

Botanica meraviglia

arboreal
amazement

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For more than eight hundred moons, I have never left this place.

Indeed, I exist as a function of this place, a part of its continuous becoming.

I decided not to move anymore, to stay here as a guard, after a trauma. I think it was in the 1950s - when I heard about the city of Palermo's plan to do something crazy: the construction of a large road that would cut the Botanical Garden in two.

The road would have run through the garden. The transit of vehicles would have shaken all the plants, hampering the balance achieved after almost two centuries. It would have disturbed the flight and song of the birds, obstructed the passage of insects - not to mention that of cats. It would have made this place less suitable for the botanists' experiments, less pleasant to care for, less enchanting for visitors.

That road would have put me to the test.

Perhaps I would have ceased to exist...

Fortunately, the man in charge of the garden at the time, Francesco Bruno was his name, had a brilliant idea. It wasn't clear to me what he had really come up with until I heard about it some time ago from another man, one who today looks after the life in this garden—and, in some way, of me as well. His name is Manlio Speciale.

Manlio Speciale: "It was known that there were these remains of a portal, of this little church—not well defined from the point of view of studies, but in any case Chiaramontana, of a clear Chiaramontano style. At that point Francesco Bruno, with his figghi, as he called them in Sicilian, his gardeners, who were many then... He decided—he thought better of it. Overnight, on a beautiful night of a full moon, with wheelbarrows they took all these pieces of the portal and assembled it exactly where the road was supposed to pass. He immediately listed the monument under the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage... until the construction of that road was definitively blocked."

The ruins of the portal have never been removed from the garden. Every time I look at them, I draw a deep breath that mingles with that of the plants around me—a prehistoric breath.

To explain what I am—the genius loci of the Botanical Garden of Palermo—and the meaning of my existence, a comparison with a forest is needed.

Manlio Speciale: "A real forest can do without man very well. In fact, I would say that if man does not set foot in it, it does the best thing. Instead, this place should be full of people. Because it is the place par excellence of plants, but also of people."

[voices and background radio playing]

When I hear the gardeners' truck approaching, I always come closer, hoping to catch a few seconds of music. Then other sounds begin—the sounds of hard work, which here, it must be said, is never lacking.

Manlio Speciale: "A botanical garden is completely the result of the forcing that man makes. But then again, so is any museum. In museums, we force works and artistic natures to stay close to each other—sometimes even in the same room—completely different styles, completely different worlds, to create a picture that's as complete as possible. We often do this in botanical gardens, which often also contravene the agronomic laws of cultivation. That is, we place plants a little too close together because we want that bed of sapindaceae or

anacardiaceae to contain as many genera and species as possible. But the plant might be better off at a greater distance, don't you think? Therefore, this kind of 'forcing' must find a balance, a balance that must always be cared for by humans."

This balance, and this care, are the basis for the coexistence of plants from the most disparate parts of the world that would otherwise never have met.

Hundreds of species coexist in more than ten hectares of space, including those that some call weeds. The man who is now in charge of this garden also takes care of them. He is an expert on monumental trees, but it's also thanks to him that the "garden of the simples" is increasingly valued.

His name is Rosario Schicchi.

Rosario Schicchi: "I remember a lady came to my office one day to make a note. 'Tell me madam, there are too many weeds in this garden.' 'Wee...?'....'Ah! Weeds? What's a weed? I don't know what weeds are. Then I'll take you with me.' I said, 'Ma'am, is this it?' 'Yes.' 'Ah, yes, this is perfect. Ma'am, do you have warts?' 'No.' 'If you had warts, I'd make them disappear with this liquid. But do you know what happens in nature? The swallow plucks this twig, brings it to its chicks' eyes and cures their conjunctivitis. Can we call it a weed? No.'"

He's talking about celandine and its yellowish sap. But this applies also to plants that many people actively avoid... after all, we're taught to be careful with nettles.

In short, if I had to describe the Botanical Garden, I'd say it's a therapeutic place—one that cures not only conjunctivitis, but also so-called *plant blindness*: the human brain's tendency not to register the presence of plants, not to see them. Yet, and this is really curious to me, all visitors notice the fallen citrus fruits on the ground, and many of them mutter comments about the waste.

Paolo Inglese: "People complain there are oranges on the ground, but when fruit falls, where should it be? In our bellies necessarily? No. The fruits fall to the ground because that's carbon being recycled, period. Ecologically speaking, the fruit must fall, leave the seeds, and die. That's what it's for. It's not meant to make a salad with herring and fennel. While we say 'what a waste', what waste? From the plants' point of view, it's a waste to eat it."


This man's name is Paolo Inglese. This is a university garden, and he led its museum activities.

When he was with guests, he rode around the avenues on his bicycle and often stopped in front of the ficus magnolioides—the one I live in. It's older than the garden but also the first planted in Sicily. I think it was the mid-nineteenth century. I remember it, a small sapling from a French nursery... no one expected it to grow like this.

Paolo Inglese: "They are dominant trees in their environments. 'Dominant' means that they constitute ecohabitats practically in themselves. This tree is a habitat in itself. Nothing grows around it—or at least not within the range of its roots and crown.

A very competitive tree. It strangles—it's the strangler fig. It grows around another tree, surrounds it, and then develops its own trunk with this immense crown.

And it has invented this system to support its own weight: aerial roots that, when they touch the ground, seem to become trees themselves... this tree looks like a forest."



Paolo Inglese: “This tree really demonstrates how a tree is not an individual. A tree is a gigantic community. If you think that each leaf photosynthesizes on its own, then this being that we might imagine anthropomorphically as a single living entity is, in truth, a gigantic community in itself.”

This community manifests itself in chorus towards evening, just before sunset. Then the sun sets—and along with the sun, silence.

It's in the silence of the evening that, after more than fifty years, I decided to leave the garden and embark on a journey to visit some of the most characteristic species of Sicily: the dwarf palm in the Zingaro reserve, the citrus trees in Pantelleria, the wild plants of the Iblei, a monumental holm oak on Etna... I've gathered voices and stories that show how the relationship of mutual care between people and plants is still strong and alive. It's within that relationship that I exist. And those voices are now my travel notes.

[mix of voices]

