

Maria Ficara

A Rose among the People

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She had suffered that reality.
On stage, she was above all,
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wild and authentic.*

After three years of research and performances based on the southern Italian masks of the Commedia dell'Arte and on Neapolitan musical traditions working as a playwright with my group, I had felt the need to look at the theatre of my own native land. Sicily is the region of *cantastorie* (storytellers), the most professional example of the southern Italian *fabulazione* (narrative) tradition. These storytellers are artists who, since the beginning of the 20th century, perfected the habit and skills of telling stories which have been orally handed down through generations. Thanks to the *cantastorie* from the south-eastern part of Sicily which I come from, the tradition was enriched by music. The storytelling art developed with the alternation of song and spoken texts which narrated stories taken from the popular tradition, episodes belonging to chivalric literature, parts of Opera translated into Sicilian, and contemporary chronicles put in the form of ballads; a cultural tradition that had its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, only to eventually succumb to the advent of mass-media.

I decided to accompany an actor, with whom I have worked for years, to Sicily. He usually involves me in his solo-experiments around the *cantastorie* figure and the refinement of its techniques in adding the physicality of contemporary theatre. In the region where this kind of popular art developed through the centuries, I saw all the artists who continue the tradition during a theatre festival that gathers all the *cantastorie* still working in Italy. The *cantastorie* who used to tour the south, travelling from town to town to tell famous stories and contemporary events in squares and streets, with their guitars and painted boards, were mostly men. I read this tribute that Enrico Ansaldi, president of the national association of *cantastorie* wrote for the occasion:

This review of the Sicilian popular tradition of "Canti e Cunti" (songs and narration) is a deeply felt homage to Rosa

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Balistreri, an artist unforgettable for her expressive power, the courage of her ideas, the intense passion of her songs. To Rosa, to her political thought and social struggle, to her lacerating cry and innocent eyes, these verses of love and sorrow are dedicated. Rosa was a banner for civil rights struggles. Her memory and that of all the cantastorie must not be lost. To lose even a single line of their songs would mean losing a part of our history, a part of our identity.

Suddenly in my memory, the deep and mighty voice of a woman emerged. I had heard it here and there since I was a child. That simple and ancient music introduced me to the shades and expressiveness of my dialect. That voice spoke to me of Sicily. To explore my native land, I should begin my research with Rosa - neglected yet never forgotten, departed and yet alive in the memories of people of all ages. How could I get to know more about her? She is too recent a figure to appear in scholarly studies or in record re-issues. She is too distant to trace her history. I decided to look for her among the people who have known her. I started with Enrico, in order to understand the reasons behind his tribute, and I asked the *cantastorie* who worked with her to tell me about her.

Rosa Balistreri was born on the 21st of March 1927 in Licata, a small town in the province of Agrigento, in south-west Sicily. A woodcarver's daughter, she was the first of five children - four girls and a disabled boy. Rosa worked in the fields to help her family. In times of hardship she used to glean the wheat left by others after the harvest.

Rosa would sing, silently, in the fields. She sang when nobody could hear her, because her father would beat her: "women don't sing, only whores do". She probably sang to herself when at fifteen she was given as a bride to a scoundrel in an arranged marriage. The marriage was marked by a husband-master, whose violence caused her to lose her first child and have another by force after she had tried to escape; a husband from whom one day Rosa defended herself with a knife.

When, after a month in jail, she was released and told that her husband was still alive, Rosa understood that she had to run away. In Palermo she took on humble jobs to keep herself and her daughter. Harassed by the landlord, she stole some money from him and caught the first train to northern Italy, far away from her island and from her land. She got off in Florence, with the little Angela in her arms and repressed songs in her throat. She found a job and a love never felt before - the only one in her life - for a young painter who was struggling for recognition.

Instead it was Rosa's free song that quickly became known together with all the words that she

Oh Sweet Lord, let it rain, let it rain
because the trees are dying of thirst
send a good shower,
without lightning and without thunder.
The water from the sky feeds the earth
a well full of mercy,
our tears touch the ground
and God gives us alms.

*Signuruzzu chiuwiti chiuwiti,
ca l' arbureddi su morti di siti
mannatini una bona,
senza lampi e senza trona.
L'acqua di' n cielu sazìa la terra,
funti china di pietà,
li nostril lacrimi posanu' n terra
e Diu ni fa la carità.*

was shouting by now: her land, hunger, jail, poverty and rebellion. With her authentic music she became more and more popular in the artistic world until one day Dario Fo invited her to take part in the performance *Ci ragiono e canto*, with which at forty years old she began her theatre career.

