

# Two Italians in Sinarades

✍️ *Maria Strani-Potts*

In May this year Gioia Maestro and Raoul Scacchi organised an artistic happening, at the little bar called Robin's Nest in Agios Gordis.

The music was fantastic, the dips delicious and Gioia's art as fresh and imaginative as always.

Being a native Corfiot and knowing the island from the inside, I often wonder why so many non-Corfiots decide to uproot themselves from their homes, to emigrate and to settle here. Of course my husband, who is English, keeps offering explanations: the landscape, easy way of life, cheap booze, Corfu's special atmosphere. I would go along with the first and the last reasons, but I'm a native, after all. I see things differently. Up until the late nineteen sixties I could understand the reasons for migrating here, but no longer.

Corfu then was a magical, special place, a place blessed by nature, unspoilt, full of hope and a place to inspire even the driest of imaginations. But for the last twenty years I have wondered and tried to rationalize the reasons for such continuing immigration to this island.

Gioia Maestro and Raoul Scacchi migrated to Corfu seven years ago.

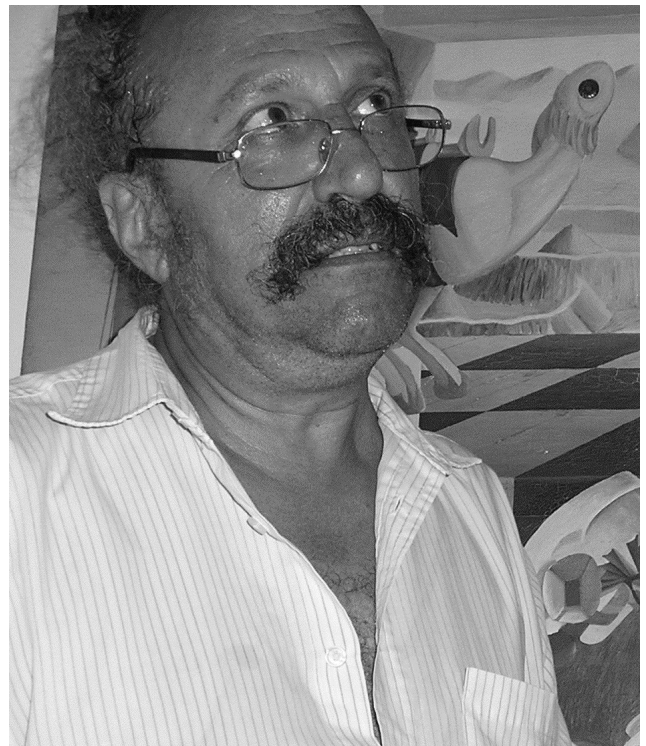
They wanted a change, a radical change; they took a rational decision. I still don't fully understand their reasons, but Gioia Maestro and Raoul Scacchi don't constitute an ordinary couple. In their own words:

'The only thing we were sure about, entering the new century, was that the time for change had arrived. Change knocks at the door several times in one's lifetime, and when it happens that means that a cycle is finished. Sometimes there is too much noise all around, media, stress, fear, competition and problems with daily life, so people are not able to read signs; they don't accept changes and are not prepared for them. The time that Change knocked at our door, we were psychologically ready for it. We took our decision and gave ourselves some time to plan

and organize our new life in the small village of Sinarades. In May 2002 we moved; the first step was done. As always happens, the first period was magic and full of energy.

Paradoxically, difficulties start later, when the novelty is over and you have to face reality, with no screaming bosses, envious colleagues and urban pollution to fill your daily life. Suddenly, empty time, enormous silence, bright stars, the sea and green vegetation are there, not for ten days holiday a year, flight enclosed, something to dream about during boring and stressful days spent in grey offices. From now on, when the grey-feeling is inside you, it's up to you only to face it. Dhen ftei kapios allos. You are responsible for it and you must look for your own way to handle it, and to see what your internal landscape is made of. So, all those who are on the Way, are looking inside and... something we find.'

From the first time one meets them, the power of their personalities and talents comes through loud and clear. Whether one is formally introduced for the first time, or meets them casually in the streets of Corfu, they give you a wide smile, kind words, and your heart warms up. Without any pretensions, they immediately put you in a great mood. None of that dreaded Corfiot manner, or the answer one receives when, out of civility, one asks another person: 'How are you?' Only to unleash a bombardment of complaints about the family's gloom and doom and a detailed list, as long as your arm, of ills, complaints, and the family's medical histories.



In spite of their own personal tragedies and family chores, Raoul and Gioia make my heart open, they cheer me up and make me love them. Even their dogs are friendly, docile, lovable and unique in temper.

