

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Our journalist recently interviewed two leading figures in a London-based Italian/British theatre company

By Ellen Teague

FOR MORE than a decade Nadia Ostacchini and Penny Culliford have produced plays rooted in the Italian/British experience. Based in London, their work is a labour of love, with a constant struggle for funding and even having to adapt a play to perform as an audio down-

load during the Covid pandemic. However, even at this time, their dream of developing the *Tricolore Theatre Company* has continued. This is amidst Nadia's care of her elderly parents and secretarial 'bread and butter work' during the pandemic, and Penny's other job as a Chaplain for YMCA hostels and supporting families facing food poverty.

Tricolore Theatre Company

Nadia is a professionally trained actress, raised in London of Italian parentage. She is a fluent Italian speaker and has lived and worked in Treviso, Bologna, and Venice, where she was an interpreter and translator to an Arts Consultant at a Salvador Dali exhibition. Since graduating from the Academy Drama School in London in 2003, she has toured the UK, Slovenia and Italy. In 2005 she toured Italian theatres in a bilingual Italian/English production of *Hansel and Gretel*.

Nadia founded *Tricolore*, a professional theatre company, in 2008 after being frustrated about the lack of international theatre in London. Her drama tutor encouraged her to consider what she might offer that was different, and a friend offered to set up a website. The name *Tricolore*, Nadia explains, "can refer to an Italian antipasto, but it also means three colours and many flags have three colours." *Tricolore's* work has continued its broadly (though not exclusively) Italian theme, celebrating the work of Italian poets and playwrights, and offering bilingual (English and Italian) productions for both children and adults. Nadia speaks French too, and so diversity in performance can be extended further.

Penny is a playwright and author, with a background in education and teaching. She has been in-

Un Bambino di Nome (A Boy Called) Porro by Penny Culliford, with Nadia Ostacchini as a Dormouse (bottom left)

Photo: courtesy of Paddy Gormley



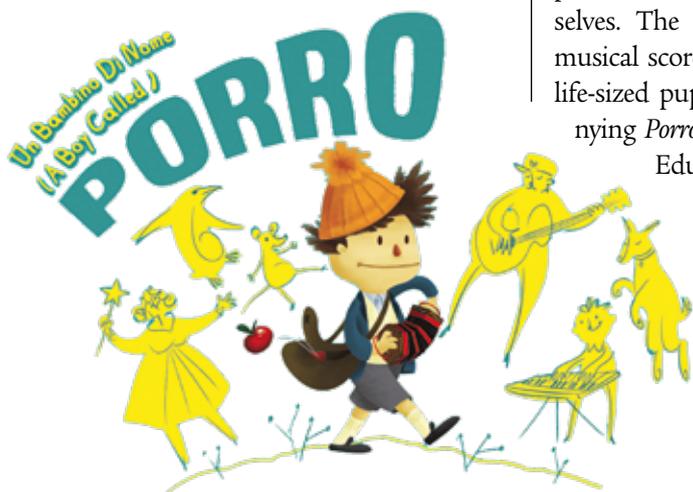
La Catena d'Oro (The Golden Chain)
by Penny Culliford, with Nadia Ostacchini
(in pink) as Colombina

involved with *Tricolore* for ten years and wrote the last five plays. Actors and staging crews are drawn in for specific plays and, as Nadia says, “we try to give opportunities to native Italian or bilingual speaking actors and have an international crew, for we like the dynamics of an international theatre company.” Nadia and Penny are concerned to work with and delegate to others so that all feel valued.

Catholic connections

Nadia subscribes to the *Messenger* and is very involved with St Peter’s Italian church in London. Both she and Penny are active members of the Catholic Association of Performing Arts (CaAPA). “We have done some charity performances for CaAPA, and one was in the Italian Church, which, with the adjoining club Casa Italiana San Vincenzo Pallotti – where we rehearse all our shows – are

A dual-language *Porro Storybook* will be published in 2022 (illustration by Dilara Arin); visit: www.tricolore.org.uk



Photos: courtesy of Paddy Gormley

like a second home to me,” says Nadia.

Plays may not be overtly Catholic, but Catholic values feature strongly. Penny says her bilingual play, *A Boy called Porro* (*Un Bambino di Nome Porro*), “represents every child who has never felt good enough.” Fables, parables and morality tales have been a way of teaching children for centuries, and this play, says Penny, “has three parables, recognisable to people with a Christian background for they are drawn from Scripture and offer a modern twist on *The Good Shepherd*, *The Good Samaritan*, and the *Parable of the Talents*”. She reflects that, “the story is of change and growth, about standing up to bullies, but loving enemies.” The play shows how self-worth can grow when opportunities to shine present themselves. The show has an original musical score, magical characters, a life-sized puppet, and an accompanying *Porro* storytelling book and Education Pack.