On stage she embodied several roles, but she did not act. She used to sing in Sicilian and she played herself. She would be on stage from the beginning to the end, involved in the action

I have a poisoned knife
that destroys whatever it touches
down in hell it was made
and to revenge then sold.

*Tegnu' ncuteddu' ntussicatu
ca soccu tocca nchiaia ed è pirdutu
'nfunnu a lu' nfernu l' hannu fabbricatu
e alla vinnitta poi fu vinnutu.*

of different plays (*La lupa*, *La lunga notte di Medea*). She sang and embodied pain, misery, hope. Her interpretation inspired a Sicilian playwright who wrote *The Salt Ballad* for her: once again Rosa put herself directly on stage, presenting a time in her life in the South when, in order to survive, she used to preserve sardines in salt.

Her singing became very well known. Her concerts, which she always wanted to give in squares, among the people, gathered crowds all over Italy.

Like other *cantastorie*, Rosa was able to express herself in that way because she represented

You know the love I have for you.
You know how much I want you.
You know how much I cry and how I feel
when for a moment I do not see you.
In my soul there is a blaze
and my heart is yours and not mine.
If I die, I will not go to heaven
as my love for you makes me forget God.

*Vui lu sapiti l' amuri ca v'aiu.
Vui lu sapiti quantu vi disù.
Vui lu sapiti comu chianciu e staiu
quannu ca p'un mumentu nun vi viru.
Dintru di l'arma mia na vampa ci haiu
e lu me cori è vostru e no lu miu.
Si moru' n pararisu nun ci vaiu
picchè p'amari a vui nun pensu a Diu.*

an historical heritage. She denounced centuries of outrage committed at the expense of the weakest people. Her song was that of the humble classes who are the victims of official History, trampled on by power. Rosa did not interpret a part, she was the character. She had suffered that reality. On stage, she was above all, herself - wild and authentic.

She did not consider herself to be an artist and claimed that it was the weight of a shared and recognisable culture that allowed her to communicate with the people. The person was the character, the audience was not an "extra", but the main performer of the everyday stories and of the feelings to which she gave voice; a voice, which made her known outside the borders of her island first, and later in the rest of Italy. She learned to play the guitar in order to sing: singing was her protest, theatre her way to survive. She adapted what was written for her. Her reference was the popular tradition, in which, with a precise traditional metre, every sentence conveyed an accomplished thought.

While Rosa's voice was used as a soundtrack for several films (*La seduzione*, *Il prefetto di ferro*, *La peccatrice*), she kept on singing, travelling and doing research. In her Sicily, among the peasants, she gathered the texts of songs mainly dating back to the 19th century. She fought to defend Sicilian as the language of her country, a language which should be safeguarded and taught at school. For her, Sicilian was the identity of an exploited people, of a land forcibly tied to a distant and different state.

Rosa made the most of her popularity: in Sicily, in particular, she used her presence and her concerts to talk to women and men. Associated with communism, she poured her commitment into the struggle for equal rights for women, her protest against every form of segregation and in favour of the right to education for all the social classes. She used her position to reach the younger generations because she did not want them to suffer what she had experienced. She was a friend of artists, judges, journalists, exponents of the Sicilian intelligentsia, committed to denounce the connection between organised crime and the Italian government. She witnessed the death of some of her friends and she sang her sorrow writing ballads and inciting the public

Tonight I run and fly with the wind
to open up history's doors.
Tonight I want to give life
for a moment to past and memory.
Tonight, with the flame of love
I dig a grave for sorrow.

*Stasira vaiu e curru cu lu ventu
a dapiri li porti di la storia.
Stasera vogghiu dari pi'n mumentu
vita a lu passatu e a la memoria.
Stasera cu la vampa di l'amuri
scavu na fossa a lu duluri.*

There is more pain, more suffering
than joy and love for human kind.
There are those who cheat and rule you
and those who keep silent
and power strengthens the powerful
and silence kills the innocent.

*C'è chiù duluri, c'è chiù turmentu
che gioia e amuri, pi l'umanità.
C'è cu t'inganna, cu ti cumanna,
e cu 'n silenziu mutu sinni sta
e lu putiri a forza i li putenti
e lu silenziu c'ammazza a l'innucenti.*

It is not tears that change fate.
It is not fear that stops the advance.
I open up my fists, count my fingers,
here I am, alone, looking at life.
I sing and tell, tell and sing,
in order not to lose count.

