

Maltese and 'Multese' verse

in Copenhagen, Mallorca, Berlin – and Valletta

Since presenting his latest book *Mużajk*, an exploration in multilingual verse (*Edizzjoni Skarta*, 2008) at the Leipzig book fair and Berlin Literaturwerkstatt last March with the support of the MCCA, over the past few months, Antoine Cassar was invited to perform his poetry at a number of literary festivals and events across western Europe. On Saturday 3rd October, Cassar will join fellow multilingual author Peter Wessel at the EU Representation in Valletta, in a joint musical and poetic performance to celebrate the European Day of Languages, as part of the *Notte Bianca - Lejl Imdawwal*.



Antoine Cassar at the Berlin Poetry Festival. © gezett.de

In mid-May, Cassar was invited to the *Københavns 4. Internationale Poesifestival*, organised by the Copenhagen Literaturhaus, a deconsecrated church converted into a literature centre with the support of the Danish Arts Council. With authors from countries as far as Bulgaria, Iraq and Mongolia, the festival consisted in a myriad of events stretching over three days, including readings from a horse-drawn carriage around the central squares of the city, a poetic homage to local author Kierkegaard at the Nørrebro cemetery, and poetry debates entitled *The Word Goes Around*, a stimulating experiment where four authors sit around a coffee table and discuss poetry for an hour, surrounded by an 'invisible' yet highly attentive audience. Two of the most popular events were a reading dedicated to love poetry, and a projection of poetry films, in which Cassar showed his two Maltese videopoems '*Ġomb*', a

violent description and lament of last December's bombardment of the people of Gaza (published last March in the anthology *Id-Dejmi Nieżel bhax-Xita*, Edizzjoni Skarta), and '*L-Ajkla*', on April's earthquake in the Abruzzo region, where Cassar lived in the winter of 1999/2000.

Cassar's main event at the Copenhagen festival was a ground-breaking reading dedicated to what was advertised as 'translingual poetry'. In 2004, three European poets, unbeknownst to one another, embarked upon three seemingly similar yet essentially different individual projects of multilingual verse. Five years and a number of awards later, these same poets – Peter Wessel (Denmark/Spain), Øyvind Rimbereid (Norway), and Cassar himself – were brought together in a common reading in Copenhagen, and were to meet again two months later in Berlin. Although the practice of writing poetry in a blend of tongues is by no means a novelty and has been taking place naturally for centuries, the fresh contagious interest in multilingual verse among cultural organisers and literary critics is a welcome development: by presenting the three different polyglot projects in a common context, the audience was invited to appreciate the poetry more for what it is (a literary expression of 'betweenness') and less for what it is not (as often occurs in generally monolingual readings, where the multilingual verse tends to stand out for its mysterious, exotic qualities). More importantly, the joint readings provided a dynamic framework in which to compare and contrast diverging forms of polyglot verse, each with its particular rhythms, modes and moods of manifestation, and varying attitudes to language and the use and abuse of translation. Whereas Cassar's *mużajki* or *mosaics* flit between the tongue-in-cheek, the cynical and even the violent, Rimbereid's multi-tongued poetry bridges existentialism with science-fiction, whilst Peter Wessel's *Polyfonías* loosely yet seamlessly weave together the four languages in which he was brought up (Danish, English, French and Spanish) not merely to make order out of an external chaos, but to transmit, at times with genuine hypnotism, a profound inner peace.

A few weeks after Copenhagen, Cassar took part in *Onzè*, the eleventh edition of the Mediterranean poetry festival of Palma de Mallorca, organised by local author and cultural activist Biel Mesquida. Among the invited poets were Giuseppe Conte, one of Italy's most renowned contemporary writers, and the acclaimed Slovenian author Brane Mozetič, whose poetry has been translated into Maltese by Adrian Grima. Events included readings in local bars, recordings and interviews, and performances at a local penitentiary centre and at the main city theatre. On this occasion, Cassar gave prominence to his poetry in Maltese, choosing to recite *Madrid Madrid*, a long alliterative poem playing on the consonant group M-D-R (*marid, imdardar, irmied...*), documenting the four exciting yet difficult years he spent in that city until soon after the March 2004 train bomb attacks in Atocha, where one of those to reach their final destination was his colleague Juan Pablo, with whom he often travelled to work.

In July, with the support of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, Cassar teamed up again with Peter Wessel and Øyvind Rimbereid for a second fully multilingual reading at

the Poesiefestival Berlin, one of the largest literary events in Europe. In an electric performance to a full house at the Akademie der Künste, aside from the sonnets contained in the book *Mużajk*, Cassar recited the English adaptation of a work entitled '*Merħba, a poem of hospitality*'. This poem is part of a new project weaving Maltese verse with words and expressions in a broader variety of languages –or as was termed almost accidentally by one of the festival organisers, 'Multese', a word which may move a little too much toward the macaronic, but which certainly sounds better than the scientific, too oftenly interchangeable designations as 'multilingual', 'translingual', 'polyglot' and others. Originally performed last April at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Brussels together with Miriam Galea and Loranne Vella, *Merħba* is a long narrative poem which celebrates the unfailing and unconditional hospitality and friendliness that welcome travellers the world over, despite the tragedies and conflicts lived by families and communities on a daily basis, and despite the shrinking of our planet at the hands of ruthless global commerce.



Mark Solborg, Peter Wessel and Salvador Vidal perform their *Polyfonias* at the Berlin Poetry Festival. © gezett.de

The English version of the *Merħba* poem has just been awarded the Grand Prize of the *United Planet Writing Contest 2009*. On Saturday 3rd October, Cassar will recite the poem in its original version, and for the first time in Malta, during the Valletta Notte Bianca-Lejl Imdawwal, in a joint performance with Peter Wessel as part of the celebrations of the European Day of Languages at the EU Representation in Triq San Pawl. Wessel will be accompanied by musicians Mark Solborg on the keyboard and guitar and Salvador Vidal on the clarinet.

For more information on Cassar's poetry, including audio recordings, videos and reviews, visit <http://muzajk.info>.

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