



Alessandro Renda as the General in 'Noise in the Waters'

Theatre Gigante Presents 'Noise in the Waters'

*An Italian dramatization of Europe's
refugee crisis* :: BY JOHN SCHNEIDER

When Theatre Gigante directors Isabelle Kralj and Mark Anderson decided to open their company's 28th season on Oct. 1-4 with Marco Martinelli's *Rumore di Acque* (*Noise in the Waters*), they had no idea that its subject, the catastrophic refugee crisis in Europe, would so occupy the world's attention. "We never dreamt it would reach such proportions," Kralj said. "When we scheduled it, it wasn't in the news. It had been going on for 15 years but we never heard about it. We knew it was an important issue and we should present it to our public."

Martinelli wrote and directed *Rumore di Acque* in 2010 for Teatro delle Albe, his theater company in Ravenna, Italy. He'd conducted interviews with refugees who'd survived the often-lethal voyage across the Mediterranean from Libya to the island of Lampedusa, Italy's southern-most point. The survivors made clear to him the reasons for their desperate journey, the trials they'd endured and the realities of their immediate plight. They told him stories of people who'd died on the journey. Martinelli cast Teatro delle Albe actor Alessandro Renda as "The General," a brutish, clownish Italian military officer beset with the task of cataloguing countless drowned refugees and assigning them histories. Renda performed the role in Italian accompanied by two musicians.

The production toured Europe. In 2013, it was invited to La MaMa in New York City, then to Montclair State University in New Jersey and Northwestern

University in Chicago where the play's English translator, Thomas Simpson, teaches Italian. Simpson is a longtime friend of Anderson and Kralj. He performed in Milwaukee in 2012 in Gigante's original play, *Our Town*. In 2013, he sent his translation of *Rumore di Acque* to the couple and invited them to see the show when it reached Chicago.

For the New York production, Simpson's translation was projected in supertitles. In Montclair, however, technical problems prevented that. Fortunately, Simpson was there to see the show. Martinelli and Renda instantly restaged it to include him as an onstage translator.

"Tom becomes a kind of witness," Anderson said. "He speaks his translation nearly simultaneously but sometimes they shift, Tom to Italian and Alessandro to English. Sometimes they speak to each other." That new two-man version is the one that Anderson

and Kralj saw in Chicago. They loved it. They knew they wanted Renda and Simpson to perform it in Milwaukee. They knew they couldn't also bring the two Italian musicians.

So Kralj invited another friend and Gigante collaborator, the accordionist/composer Guy Klucsevsek, to create a score. Klucsevsek is renowned for his work with such luminaries as Laurie Anderson, Ping Chong, film composer John Williams and many others including Milwaukee's Present Music. Klucsevsek also agreed to perform his music live. He and Renda worked via Internet. "It was an easy process," Kralj said. "Guy would say, how does this sound? Alessandro would say, I love it." Martinelli was also excited. Immediately following the Milwaukee run, *Rumore di Acque* will travel to Milan for performances using Klucsevsek's score.

I asked Kralj if Martinelli had rewritten his script to include aspects of today's drastically expanded crisis. "There's no need," she said. "It's written to bring heart to the issue. He talks about victims, he talks about their numbers and tells individual stories." Anderson agreed: "The oppressive regimes in Africa and the wars in Syria and Afghanistan, where so many refugees come from today, are different events but their impact is similar. In Eritrea, where the people Marco interviewed escaped from, young men are forced into the army for 20 years and used as slave labor." The government of Eritrea was named by Human Rights Watch as the most brutal in the world.

Eritrea lies in Africa across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Since the early 2000s, refugees have paid great sums to traffickers for passage through Libya to Lampedusa, only to be given unseaworthy boats. We've recently heard about dead bodies crammed in an abandoned truck in Hungary. Stories of those drowned in the Mediterranean are at least as horrific. There's no end in sight to this tragedy which is transforming Europe and for which the United States must share responsibility.

Theatre Gigante
Noise in the Waters
7:30 p.m.
Oct. 1 - Oct. 3
2 p.m., Oct. 4
Kenilworth
508 Theater

journey that the play details.

Kralj called the play "a beautiful bi-lingual tribute. No one will have trouble understanding it."

Performances are Thursday-Saturday, Oct. 1-3, at 7:30 p.m. and Sun, Oct. 4 at 2 p.m. following a 12:30 p.m. panel discussion, at the Kenilworth 508 Theater, 1925 E. Kenilworth, fifth floor. For tickets, call 414-961-6119 or visit theatregigante.org.

Renda will speak about these events to high school and college groups while he's in Milwaukee. Talk backs will follow the Oct. 2-3, performances. Before the 2 p.m. matinee on Sunday, Oct. 4, Theatre Gigante will host a 12:30 p.m. discussion in the theatre with Renda and Fessahaye Mebrahtu, the director of Milwaukee's Pan-African Community Association. An Eritrean, Mebrahtu aids survivors living in Milwaukee who made the very

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