*Nun è lu chiantu ca cancia lu destinu.
Nun è lu scantu ca ferma lu caminu.
Apru li pugna, cuntutu li rita
ca sula sugnu, scurru la vita.
Cantu e cuntutu, cuntutu e cantu,
pi' nun perdi lu cuntutu.*

to stand up against the violations exerted by the mafia on one side and by the state on the other.

She was touring with the performance *I Mafiusi di la Vicaria*, when she suffered a stroke and died in Palermo on the 20th of September 1990.

Artistically, Rosa was born at the moment of decline of the *cantastorie*. She had of necessity to become something else, with respect to the tradition. She was a *cantastorie* in terms of the themes she treated and for the social function that accompanies the poetic-narrative role of a

Sicily has a master,
a master who is always the same
that keeps her hanging from a cross
and sings her funeral.
Sicily has a government,
a government called Italian
with the gallows by its side
and the rope in its hands.

*La Sicilia havi un patruni,
un patruni sempri uguali
ca la teni misa' ncruci
e ci canta u funirali.
La Sicilia havi 'n governu,
un governu' taliano
cu la furca a lu capizzu
e la corda' nta li manu.*

Sicilian storyteller, but she was able to move into her own time, fully embracing the possibilities offered by music and by the years in which the cultural operation of the national left-wing political movement discovered an art which belonged to the people. The fact that she was a woman took the tradition in other directions: she was able to confront problems never discussed before, and she could introduce an intimacy in the themes that had never existed in the male tradition, a change that allowed her to dialogue with the women of her time. She was something else also in relation to the historical folk-singer fashion in the Italy of the 1970s. She never did anything to please, she did not study or change her way of singing with particular techniques. Her singing was internal, violent, vigorous yet gifted with delicate vibratos envied by professionals. Her interpretations had a dramatic impact on the listener.

Sicily is asleep,
fallen in a sleep of death
and she waits while dreaming
for her fate to change.
But fate is not a gift from heaven,
it is not a mercy from the saints.
We have to win it by force
in the streets and march ahead!

*La Sicilia è addummisciuta,
cu un sonnu di li morti
ed aspetta mentri dormi
chi canciassi la so' sorti.
Ma la sorti nun è ostia,
Nun è grazia di li santi.
Si cunquista cu la forza
'nta li chiazzi e si va 'vanti!*

In my search for Rosa, I have gathered her different music pieces on the way. I have talked of her with the *cantastorie* Nino Racco, with whom I collaborate; with Otello Profazio, who contributed to her fame working with her on her first album *Amuri tu lu sai 'sta vita è amara*; with the composer Gianni Belfiore, co-author of the songs of Rosa's last album *Amuri senza Amuri*.

I have driven for hours in Calabria, Sicily, Rome, listening to the songs that I heard during my childhood and others, impossible to find, that Enrico Ansaldi has collected for me.

I return to Scilla, the village where I live, and I discover that her songs have left me feeling that I have listened to living, throbbing, familiar characters. I write the dramaturgy and a brief text around her real one: sixteen meaningful songs that today seem to speak for the majority of the exploited and hungry people in the world, and at the same time tell me of my land which is in the hand of other masters.

In Florence I met Luca, the grandson she adopted from an orphanage when he was just three months old and who has always lived with her. I asked him to take me to her.

To find Rosa we must walk a little way along a tidy and silent hillside that gathers faces and flowers, writings and paths, from marble chapels down to wooden crosses in the earth. Luca

shows me her grave: she wanted to be buried in the same city where she had brought all her family, whose life was marked by tragedy until the end.

I recognise the smile in the photograph, and the theatre of Gibellina behind her grey hair. We leave our flowers for her: Luca's rose and my five gerberas - one for me and for each of the characters that she has bestowed upon me. Big, red flowers for the Rose of Sicily.

When I die,
sing my songs.
Do not forget them,
sing them for the others.
When I die
think of me, sometimes
as for this crucified land,
I have died without voice.

When I die,
don't let me die,
but remember
your Rosa.
When I die,
bring me a flower,
a flower big and red
like the blood that we shed.

*Quannu iu moru
cantati li me canti.
Nun li scurdati,
cantatili pi' l'antri.
Quannu iu moru,
pinsatimi ogni tantu,
ca pi' 'stà terra 'ncruci,
murivu senza vuci.*

*Quannu iu moru,
faciti ca nun moru,
ma ricordativi
di la vostra Rosa.
Quannu iu moru
portatimillu' n ciuri,
un ciuri ranni e russu
comu lu sancu persu.*

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