

"Le Conversazioni 2010: a Symposium on Human Rights in Beautiful Capri"

Benedetta Grasso (May 17, 2010)



Antonio Monda presented @ Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò (NYU) the 2010 edition of "Le Conversazioni", a literary festival held in Capri, now at its 5th edition, happening this summer from June 25 to July 4 2010.

The best intellectual exchanges among writers, philosophers, politicians and artists are often triggered by the simplest, most personal, conversations. Lectures, academic treatises or books can enhance and spread their ideas, but - much like true friendship - it's the back and forth between two people, the way a topic shifts if challenged immediately in a lively chat, in a real "live" symposium, that often brings out the deepest thoughts.

In ancient times a symposium was also very closely associated to pleasure: the pleasures of each



other's company, in friendship or in a relationship, the pleasures of food and wine, the pleasures of the aesthetic beauty of a landscape or something artistic.

Five years ago the journalist and NYU professor Antonio Monda and Davide Azzolini managed to create an event that embodies this "ancient" spirit and delivers fresh, original "conversations" among intellectuals that are all linked together by a common theme, juxtapose ideas and people or connect them through the various days and events. This event is indeed called "[Le Conversazioni](#) [2]" and is held in Capri, the Italian island that is a synonym of the pleasures described above. One summer day in Capri equals delicious food, tasty wine, relaxed and tan people coming together with their friends and families, and breathtaking landscapes over the shimmery light-blue water.

Each edition has brought together famous names from the Anglo-American (and particularly New York) literary scene as well as famous Italian writers. While in New York Antonio Monda is officiously famous among the artistic intelligentsia of both continents for making the Upper West Side more "Italian" through his Sunday brunches attended by writers, film directors and actors, during the summer it is Capri, already chosen by Americans as a tourist destination, which becomes a small "big apple", where people from all over the world grab their cup of coffee to rush to the latest cultural event while at the same time relaxing and sunbathing.

Every night for two weekends between June and July, in front of two natural "skyscrapers", the gorgeous Faraglioni, majestic rocks that emerge from the sea, this festival finds a theme to discuss and develop through the various nights. Last year, in 2009, the topic was the Seven Deadly Sins, seen in various contexts: religious, secular, cultural, psychological or personal and ironic.

The documentary shown at [Casa italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [3] on May 4 2010, directed by Carlotta Corradi, linked together the conversations from last year that featured [Jay McInerney](#) [4], [Nathan Englander](#) [5], [Salman Rushdie](#) [6], [David Sedaris](#) [7], [Roberto Saviano](#) [8] and [Patti Smith](#) [9] and was dedicated to the memory of David Foster Wallace. Each "sin" was interpreted and discussed by a different participant. Patti Smith read a poem about Lust and sang "Because the Night", David Sedaris joked about the concept of greed, Roberto Saviano linked the concept of envy with a tragic political reality and his personal life, Salman Rushdie challenged the notion itself of sin while beautifully depicting sloth in his writing and Antonio Monda coordinated the discussions often offering quotes from books, movies and religious texts to give talking points to the authors.

The documentary recaptured the most interesting moments of last year's festival, ultimately blending different conversations into one fluid symposium that entertained the audience and was very easy to follow even for those who weren't present in Capri.

At Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò and at the [Morgan Library](#) [10] a few days later Antonio Monda and Davide Azzolini presented in New York City the 2010 edition of "Le Conversazioni" which will start on June 25 and continue through July 4 (in Capri) and will focus on the topic of liberty and human rights.

The theme of liberty and freedom in literature and philosophy is a crucial one but its implications in the social-political world expand far beyond art and imagination. Those who touch on these topics have an actual effect on the reality around them. The [Marilena Ferrari-FMR Foundation](#) [11] and Dazzle Communications have teamed up together to support the event and work on a series of "conversations" revolving around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Antonio Monda introduced this year's topic with a brief speech, looking at the different contextualization of freedom and human rights. There is the importance of dignity and equality, a constant in every important democratic constitution nowadays; it will be interesting also to reflect on the core American values, such as the spirit of brotherhood and the celebration of liberty itself (given that the festival ends on the 4th of July) for example with E. L. Doctorow, a writer immersed in the social and political reality of the United States; the topic will allow the authors to reflect upon words of wisdom of the past and of the present. Great thinkers like Gandhi, Voltaire and many more have poignant aphorisms one could write entire books on. Antonio Monda, in his introduction, shared some interesting starting points for a symposium. Thucydides' idea that "the secret of happiness is



freedom, the secret of freedom is courage" or the famous quote from the gospels "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" or even the radical and provoking concept that humankind might be actually condemned to freedom. All these point of views are part of a framework that will guide the 2010 edition.

The participants, divided in two main week-ends (June 25-26-27 and July 2-3-4) will be: the novelist [E.L. Doctorow](#) [12], [Chimamanda Adichi](#) [13], the Nigerian winner of the 2007 Orange Prize and the 2009 International Prize for Half of a Yellow Sun, [Colson Whitehead](#) [14], candidate for the Pulitzer prize in 2001, [Joshua Ferris](#) [15] (Then we came to the end), [David Byrne](#) [16], leader of the band Talking Heads (writer, Bicycle diaries), [Adam Haslett](#) [17], young literary promise Paolo Giordano (La Solitudine dei Numeri Primi) and screenwriter Paolo Sorrentino.

In the case of the Seven Deadly Sins, the 2009 festival became a way to share some thoughts about the beauty of being human, appreciating the hedonistic aspects for life while maintaining an ethical and moral balance. The 2010 edition seems just as promising: a cultural occasion that is not about teaching but about sharing, that triggers imagination, human intellectual depth and personal enrichment, within a joyous and relaxing atmosphere, not an academic one.

The festival, held at the Hotel Punta Tragara, is free and every event is bilingual, attracting both Americans and Italians, tourists and aficionados, young and old.

In 2009 writer George Saunders said that in addition to the seven sins, there is an 8th one, the worst one, the one that must always be avoided: the absence of intellectual curiosity. One thing is sure: this 8th sin is the one which will absolutely be banned in Capri this summer.

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- [3] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>
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