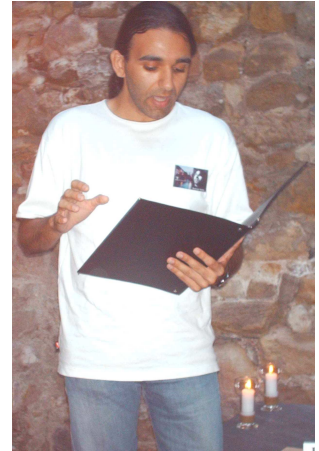


WRITING BY THE SEA

Adrian Grima talks to the young Maltese poet Roderick Mallia

“I have lived by the sea for as long as I can remember and thus it is only natural that I make full use of that kind of imagery. For me the sea is the closest one can get to a perfect metaphor. It has different moods and characters, and so much depth and mystery.”

I ask Roderick Mallia about how he reads his poems in public. “I did not make use of sounds and any other visual aids during my readings; however, I am very keen to do so in order to give a new dimension to my works. Poetry recital should be one fulfilling experience and I believe that for this to happen one must make full use of the senses. I therefore look forward to using sounds and music as well as other visual props such as slides to accomplish this. Seeing or rather, experiencing, a lot of visual poetry in Lodève in 2006 definitely affected my ideas regarding the mode of delivery. I usually favour a lot of rhythm and sounds in my poetry and my guess is that by using music I might actually accentuate them – so that is what I’m working on at the moment.



Roderick Mallia in Lodève

And what about his influences? “Maltese contemporary literature is a great inspiration. I am particularly fond of the works of Simone Inguanez, Norbert Bugeja and Immanuel Mifsud, and other writers within Inizjamed who I wish to commend for the great service they are doing to Maltese literature both on a local and on an international level.”

So when he read at the the ninth edition of the *Voix de la Méditerranée* poetry festival in Lodève (22-30 July), was did his poetry represent a particular generation? “My poetry was first and foremost representing me and the way I interact with my surroundings. I don’t like to see myself as being some sort of spokesperson for a generation, a nation or a culture. I think that most of my poetry is far too personal to be considered representative of something wider. I write because I feel the urge to do so and as such, my writing reflects the world I see when I look into myself. I write because I want to explore the world within myself, and I use the outer world to mirror the one within.”

Poets Narrate the World

This experience of poetry seems to both agree and contrast with what the Lodève festival director, Maïthé Vallès-Bled, writes about poetry. She believes that poets narrate the world, not the world as a shopwindow but the real world of hate and love, of violence and tenderness, of rejection and tolerance. They narrate the world that humans have made, a world in which only humans are essential. They say the things that we are taught never to express, the thoughts and emotions that remain buried, ignored, in the intimate and sensitive corners of our being. Roderick Mallia talks about poetry that explores an inner world through the outer world, while Vallès-Bled suggests that our narration of the (outer) world is inevitably filtered through our inner worlds.

“This is the word,” writes the festival director, “that the poets invite us to, the word that we who goes to their readings hear as our own. We get the impression of a secret familiarity, a closeness, when we recognize the words that we ourselves have never articulated. It’s as if the poet’s word drags from the

bottom of our ignored memories a joy, an anger, a hope, a faith, a fear that no one, despite everything, has ever forgotten.”

Lodève is a medieval town in southern France. With a population of about 7,000 people, Lodève lies where the plains rise up to the Larzac plateau, 54km from Montpellier, in the valley of the Lergue river. It is surrounded by green hills and vineyards and lies only 8km from the large man-made Lake Salagou.



The audience on the river bank

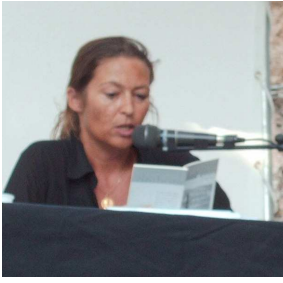
“At the Lodève festival I was particularly impressed by the organization and the genuine interest of the local community. Back in Malta the number of people that attend literary events can be heartening. In Lodève, the people come over to you and talk over a coffee. They’re keen to learn about you and what you do. That is something most of us will never quite experience here in Malta. Moreover, the fact that so many people from all over the Mediterranean meet to make their voice heard and share their thoughts was quite a feat in itself.

I also enjoyed the sessions which involved an mixture of music and the spoken word. I think that poetry should not be seen as an artistic entity on its own. The marriage with other forms of art should be encouraged since this can add more depth and enrich the poetry itself, as well as helping to reach a wider audience.

So this festival serves both as an opportunity for literatures and literary works from Mediterranean countries to meet and as a fertile womb for new literature to be conceived. Each one of us was exposed to a myriad of styles and themes, and I am more than convinced that most of us left Lodève with a baggage full of ideas, not to mention contacts and proposals for publications and translations.”

I immediately think of Norbert Bugeja’s beautiful poem “Ballata għal Poetessa b’Xuxtha Hamra” (Ballad for a Red-Haired poetess), dedicated to the Israeli poet Tal Nitzan and written in Lodève in 2005, the year before, one of the gems in his first collection of poetry which should be out soon.

