

US/ITALIA Weekly
May 14, 2006, p. 1 and p. 4

US Italia Publishing Corporation

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An Encounter with Writer Dacia Maraini

A Trailblazing Role Model

by Maria Luise Caputo-Mayr

With her sophisticated appearance and her fine chiseled features, Dacia Maraini is a joy to see on any occasion, a pleasure for any organizer. She has been to New York a number of times, but to hear her again, of course, is much more: It means to be in the presence of a phenomenon of Italian literature and culture of the past half-century. The event at CUNY was co-sponsored by The Graduate Center, CUNY, Jane House Productions, and the Italian Cultural Institute. And upon seeing her again and talking to her, I remembered a memorable evening at 10 or more years ago when the America-Italy Society co-sponsored one of her readings at the Italian Cultural Institute

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Among the best known Italian present-day writers, she also contributed to changing post-War Italian theater, influenced by the experimental “Living Theater” of Judith Malina (present for the occasion, together with Hanon Reznikov). She co-founded the Teatro del Porcospino in the 1960s, the feminist theater La Maddalena in Rome in 1973, and inspired women to try their hand in so far male-dominated professions as film/stage directors, lighters, costume designers, scriptwriters. It was the playwright Maraini who was highlighted during the event, introduced by Jane House with film and video clips from her plays, accompanied by Southern Italian-inspired music.

A look at her website www.dacia-maraini.it in five languages shows her quality of reaching out to others, a hallmark of her career, and presents her works that span prose (a dozen or so novels, among them “La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria, Bagheria” (1993) and “Colomba” (2004), short stories, essays), plays (40 so far), poetry and films and others. Her works are being translated into many languages; performances of her plays take place from Vienna to Tokyo.

The excerpts in English translation read from her plays “Camille” (1995), “Mary Stuart” (1980) and “Notarbartolo. A Just Man” (2006, still in progress, she says) by actors from the Actors Equity Association, gave a sensitive and skillful rendition of Maraini’s personal interpretation of literary and historical facts and events and also

illuminated the leading thought of her work: the defense of justice, the law and the weak that have suffered injustice. Particularly impressive were the performances by the fine group of actors, by Monica West and Kathy Lee Hart as young Camille and her mother in an episode of violent mother-daughter controversy about what is best for a young woman. Camille, in real life herself a gifted sculptor and Auguste Rodin's companion, will end up in an insane asylum. The Italian actress Silvia Giampaola added an original Italian excerpt of Camille, addressing Rodin, which brought out the fine musical qualities of the language in play. Further, by Judith Malina's interpretation of a raucous Queen Elizabeth ("Mary Stuart"), denouncing societal impositions on women. And by Oliver Henzler [Hanon Reznikov—Oliver played Leopoldo, his son] and Shawn Elliott who gave both a convincing portrait, of "L'uomo giusto," Leopoldo [Emanuele] Notarbartolo, and the shady Palizzolo, at the opposite poles of law and justice within a circle of corrupt hospital employees. Palizzolo, hired a murderer and has Leopoldo [Emanuele] killed ultimately because the latter believed in the application of the law. The dialogues between Palizzolo and his mother parodied a Southern Italian mother-son relation, a fine example of Maraini's social satire. The English translations managed well to transfer the power and style of her original language.

Despite her international childhood, her English, Sicilian and South American ancestry ("I am a great mixture," she joked) and a two-year experience in a Japanese war internment camp as a child, she assured us she still feels to be a great part Sicilian. Her affinity with this region shows in some of her best literary creations.

In the Q&A session following the performance, Maraini discussed her notion of history: "History gives a unique distance from the past.. .A distance between you and the past... and transforms things poetically, they.. .become a metaphor for the present, or become linked to problems that still exist in other countries..."

About the relevance of "Notarbartolo" for the present Italian situation she explained:

"It [the play] is so *actual*, so much related to power and Mafia.. . You have gangsters and criminality in every society. But when criminality is linked with power, or political parties, then it's terrible. Leopoldo [Emanuele] Notarbartolo is a historic figure of late 19th-century Palermo. He was a traditional person, stood for family and justice. He stood up against corruption. He wanted to apply the law, but he was considered a 'revolutionary' by the Mafia. So the 'uomo giusto' became a victim, stabbed to death. This is the first reading of my play. It will be produced in Sicily this year. Italians don't know much about him, although a street in Palermo was named after him. I see similarities with the Borsellino-case. He also was a traditional man who believed in the law. It is important to see strong examples of people who can be just. A book on Notarbartolo, written by his son, that is out of print, I had difficulty getting it, it gave me a lot of inspiration and material for my play. Thanks for presenting my unfinished play..."

The scenes presented from "Notarbartolo" depicted the corruption in a large Palermitan city hospital in the late 19th century where medical and food provisions disappeared without trace and Notarbartolo hit upon a wall of silence on the side of his personnel. Other scenes show the accommodating nature of Palizzolo, the perpetrator of the murder, and his mother. A question about the translation of her works elicited the following considerations:

“There should be a lot more money for translations in Italy. Some aspects of the original texts (such as the musicality of the Italian language) are lost in translation, but other elements are often added in the new language. There are so many things that go into a play or a novel, research, psychology... thoughts and ideas move with language, for me writing is ‘musical work.’ The performances in other countries create a dialogue, a link with other cultures. In Japan, ‘Maria Stuart’ was performed by traditional Kabuki actors.. .a play on English history, written by an Italian woman...the voices and gestures surprised me. I like working with others, I love the theater. While writing a novel is a solitary task where you need silence and isolation, the theater confronts you with others: The company, the directors, the relation with the actors is important, there are also fights, and you learn from that. In a play, everything becomes present, it has to do also with the relation of beauty and pleasure, but also with the rights of the majority and the minorities.. .the question of moral and power...the analysis of power (life, sex, gender, political life)...has to do with society.. .with political intrigue. In Paris, I changed something in a play because the actress could not perform it as it was in the text.. .the delicate chemistry, every play is different...”

She drew a comparison between her work and Bertolucci’s films, adding that she has particular insight into the role of women. In Italy, she usually works with a theater company, is available and also speaks her mind, some plays change with the theater group that performs them. Upon my question when her commitment to feminism started, she said : “I was always a feminist, from the very beginning of my career...”

Where do you find your material?

“I find many topics around me...”

Indeed, in a way Maraini is constantly rewriting literary themes, plots and stories of events of the past and present, giving them new meaning.

And Alberto Moravia?

“A great model of culture and civility for me.. .I learned a lot from him.”

And the political future of Italy?

“I am optimistic about its future, not about men, but about the force of the country. The last election gives me hope.”

Maria Luise Caputo-Mayr, Professor Emerita of Temple University, reviews Italian books for several literary journals. She is the editor of the Journal of the Kafka Society of America.