the region around Naples.

You and Dad have always been committed to bringing theatre and song to deprived rural areas of your region. Have you got a particular memory of these tours?

After the terrible earthquake of 1980 in Campania, the mayor of a tiny mountain village, which had been completely wiped out, invited us to sing in the tents where the whole community was living on New Year's Eve. Franco took his guitar and for about three hours after dinner we all sang together. There were still tremors so singing not only distracted people, but also exorcised the fear.

Faced with such a disaster and so much suffering I initially felt uneasy and asked myself what use was singing when people were shattered, exhausted, with concrete problems like the absence of water and electricity to solve. But a song can bring serenity even in such a tragic situation.

What happens to you when you are on stage?

I always feel a great emotion mixed with fear, which goes as soon as I start singing. In front of an audience I say to myself "Go!" It's a challenge I enjoy. I am like a toreador in front of a bull.

Singing I have the sensation of rising, of flying, my body becomes something else, sinuous, elegant, strong, powerful.

For whom do you sing?

First of all for myself, and then to give the audience what I feel. In singing you free yourself, you get drunk on yourself - I am a good wine and I get drunk. And when you are drunk you are true...

You have sung Neapolitan songs throughout

Europe, but what is your relationship with this tradition and with Naples as a city?

Naples is a strange city, which embraces you in pain and in joy. Neapolitan song flows with the people's problems, reflects their moods, their life situations.

But these songs do not really interest me as a tradition; to want to sing a song it has to provoke emotion in me. And this goes also for the songs that your father composes for me; I reserve the right to decide. If I like the song I'll study it, otherwise there's no chance!

You say that you make theatre with songs; in what sense?

Because every song contains a situation and a character, and the singing is the medium through which I express character, but then there is my presence on stage, which is equally fundamental. In my 1992 solo *Rosa, Preta e Stella*, which is a journey into the history of Neapolitan song from the Middle Ages until today, I am on stage for an hour without live musicians, singing to recorded tracks. Yes, I have lighting and a set, and it has been a very successful show, but I know I couldn't have survived this challenge without the weapons of theatre.

And when there are musicians?

I listen to the music, but I don't look at them, because I am making theatre with the music. I consume my space and live it like a theatre stage. If the tone of the song is very intimate, passionate or strongly political, I often sing with my eyes closed.

What has it meant for you to create and run a theatre space?

It has given me the opportunity to fulfil what I have felt and done since I was a child,

and then of course to see so much theatre and so many great artists performing has been a privilege and has taught me a lot.

As a singer you have toured nationally and internationally with your concerts and performances, you have also made cinema, television and radio, but you have never stopped dedicating yourself to the running of Teatro Sancaarluccio. Why didn't you choose to concentrate solely on your singing career?

In order to have our own space, to guarantee the continuity of my artistic work and professional independence - which is sacred for me. It's a beautiful thing, being able to come back and find your own artistic home in which to carry on the work of studying and training, both in music and theatre.

PINA CIPRIANI (Italy) officially started her career as a singer and performer in 1973, and since then she has performed and toured her concerts and shows all over Italy and Europe. She is internationally recognised as one of the finest interpreters of traditional Neapolitan song, and has recorded over ten critically acclaimed albums, with her songs appearing in many compilations. Her work as co-founder and artistic director of Teatro Sancaarluccio in Naples, as well as her own theatre company, has encouraged and helped many performers and practitioners to create and generate cutting-edge new work for more than thirty-five years.

BIANCA MASTROMINICO (Italy/Britain) is a performer, writer and director. Working in every aspect of theatre craft from a very young age and subsequently refining this hands-on practice with university studies, and further training through encounters with masters, she now lives in the UK, where she has co-founded Organic Theatre together with her partner, performer and director John Dean. For more information please visit www.organictheatre.co.uk.