

Celebrating 10 Years of “Conversazioni”

Roberta Cutillo (May 08, 2015)



It has now been ten years since Antonio Monda and Davide Azzolini held the first edition of their literary festival “Le Conversazioni”, on the beautiful island of Capri. Since then the event has grown and now takes place in four different cities spanning over 3 continents. The festival takes the form of casual yet sophisticated discussions between notorious intellectual figures. We met with the organizers during their annual New York preview at NYU’s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Merimò and talked about the event’s inception and about what’s to be expected from the season’s NYC events at the Morgan Library, at the NY Historical Society, and at the Guggenheim.

Ten years after they held the first edition of “[Le Conversazioni](#)” [2] in Capri, [Antonio Monda](#) [3] and [Davide Azzolini](#) [4] are back in New York where they’ve been holding an edition of their literary event every year since 2008.



This literary festival has been growing each year since its inception. Antonio Monda tells us all about this process starting from how they came up with the idea for it in the first place. It came to them as all good ideas do, over dinner. He once had Azzolini and a series of other writers and intellectuals over at his Capri residency. As they were enjoying a long post-dinner discussion, Azzolini asked “why don’t we do this in public?”.

Monda promptly agreed, under the condition that they did so in the place he considers to be the most beautiful in the world: Capri. The idea was to recreate the same casual atmosphere and engaging in literary discussions all while allowing the public to listen in. And that’s what they did. The first edition of the festival was very low-key, featuring just one event with five guest speakers.

However, as Monda puts it, they were “small in number but had very big names”. These five guests were in fact [Jonathan Franzen](#) [5], [Zadie Smith](#) [6], [Nathan Englander](#) [7], [Jeffrey Eugenides](#) [8] and [David Foster Wallace](#) [9], who had never travelled to Europe for a festival before.

While the discussions remain limited in size in order to maintain a feeling of casualness and intimacy, the number of events have increased exponentially. Currently, “Le Conversazioni” are held in four different cities: Capri, Rome, New York and Bogotá, Columbia. Starting next year another city will add itself to the list: Cartagena de las Indias, also in Columbia.

Several events are held in each city. Capri will have six this year and the New York edition features three, all held at different prestigious locations. One of these took place at the [Morgan Library](#) [10], which incidentally is where Monda and Azzolini were first invited to recreate their event in New York back in 2008, on May 7th.

It featured composer and lyricist [Stephen Sondheim](#) [11] as well as author and professor [Joyce Carol Oates](#) [12].

The other New York events are to be held at the [New York Historical Society](#) [13] and at the [Guggenheim](#) [14]. Guests will include writer and commentator [Adam Gopnik](#) [15], New Yorker editor [David Remnick](#) [16] and author [Don DeLillo](#) [17].

Although the format remains the same, each talk is different and their focus shifts depending on the guests and the location. The New York edition usually focuses more on film and the film-literature relationship compared to the Capri talks. This year’s latest addition, the Bogotá edition, was born from an invitation to collaborate by the [International Book Fair of Bogotá](#) [18]. It too focused on the ongoing dialogue between film and literature, and was particularly interesting because it demonstrated the country’s determination to redefine itself by emphasizing its interest in culture.

As Monda reveals, the secret behind the international success of the “Conversazioni” is that they “communicate profound themes lightly”, something people everywhere are interested in. These events also speak to the desire to meet authors, to see who they really are, which he finds to be very common within contemporary society.

Hopefully the demand for events such as these will persist, allowing the “Conversazioni” to keep growing and expanding to further parts of the world. It certainly seems to be the case: with one more location adding itself to the list (i.e. Cartagena de las Indias), next year’s edition already looks promising. And those already looking forward to it will be glad to know that we got the inside scoop on what the theme will be: diversity.

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Links



- [1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/monda-pres1431120441.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.leconversazioni.it/>
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Monda
- [4] <https://irvapp.fbk.eu/people/profile/azzolini>
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Franzen
- [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zadie_Smith
- [7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_Englander
- [8] [http://Jeffrey Eugenides](http://Jeffrey_Eugenides)
- [9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Foster_Wallace
- [10] <http://www.themorgan.org/>
- [11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Sondheim
- [12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_Carol_Oates
- [13] <http://www.nyhistory.org/>
- [14] <http://www.guggenheim.org/>
- [15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Gopnik
- [16] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Remnick
- [17] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_DeLillo
- [18] <http://feriadellibro.com/>