“When you are exposed in such a way to all these opportunities, it is inevitable for these things to happen; which of course is the whole point of it all. This festival has done a lot to help people appreciate what is being written in different countries and how the world today is moulding contemporary literature.”



Agnès Olive

In the 2006 edition, some 90 poets from all over the Mediterranean took part in this festival. Mallia has kept in touch with a good number of them and has exchanged works with some of them. He was particularly impressed by the work of the young Bosnian poet Adisa Bašić who writes very deep poetry. Israeli poet Lyor Sternberg also writes some very interesting poetry. “I particularly liked the sensual verses of Agnès Olive from France, as well as the works of Alexandre Issaris from Greece and the thought-provoking Giuseppe Napolitano, whose work I am currently translating to Maltese.”

I ask Roderick Mallia where he stands on issues of life and death, of justice and injustice that may seem so distant from poetry. “I do not think that these issues are distant from poetry.” He immediately thinks of Adisa Bašić’s work. “What is almost certain is that poets who have themselves experienced and lived through atrocities tend to express them in their work. So maybe the ‘absence’ of these themes from poetry might be due to the fact that many of us have not experienced them first hand.”

This leads us on to an old issue in art, one which the character of Pablo Neruda raises in Robert Radford and Massimo Troisi’s film *Il Postino* when the Mario Ruoppolo the postman asks him to write a poem about a woman Neruda has never met. “Let’s face it,” says Mallia. “How can I ever write about something I have never experienced myself? How ethical is it to talk about things I don’t know of? Am I morally obliged to do so? What’s certain is that this dilemma always stands between me and the paper when I try to tackle such sensitive subjects.”

Is this world worth writing about? “In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote, ‘There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.’ I believe that anything in the world is worth writing about and that we should leave no stone unturned in the process.”



Giuseppe Napolitano (Italy)

So I home in on the Mediterranean? Is it just a cultural construct created by romantics or tourist industry? “If we have to view the Mediterranean as it is, one can clearly see that it does not embody a common identity. Its members, who span from Southern Europe to the Middle East to North Africa, do not share a cultural tradition, language, religion, policy or a history of unity. Most probably, the only thing that binds these countries is in fact, geography, climate and a number of stereotypes taking the form of loud people running along bazaar-filled streets eating bread soaked in olive oil and drinking home-made red wine (when they’re not having their afternoon siesta, that is).”

The Mediterranean Sea can be viewed as the common denominator of all people living by its waters. Yet I cannot deny the fact that I feel some sort of bond with the other Mediterranean people.”

How interested are the Maltese in ‘the Mediterranean’? “My guess is that the majority of the Maltese population do not really care about being Mediterranean. In a survey held in the mid-1990s, only 2% of the Maltese identified themselves with the Mediterranean. Perhaps because a “Mediterranean culture” *per se* does not exist; it is not a tangible fact.

I view the Mediterranean as a colourful mosaic made up of a lot of cultures living in a confined region and in close proximity; each different but forming part of something bigger, whatever that might be.

Reading Poetry in Maltese

“When you read poetry in Maltese foreign audiences are inevitably fascinated by the sounds and rhythms of the language. Being the only official EU language with a Semitic origin, Maltese manages to arouse the curiosity of many. I found it quite amusing to see the audience trying to find similarities between Maltese and the closely-related Arabic and Italian languages. On more than one occasion I was asked for encores, simply for the audience to keep hearing the musicality of the language. I was positively amused to see such interest in a language that back home, is taken for granted and more often than not put aside to make way for a ‘colonial language.’

Although the situation of the Maltese language has improved over the last few years, it still leaves a lot to be desired. Most would agree that even though Maltese is an official language of the EU, it is still not being taken seriously enough. The Maltese themselves seem to shun the language and question its practicality. Some see it as being an unnecessary burden because after all what is the use of a language spoken only by a few hundred thousand people? The problem I see with Maltese is that we are not being pro-active enough and that we are slow in anticipating change. There is a tendency to adopt foreign words and ideas rather than create new ones, and, in my opinion, this is why the language is slowly deteriorating.

Obviously enough, much of the interest in the language is due to its ‘exotic nature.’ Discussions sometimes continued well after the allotted time and often ended up being almost history lessons. I got the impression that most people I talked to were genuinely keen to learn more about Maltese literature and of course to read more. I was also struck by the fact that some people remembered the Maltese poets who took part in previous editions of the festival.

Maltese writers know what it feels like to be bombarded with questions about the promotion and translation of Maltese literature. It is very frustrating to see that audiences abroad want to know more about Maltese literature and that there is so little we can offer them by way of translations. When one compares the exposure of the Maltese language to that of other small European languages, it is immediately apparent that the difference is abysmal. It is embarrassing to be confronted with questions about the promotion of Maltese literature, because as yet, next to nothing is being done.



Liana Sakelliou and Alexandre Issaris, Roderick Mallia

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