

Claudio Angelini. Promoter of the Italian Culture

Letizia Airos Soria (November 04, 2007)



Angelini, writer, poet and journalist. At the height of his career he knew how to translate his lengthy experience as an able communicator to his new appointment as Direttore dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura in New York. After 4 years in Park Ave. Angelini leaves with a new book in print and a lot of new projects

It's the third time that Oggi7 visits Claudio Angelini in his Park Avenue office. We came to see him at the beginning of his term four years ago, to hear about his plans for the Istituto, and again two years later for a first assessment. This time we come here to say goodbye and to collect some reflections and opinions on a term that, even through difficult times, has seen this New York institution change tremendously.



Angelini, writer, poet (he debuted at a very young age thanks to Salvatore Quasimodo) and journalist, began working at RAI at the same time as Bruno Vespa, Nuccio Fava and Paolo Fraiese. At the height of his career he knew how to translate his lengthy experience as an able communicator to his new appointment as Director of the Istituto. In our first visit, his enthusiasm was apparent from the way he presented his program; the enthusiasm of a man strongly tied to Italian culture: organizer of literary prizes, curator of cultural programs and well-known news anchor as well as correspondent from the Quirinale. Two years later, when we met Angelini again, we found him still productive, but more aware of the difficulties, particularly the bureaucratic ones, that he's had to deal with. He couldn't accomplish all that he had planned and promised.

During his term he's had his share of criticism. In particular regarding some events he organized. Nevertheless, considering the means available to him, we must recognize how much this man has given to this institution he led. First of all the office on Park Avenue, which no longer has the decaying air it had four years ago. Of course the newly appointed director had dreamed of a renovation plan that was more ambitious, and would involve famous architects: "I tried to get some financing. There was a project with the Public Works Superintendency of Lazio. The basement was going to be turned into a theater with a concert hall...we got a lot less accomplished. We cleaned up the headquarters...we redid the lighting, created an art gallery, renovated the basement which now houses the offices of IACE and the Dante Alighieri...The attic is still left, where I would have liked to dig out another room...I now place my faith in my successor. You need 'papers', authorizations...it's not just a problem of funds."

In this third meeting we expected a final assessment from him, instead we realize that in some ways Angelini leaves an "open balance" - open to his successor, but also to the effort that he now intends to put forth directly in the world of Italian culture in the United States.

Affable as always he welcomes us into an understated yet well renovated office. On a table we notice his book translated into English: *The Mystery of Simonetta* (Guernica Editions). "It's the story of a woman in Florence during the 1400s at the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Simonetta is the woman painted by Botticelli in *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*. I recreated the setting of renaissance Florence and the character of this woman, who some thought was an angel, others a courtesan. But then why can't those two things go together? It was a biographical and ambient research that lasted some years. Piero Bargellini (remembered as the mayor of Florence during the flood) a great popularizer of the history of Florence, introduced me to Simonetta and I read some of her writings. The mystery surrounding her fascinated me. Officially she died of natural causes, but I discovered that the doctors that had visited her did not agree with this diagnosis. And so I created a real thriller around it. But I can't reveal now if I have her being murdered..."

The decision to translate it into English was made because of the cultural curiosity Americans have towards the Italian Renaissance: "I think it is a novel that appeals to them. Of course the translation - as is often the case - had its difficulties, but thanks to Marta King and the excellent editing of Michael Moore we succeeded."

The promotion of Italian culture in English and now the Italian language. Angelini will be the new president of New York's Dante Alighieri. As they say - another hot potato... "I have some clear ideas, but I have to go to Rome to discuss the funding," he says about it. In a recent article Magdi Allam spoke of the "suicide of Italian", caused by the few "pennies given to the Società Dante Alighieri (only 1.7 million euro, compared to the 300 million that the Goethe Institut receives from Germany)". In the *Corriere della Sera* he wrote: "it's ridiculous that we are shocked if the European Union and the United Nations declassify Italian".

On this subject Angelini's opinions are realistic: "Europe is hard terrain. There are cultural jealousies in all families. Italy has to set its sights on larger continents like Asia, China, and the two Americas. In



particular in the United States, where Italian is so loved. It has it is more widely studied that German or French. And it is third after English and Spanish. I'm not suggesting it's going to be second or first, but it should maintain its spot. The Dante Alighieri can help this by increasing the diffusion of the language. But it is necessary that the US offices coordinate with each other and there need to be funds to boost the courses. I also want to create an arrangement and work with IACE (Italian American Committee on Education). And I would like to use Italian writers, maybe with the help of the Istituto di Cultura, to hold special Italian lessons. Italian courses give back. Of course there needs to be some initial funding. A sum of about...60, 70 thousand dollars.

Along with that, Angelini will return to RAI as a journalist. He has always said with pride how he organized the Istituto di Cultura as a newsroom. "I nominated "managing editors" of sorts. Actually I wouldn't want them to sue the journalist order...one for art and cinema (Amelia Carpenito Antonucci), one for literary events (Renata Sperandio) and one for music and theater (Silvia Giampaola). I leave a great Istituto among women, like New York itself, a city fascinated by Italian culture. It doesn't just love the Florentine renaissance, but also our way of life, our music, our new cinema...there is fertile ground, we just opened it up. But I have to say one thing, when I was a director at RAI I had an administrative executive follow me all the time... in the Istituti there should be an analogous figure that reports to the director. I know that in the so-called Baccini reform it was proposed...As far as administrative and bureaucratic matters I think the Istituti have to further themselves more from the consulates. I say it even though I personally was lucky to find the two consul generals I worked with."

The funds that should have arrived thanks to an elusive "targeted legislation" never arrived. The Istituto still managed to have its renaissance. "Yes, those funds were diverted who knows where...I think it's the one thing that really upset me. But in the meanwhile beyond working with our own resources to renovate we intensified our collaboration and the synergy with other centers of Italian culture. The Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, the Italian Academy at Columbia University, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at CUNY, since Anthony Tamburri took over. The mission of the Istituto di Cultura is also that of sorting, involving, spreading the culture and in the second half of my term I think we accomplished this. We worked with museums, universities, American organizations. I already prepared some events for the future...I'm not leaving a void. I am happy with the nomination of my successor. Renato Miracco has already collaborated with the Istituto, and there are events that we organized together to maintain continuity."

So, more projects. Good luck then, Director...

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