



CULTURE, EUROPE

# Ancient Greek theater in Italy's Syracuse gives new life to classics

Sicily's historic theater mixes tradition with contemporary arts, attracting a younger international audience and boosting the economy

Giada Zampano | 21.06.2023 - Update : 22.06.2023



## SYRACUSE, Italy

Steeped in history, an ancient Greek theater in Syracuse on the Italian island of Sicily is bringing new life to classic tragedies, from Aeschylus to Homer.

With productions aimed at an increasingly young and international audience, it is also providing a welcome boost to both the local and national economies.

For the new season running from mid-May through July 2, the National Institute of Ancient Drama (INDA) has four new shows – one more than usual.

Also, for the first time in the theater's 109-year history, the productions are being led by a woman superintendent, Valeria Told.

Told has joined forces with another woman, Marina Valensise, the managing director of the INDA Foundation since 2020.

“This year we are hoping to beat the record attendance reached in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, as box office bookings are already going very well,” Valensise told Analodu at INDA's offices in Syracuse.

“We keep renewing this miracle from year to year, thanks to the uniqueness of a city with incredible cultural roots. Here in Syracuse, you can hear people reel off Greek verses in bars, restaurants and open markets, where they discuss tragedies with the same expertise as real critics.”



The first Greek tragedy staged at this ancient amphitheater – one of the largest in Europe – was back in 1914. The auditorium is carved out of a hillside and can seat 5,000 people, with an imposing stage that is 27 meters (88 feet) wide and 44 meters (144 feet) deep.

Plays staged here have been forged by the words of the great tragedians of the past, and brought to life by the faces, voices and gestures of artists with indelible footprints in history.

World-famous Italian actors such as Vittorio Gassman, Valeria Moriconi and Giorgio Albertazzi have performed major roles on this stage, directed by stars such as Irene Papas, Luca Ronconi and Peter Stein.

Intellectuals of the likes of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Salvatore Quasimodo are among those who translated and rewrote the words of the Greek tragedians, bringing them to contemporaneity.

“Today, Syracuse doesn’t attract only experts, but also people discovering Greek theater and classic drama for the first time. It’s not a coincidence that 40% of our audience are youths,” Valensise said.

INDA is a solid organization with an annual budget of €8.5 million (\$9.2 million), 70% of which comes from box office revenues and donations, with only 30% provided by public and local funding.

### **Culture fuels economy**

Valensise said the theater is estimated to generate seven times its budget in terms of spending on hotels, restaurants, bars and the flourishing tourism business in the whole region, according to the local hoteliers’ association.

“Our productions are a striking example of how culture can also produce economic value,” she added.

As part of her new projects, superintendent Told wants to bet on co-productions with other theaters, pursuing wider cooperation with foreign artists and continent-wide tours for INDA’s productions.

“I’d like to take our productions all around Europe, attracting a more international audience,” Told said in an interview with Anadolu.

She said INDA now provides the theater’s non-Italian audience with audio translations and texts in English for a deeper understanding of the performances.

This season started with the powerful *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus and the acclaimed *Medea* of Euripides, before moving on to Aristophanes’ comedy *Peace* and a much-awaited contemporary show based on Homer’s *Ulysses*.

Ulysses: The Last Odyssey has been revisited by renowned artistic director Giuliano Peparini, who set the story in an airport where travelers get stuck for one night, refreshing the classic with a mix of theater, dance, circus and music.

More than 400 people represent the core of INDA's work, including craftsmen who create sets, costumes and scenography, and take care of the arena.

INDA also invests in a young generation of artists through the Academy of Art of Ancient Drama, which has students age five and up, and the International Festival of Young Classical Theater that hosts thousands of students from all over the globe every year.

"It's a real gift for me to be able to perform here, where I can enjoy the spectacle of 5,000 people watching me," said Deniz Ozdogan, the Italo-Turkish actor who hypnotized Syracuse's public on the opening night of the 2023 season.

Istanbul-born Ozdogan delivered an inspired performance as Io – the cursed lover of Zeus who, transformed into a cow, wanders the earth seeking salvation and helps to free Prometheus.

"All the great names who performed here are not a burden, but instead become your allies," she added, stressing how the past and future converge in this unique amphitheater.

"When I arrived here for the first time, I kneeled to the energy that has filled and continues to fill this magical place, paying homage to the wisdom that circulates among these stones and trees."

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