

# Clowns in the Mezzogiorno



## ~ Bill "Rigoletto" Waters

Bill Waters, a retired professor of Criminal Justice at Northern Michigan University, is not unknown to readers of this newsletter. A veteran of so many trips -- China Russia, Siberia, Mexico and Afghanistan, here he shares his experiences in Southern Italy with Ginevra *Gin Gin* Sanguigno

As long as I can remember I've been curious about that part of Italy known to some as the *Mezzogiorno* - the *Midday* which lies south of an arbitrary line around the Po River and divides the European, industrial north of Italy from the chronically poor, superstitious, Mediterranean south. In June of this year my curiosity was to be satisfied in the most delicious way by a magical nine day clown trip through the provinces of Calabria and Puglia and with stays in Naples, Otronto and Caulonia and Reggio Calabria. There were 18 of us from the US, Holland and Italy all led by the Pied "Pipress" of clowning herself, Ginevra "Gin Gin" Sanguigno from Milan. If you've seen the award-winning movie, "Life is Beautiful" with Roberto Benigno then you have some small idea of how this consummate clown artist behaves and looks. *Gin Gin* is a wiry, angular, lovely little ball of fire who hardly ever stops moving, puts a unique, creative spin on everything she sees and epitomizes that most important of clown characteristics, "being in the moment." Her spontaneous animation is nothing less than art in action.

We began our odyssey in the ancient, crowded, noisy city of Naples with its hordes of Vespa pa pa pa pas weaving in and out of choking traffic and its ubiquitous wash hanging from the thousands of balconies which overlook its narrow, cobblestone streets. Here we visited the AIDS ward in a huge prison and were the first clowns ever to be invited into this place. It was magical to

see emaciated and obviously very sick men laughing and cheering as clowns "let loose" frolicked unabashedly with them in the barred and guarded hallways. Also for the first time we "partied" through the morning with the patients and staff of a mental institution which housed handicapped, some quite severely, residents but many of whom were clearly released from their psychic and emotional bondage for a few hours by the music, dancing, balloons, bubbles and magic of clowns in an otherwise serious place. Some of these folks had recently been strapped or tied down in fetid conditions, but now thanks to government action after revelations of scandalous conditions, had been provided with this more humane residence. After traveling all day through miles of olive grove and grapevines to the East coast around Brindisi we stopped in an enchanting village called Otronto and a B&B right out of Conde Nast, our home for two delightful days.

All the food was traditional, home grown and prepared just for us as if we were long lost family. While here, we visited a children's hospital and a refugee camp. That the children and their parents and staff were soon all smiles and laughter behind their red foam noses was no surprise. But, to see a fence-encircled yard with burly grown men from Albania, Africa, Pakistan and elsewhere - refugees all - dancing, singing, "playing" with balloons and blowing bubbles was a sight to behold. "We're so bored, just sitting here, waiting" one of them said to me, "Thank you for coming here!" "No," I said, "Thank you for having us"! On our last day in this region, we were hosted by an artist who is restoring an old farmstead and converting it to a restaurant/hotel. Here we feasted in the gorgeous courtyard on roast lamb, pasta, eggplant, "funghi" (mushrooms) and regional wine and were treated to a magnificent evening under the stars of traditional folk singing and "Tarantella" dancing by several local artists who are trying to revive the almost lost music unique to this part of Italy.

In Reggio Calabria, where the temperature soared to over 100 degrees by 11 AM we visited a large cancer outpatient clinic where patients waiting for their infusions sat patiently -- some for hours -- in a long, hot corridor and in deadly quiet until their names were called. When the clowns came in, it all changed. Mirth and merriment replaced seriousness and the magical transformation was underway. By the time we left several hours later what had been a place of lonely desperation for many had become a lively hallway filled with, yes, dancing, laughing adults - some with premature bald heads, some and some only faintly smiling through their despair. But most became convinced that even this place could be hopeful, even joyous with a little help from caring clowns!

Little did I know when I chose the name "*Rigoletto*" for my clown persona that I would be so privileged as to be a clown in this beautiful Italian place and for these beautiful Italian people. How could I have known that I would have this rewarding opportunity to be "*Rigo*" the clown in South Italy? But of course, now I know that I should have at least suspected because for clowns and for those who open up to clowns anything and everything is possible!

The realm of infinite possibilities was reaffirmed for me when I and two of the other clowns, while walking through the entry gates at Pompeii, ran headlong into a new friend and her family from Washington, DC. Curiously, this was the same new friend who came magically into my life just when I needed help to complete a project I undertook to send school supplies to Afghan kids after a clowning trip with Patch Adams to Kabul. It was sheer, split-second serendipity, fate, chance that we should, unbeknownst

to the other, be at that exact spot at that exact second. Or, was it simple Clown Reality that such a one in 10 billion chance should occur as if prearranged? We hugged in breathtaking astonishment, exchanged a few pleasantries then went on our ways, she to enjoy more Italian vacation with her family and I to play the Jester in Pompeii village with dozens of vacationing visitors.

South Italy has a Greek heritage which predates the Roman Empire and one can see and hear it in the quaint villages of the extreme south. A few old folks in the region still speak an ancient Greek patois. One such village in particular, Caulonia, will remain in my memory forever as that little antique jewel we reached late at night after a full day of driving from Naples in the baking heat. It sits atop a high granite outcrop and overlooks the Adriatic.

One must drive up the narrow winding streets to reach the central square where, on the night after our arrival we would take part in an annual commedia dell'arte with musicians, dancers stilt-walkers and clowns. It was not hard to imagine being part of a medieval festival here and to happily forsake all connection with the cares and stresses beyond this tiny village. It seemed that there truly was nothing of any consequence beyond the fun and convivial companionship of this lighthearted celebration.

Altogether we visited and clowned in two mental institutions, one prison AIDS ward, one cancer clinic, one refugee camp and two hospitals for kids. In between we clowned on the streets of Naples and Caulonia and everywhere we stopped for water, pizza or gas. Everywhere we went the beautiful people of the Mezzogiorno welcomed us with kisses on both cheeks and hugs as we all smiled, laughed, danced the Tarantella and sang together. I came home a very melancholy but happy guy named Bill, but *Rigoletto* the clown left part of his heart in the Mezzagiorno.

~ **Ettore Sacchi** (Pictured below with Bill):



“For me the trip was an important experience, because it was the first time that I participated in a journey with American clowns. I met very special people from whom I learned a great deal. The journey was tiring, but it was a "bella fatica." We carried a smile to all: those in prisons, to psychological sick persons, to the children, to the sick with tumors, to the refugees, and to the handicapped. Again I saw that there is so much suffering and loneliness in the world, and how important it is to carry a little cheerfulness to those who suffers.”