

## **“SEMPREVERDE:EVERGREEN”: THE FIRST GO-GREEN BILINGUAL MUSICAL CAPTIVATES THE STUDENTS OF ITALIAN IN TORONTO**

Air and water, earth and fire ... actually, metal and electricity. You may think: talking about pre-socratic philosophers? A famous R&B group of the 80's? Not at all. It's the theme of a Canadian premiere, the Italian language edu-musical "*Sempreverde/Evergreen*", that just landed in Vaughan, Toronto, at the City Playhouse Theatre, with eight performances in four days (October 24 to 27), for junior high and elementary school children who study Italian. *Sempreverde* is an ecological musical fully devoted to nature stewardship and a strong appeal for recycling and the preservation of the environment. The entirely original theatrical script, the dances and songs powerfully call for the preservation of our planet's air and water, for stopping the waste of metal and electricity and curtailing the overflowing omnipresence of paper and plastic. "*Sempreverde/Evergreen*" is an idea of Simona Rodano, an Italian singer, actress and author living and performing in North America, with eighteen years of experience in entertainment. Founder of Incanto Productions, she specializes in edutainment products for young students of Italian of all ages. Nothing to do with philosophy, then! But the *Italian Fairy* (this is the singer's stage name, known to children the world over), by secretly alluding to the constituents of the world in ancient Greek thought, endows *Sempreverde* of a cosmic inspiration, while avoiding the trap of excessive, apocalyptic tones. The show, in fact, plays as a hymn to the harmony of Nature, constantly celebrating the beauty of our macrocosm (our planet and its ecosystem) and the distinctive microcosm of Italy, one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Indeed, the story is also a pretext for visiting some of the most famous Italian *piazze*, their unabashed harmony and beauty serving as a background for the uncontrollable ugliness of environmental degradation.

The scene is thus set for an entertaining and compelling modern fairytale. Thanks to this cosmic dimension of the play, the characters take on the complexion of mythical heroes, representing basic impulses and desires of humanity at large. The mission of the heroine, *Sempreverde* (Evergreen), impeccably played by Simona Rodano, is to persuade her antagonist, *Spreco* (Waste), convincingly played by Gianmarco Colucci, to reuse and recycle. *Sempreverde* is the personification of lush, flourishing Nature, and its simple beauty and harmony. *Spreco* is the emblem of human neglect and man's inordinate lust for the exploitation of natural resources. He does not care about beauty and is only interested in making money and enjoying life. The contrast between the two could not be stronger. In antiquity (and in the *Bel Paese*), the primordial elements of air, water, earth and fire guaranteed eternal harmony, worldly order, and beauty. Nowadays those same elements are the primary symbols of environmental degradation, the first object of human uncontrolled desires and haggling, and the insatiable appetite for money and material goods. So, what to do? Should one respect the environment, and enjoy its beauty, or overspend, overuse and enjoy life no questions asked? Who will win the joust? *Sempreverde* or *Spreco*? The tension is palpable. Some of the students in the audience are all for her; some, especially the older students, are all for him; and, together, they intone their incitements as if we were at gladiatorial games.

Indeed the show is built around the idea of disputation. The mechanism instantiating the storyline is that of the ancient medieval Morality Plays, in which two contenders, for example angels and demons, in a struggle between good and evil, duel to convince each other about an ethical-moral argument. *Sempreverde/Evergreen* is a musical duel; its aim that of persuading the public to support the position of one contestant over the other, and judge about the merits of each position. Music itself is a metaphor for that harmony and beauty that the world is about to lose. To overcome this loss, *Sempreverde* challenges *Spreco* through music, by singing songs - beautiful, modern and very danceable - written by Simona Rodano herself and masterfully arranged by the prestigious Punto Rec Studios. The students, having had the opportunity to learn a good number of songs in class as part of the Italian curriculum, are called to sing and dance as if they were at a pop or rock concert, and challenged to take one side or the other, interacting with the actors on stage.

No doubt the recycling issue is serious and carries a high educational value. However, *Sempreverde's* genre and mode is that of a Broadway musical, featuring light and humorous tones, and a dazzling,

bubbly succession of comical and amusing moments. The Morality Play never goes down as a gloomy statement of present or imminent disasters. On the contrary, it brings a lot of fun and inspires laughter and reflection at once. *Sempreverde* challenges *Spreco* with the aid of other characters that are equally strong: *Strillone* (Newsboy), a dodgy street vendor of newspapers, affected by Archimedes syndrome, announces pending environmental calamities from some of the most beautiful Italian *piazze* (but not necessarily most celebrated), while exhibiting the most improbable inventions for recycling. *Fiore*, a childhood friend of *Sempreverde*, is the classic aide, who bestows her heroine with magical gifts. She is wonderfully rendered by the expressive Italian singer and actress Francesca Capetta, as a somewhat scatterbrained flower girl, who, nevertheless, in her sincere genuineness, turns out to be generous, intrepid and capable of brilliant stratagems to contrast *Spreco*.

*Sempreverde/Evergreen* has a pressing and compelling rhythm, a good mix of professionals, among whom two young dancers, who captivated the nearly 3,000 students, and their teachers and parents, from beginning to end. No distractions, attentive eyes, their breaths held tight, all children were fully enraptured and fascinated by the modern scenery, the stunning 3D projections, the choreography and the songs of the musical.

When the world of arts and school come together, great things are born from their embrace. Centro Scuola e Cultura Italiana of Toronto, in collaboration with the Consulate General of Italy in Toronto, believed in and promoted the show with the local community and schools, and succeeded in endorsing its vision of quality and excellence in education. The York Catholic and the Toronto Catholic school boards strongly responded to this challenge by supporting and organizing this important excursion for so many Italian students in elementary and junior high. *Sempreverde* planted a fruitful seed that helped our students feel even more a part of the Italian community, and brought their learning of the Italian language and culture outside of the narrow confines of the classroom and away from their, otherwise precious, school routines. When the world of arts meets that of education, in the hearts of many - children or adults alike - a profound and indelible desire to learn and discover is spawned. No matter what the age, no matter what the times. And Italian turns into a living language that walks the world.

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