An early project in 2009 was *The Gingerbread Man*, based on a traditional children’s story. “I love kids and love teaching through theatre,”

says Nadia. “It’s a fun story with audience participation for young children,” Penny adds. Performance venues included The Italian Cultural Institute and The Cambridge Italian Club, as well as venues in Rome.

The Italian diaspora

Another play, *Saffron Hill*, was written by Penny to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of The Mazzini Garibaldi Club and the 150th Anniversary of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s visit to London in 1864.

It sold out for its production at The Pleasance Theatre, Islington, in 2015, which, Nadia says, has “a small, intimate theatre which is ideal for *Tricolore* productions”. Three scenes follow the lives and fortunes of several generations of a fictional Italian family in Saffron Hill, Clerkenwell, from the 1870s to the 1960s. In the early 19th century, this area of East London was a poor, densely-populated neighbourhood. By 1850 nearly 2000 Italian immigrants had settled there, chiefly employed as itinerant workers – street musicians, organ-grinders, street vendors or artisans producing plaster figures, picture-frames, looking-glasses, barometers and other scientific instruments. St Peter’s Italian Church opened amid

The Arts Corner

Saffron Hill by Penny Culliford;
the play commemorates
the 150th Anniversary of Giuseppe
Garibaldi's visit to London in 1864

great celebration on 16 April 1863. The play explores, through the eyes of the family, the issues, attitudes and music of the times. Although based around historical events, it offers the stories of personal lives, loves and losses of Italian immigrant families in this area.

The play also marked the 75th anniversary of the sinking of the *Arandora Star* on 2 July 1940 during World War II. This converted cruise ship was carrying around 1500 Italian, Austrian and German internees and 'enemy aliens' from Britain to Canada when it was torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland. Selection of Italians for deportation and the significant loss of life shocked the whole community and 'remembering' has not diminished in the years since. Actor Tom Conti, for example, said that his godfather, Gaetano Cibelli, a survivor, "spoke to me about it only once". Many Italians in the audiences had direct experience of the disaster in their collective memories. There are two plaques at London's Italian Church. One outside shows three drowning men reaching up to the cross from



Photo: courtesy of Islington Local History Centre

the waves, erected 20 years after the disaster. The second commemorative plaque was blessed on the 75th Anniversary of the tragedy in 2015 and stands at the back of the church.

Production plans

Despite pandemic restrictions on performances, Nadia and Penny are working on a new project, based around the famous clown, comedian, dancer and actor Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837). Born in London, he was a second-generation Italian. "He had a very interesting life and the one-person show was written with a specific actor in mind, but it was just as theatres closed in March 2020" said Penny; "so, I rewrote it as an audio play titled, *Grimaldi's Last Act* and details are available on the *Tricolore* website". Penny did extensive research and found that Charles Dickens was a huge fan. Nadia laughed about feeling a special connection to Grimaldi, "because we share the same birthday."

All the projects rely on sponsors. The Mazzini Garibaldi Charitable Foundation has been a generous sponsor and supporter. Giuseppe Mazzini founded the first Italian school in London in the 1840s. Yet,

Playwright and author Penny Culliford's other jobs are as a chaplain for YMCA hostels and as a helper for families facing food poverty

Nadia and Penny raise funds for other worthy causes too with CaAPA, such as Age UK and The Passage. "We try to unite the community through our projects," says Nadia.

Future projects

Nadia and Penny dream about a long weekend in Italy, if specifics can be worked out and crowdfunding obtained. *Tricolore* would like to perform their children's play *Porro* for children, such as children in hospital. This bilingual Christian play, says Nadia, "has parables hidden in it and it highlights important themes that children face nowadays." Four shows, a workshop and a Q&A session for children are being considered.

In London, they would like to organise another *Saffron Hill* production. "A three-week run would be great" says Nadia. And perhaps *The Golden Chain*, (*La Catena D'Oro*), "a bilingual' family show in the commedia dell'arte style." *Tricolore* remains ever dedicated to the promotion of international culture, literature and language.

Nadia and Penny are full of ideas and energy, which make me feel that *Tricolore* not only has a secure future, but that it will make a creative contribution towards community-building post pandemic. "We're very proud of what we've achieved," they say; "we stress the importance of storytelling and love telling stories." ♦