Raul is tall, well preserved, well tanned and with the thinnest of ponytails hanging at his nape. Whether he speaks in English or Greek (the two languages I use to communicate with both him and Gioia), he comes across as a kind, well-spoken, intelligent, talented man. Raoul's charm and sense of humour always manages to ride over linguistic barriers and he makes my husband (an Englishman to the core) roar with laughter; something that amuses me enormously. Englishmen do not laugh much at foreign jokes, but somehow Raoul makes Jim laugh like no other. Raoul is from Milan; he's really a fantastic musician, a talented painter, a highly educated man, and without doubt, a multi-skilled Jack-of-all-Trades.

Gioia, from Pisa, is shorter, attractive, with a kind glance and the most infectious of smiles. Both of them have that irresistible Italian charm and style that no other European national possess. Above all they are true artists, a couple for all seasons.

I met Gioia nearly two years ago when I participated in the Christmas Craft Fair in Dassia. I was there with a table and my beloved quilts for three days. Towards the evening of the second day, the lady who had the stall opposite mine, and who seemed to possess the most smiling of faces, approached me. We started talking. She showed interest in what I was doing in the kindest and most sincere way. She spoke excellent English and Greek. She talked about her art and poetry and everything she said was like a breath of fresh air.

She writes poetry, she told me. She plays the saxophone in the Sinarades Band and creates handcrafted wooden houses and boats from recycled material. Wow! I thought. She has to be the only non-Greek participant in our old Corfiot band tradition. She asked me about myself. I told her that I write too and had lived a peripatetic life. She had travelled too. During the 80s she spent some years in Latin America working for UNESCO at the ORE-ALC (Oficina Regional Educacion para America Latina y el Caribe). I loved her from the start. I told her about my quilts, my writing, my love for Italy and much more. I could talk to her for hours. With her interest in my work and me, she put me at ease..

Then I walked across to look at her work more closely; her houses and boats. Hundertwasser came to mind. But when I looked closely at the objects, I realised that she had something unique. I was impressed by her love for detail and the effect her art had as it emerged out of things that most of us throw away.

She gave me her *Occasioni Di Poesia*, a collection of her poems, but my Italian is not good enough to do it justice.

Then Raoul approached. The four of us introduced ourselves, and we've remained friends ever since.

At present Raul is working on a CD project entitled *Neuromantics* and Jim is helping him with the lyrics. Their collaboration is amusing, full of laughter and fun and I can't wait to hear the outcome. Two very funny guys composing offbeat songs about all the varieties of love, with flair and wit.

Raul's previous CD, *E mails to Emily* - a strange choice of theme for an Italian - demonstrates Raoul's global thinking and interests. It is a CD with 10 songs, his own wonderful musical settings of the lyrics of poems by Emily Dickinson.

Jim was thrilled with Raul's musical talents, enthusiasm, imagination and knowledge of the blues (which extends to opera). They can bang away on their guitars forever, happy as two kids.

Raoul has been a member of many bands. At present he is part of a rock-blues duo called Blues Refugees with David Green, another blues fanatic, a brilliant guitarist and singer, who has also settled in Corfu, in the north of the island. Raoul's paintings are very different, surrealistic and powerful; unfortunately they are all hidden in their home in Sinarades.

Gioia Maestro has had several exhibitions in Kerkyra during the seven years they have lived here. She has written *Ranieri e il miracolo dell'isola, un viaggio di Santa Caterina*, a short novel published in *Porphyras* (the distinguished Corfiot literary magazine). Also *Italiano, lingua straniera*: a book of exercises on Italian Language Culture and Communication, for foreigners, published by Guerra, Perugia 2004. Her *Dall'altra parte del lago* is a novel published by Carte Scoperte in Milan in 2005 and *Literary Aperitif* will hopefully come out in Greek soon.

During their years in Corfu, Raoul and Gioia have managed to integrate into village life like no others. No mock-Parthenon for them as their residence. They bought a village house, which they restored lovingly, saving it from ruin. By taking such a decision to live permanently in Sinarades, they not only achieved the radical change they wanted, but they also contributed enormously to the cultural life of Sinarades, and of course of Corfu.

As I wrote above, I still fail to comprehend why people (apart from people coming from the third world) immigrate to this island. Yet the island is full of many people from around the world, all hard working, artistically productive, astonishingly successful in their adjustment to their new life. Sadly, their talents remain unknown to the Corfiot public at large. Their cultural input to Corfiot life is often larger than that of the native population. They have both energy and creativity.

My friends, Gioia and Raoul, are part of this force, and to me they are certainly Corfiot artists, and much more.

I am a Corfiot, as you all know, and it makes me so proud to know that Corfu, my 'Panorea', whose fate I lament in my little novella, still manages to give inspiration, hope and cheer to people like those two true Italian friends of mine.

**Maria Strani-Potts** is author of *The Cat of Portovecchio - Corfu Tales* and *The Pimping of Panorea*.

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