

New York: an Apple or a Beast?

Marina Melchionda (December 09, 2009)



On Dec. 7 the Italian Journalist and Photographer Michele Molinari presented his book *Nella pancia della bestia* (In the Belly of the Beast) at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò. What is life like in NY? How did it change him? Why did he decide to go away? Find all the answers in this book, a disenchanted and often ironic recount of his experience in the Big Apple, where he lived for eight years before moving to Buenos Aires

"Continuare a vivere nello stesso appartamento con l'ex di turno perchè nessuno dei due si può permettere di pagare l'affitto di un appartamento da solo" - Living in the same apartment with your ex because none of you two can afford to pay the whole rent (From "168 ways to be a Newyorker" in "*Nella Pancia della Bestia*", p. 142)



New York: An Apple to taste bite after bite, or a beast that divorces you? It can be both, and it's up to you to realize it. On December 7th the Italian journalist and photographer Michele Molinari presented his newly released book "Nella pancia della bestia" (In the Belly of the Beast) at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, NYC.

Michele has spent 8 years, a fifth of his life, in the Big Apple, before moving to Buenos Aires. A dream brought him here and he went away by his own will, in search of something else: the vital necessities this city could not fulfill.

In the intimate and elegant library at the second floor of the Casa, he recounted some of the most significant moments of his life in the city, answering the questions of Grazia d'Annunzio, a journalist for Vogue Italia, and those of the Italian and American public attending. He introduced the book as a recount of 12 months of experiences in New York City, a sort of journal where he collected the most ironic, significant, and challenging moments of his life here. We found the book to be an excellent "guide" for all those (Italians and non) who are planning to visit or live in New York. It is also a good source of reflection for those who are already here.

As he recounts in the book, Michele moved to the US in his early 30s, and rented an apartment in Hell's Kitchen, which at that time was a very seedy area. "It was the only neighborhood below 110th street where I could afford a whole apartment. I love walking, and I thought it was perfect since it allowed me to get to the Village by foot". There he learned the first "rules of survival" that the city imposes on you. We all felt very close to him when he talked about his everyday battles against cockroaches and rats, both inside and outside his apartment! "I can't forget the morning when I opened the fridge and found a cockroach sunk in the coffee remaining from the day before". For an Italian, it's also hard to get used to tropical temperatures inside, when outside the thermometer indicates below zero. "As soon as I woke up I opened the window and gasped for some fresh air. It was in that moments that I realized how much I wanted to live in New York!"

These and other episodes of the kind characterized his everyday life in New York, but he also learned to accept these "challenges" and decided to live here for much more than he had initially planned. He moved to Park Slope in Brooklyn in search of a "community to which to belong": "In Manhattan I felt alone among millions of people. On the third day I lived in Brooklyn, instead, the attendants at the café around the corner already recognized me: when they brought my "usual" cappuccino with brioche to my table without me even having to ask, I felt...happy. Something like that could never happen in Manhattan".

Sensations, feelings, both positive and negative. Everyday challenges and discoveries, surprises and disappointments: the book is a collection of episodes of this kind. It's both a physical and psychological journey, the recount of an "immigrant" who finally became a New Yorker. "The moment in which I felt a citizen of New York for the first time? Well, when I finally understood the announcements in the subway. For the longest time I had never been able to decipher what those cawing old megaphones were saying. When I finally did, I was thrilled!"

Landing at JFK and knowing exactly where to go and who to call, leaving at "the New York minute", planning a pizza with friends a month before to be sure that everybody was available, having visitors from Italy and knowing where to take them and avoid "the classical tourist sites", were all things that made him feel like a citizen of New York.

But Michele did not feel to belong to this city, and went away. It was eight years after the day he first arrived and was immersed in the "belly of the beast": "Although living in Park Slope did help me a lot, I still didn't feel to have enough 'human contact' with those surrounding me. It happens that New York is a city that doesn't allow you to rest. All things different from those that can help you in the pursuit of your dreams become secondary and lateral. There is no time to make friendships, and all the people you know remain mere 'contacts' on which you can count...or not".

We felt we needed to know more about his final decision to go away, and asked him more questions after the meeting:



Why did you decide to move to Buenos Aires?

I love the kind of life people carry on there. It is almost like living in Southern Italy! If you walk around your neighborhood, people wave at you and invite you inside. They show they care about you in every way.

Do you miss New York?

Well, I must admit that I do miss some things that I saw and lived in New York and never found anywhere else. Like the incredible respect for the environment, the parks, the organization that completely lacks in Buenos Aires. For a long time I kept living in the "New York minute" and I got used to the "chaos"

In which area would you live if you wanted to come back?

I would go to Park Slope again. For sure; it's the only place I could imagine living in New York, and that I miss the most.

Are you planning to write something about your experience in Buenos Aires?

Yes, that is actually one of my projects for the near future. I would like to recount the most significant experiences of my life in Buenos Aires accompanied by a typical recipe. I am also planning to have my book *Nella Pancia della Bestia* translated in English. Therefore, I am looking for a translator that knows both Italian and New York slang.

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