

08/15/2003

It Takes A Village

By GEORGE DE STEFANO

"Che caldo!" exclaimed the lead singer of the Belgian disco group Alcazar, fanning himself after he and his two backup vocalists had just finished a number about getting back at an abusive lover by going on a shopping spree with his credit cards. It was late in the evening, but the intense heat of Rome's hottest summer in decades lingered in the still air. Alcazar soldiered on nonetheless, with tales of dance floor angst ("These are the last days of disco," "Crying in the discotheque") set to incongruously bouncy prerecorded backing tracks.

The dance trio from Brussels was the night's entertainment at Gay Village, a more than two-month long celebration of queer culture and community held in the Testaccio section of the Eternal City. The festival, which began in late June and will conclude on August 31, offers panoply of culture, entertainment, social, and recreational activities and politics. The amazingly diverse menu includes concerts by Patty Pravo and Irene Grandi, two pop divas beloved by Italian gays, a film festival, literary readings, AIDS education forums, bodybuilding demonstrations, and dance parties with DJs from all over Italy, as well as special week-long events focusing on lesbians and transgenders.

Theater's in the mix, too, with one of the festival's highlights surely the one-"woman" show in which nationally-known drag artist and activist Vladimir Luxuria will impersonate Silvia Baraldini, an Italian radical whose release from a U.S. penitentiary became an international cause celebre during the 1990s.

Set in a 500 square-meter outdoor space resembling a movie soundstage, this year's incarnation of Gay Village has a Paris in the 19th century theme, with Moulin Rouge-ish decor and ambiance. Strolling through the winding, kasbah-like streets of the faux village with my lover Rob and several Italian friends, I didn't observe any Pernod-sipping or hear chansons set to accordion music. What was unmistakable, however, was the fact that Gay Village represents a new and welcome leap forward in visibility for gay, lesbian, and gender-variant Italians. This year's festival builds on the success of the first edition held last summer, which attracted more than 100,000 people with a similar, if less ambitious, program that offered, in the words of the promoters, "freedom, music, theater, and civil rights."

Like last year's event, Gay Village 2003 is a cooperative venture of gay activists and entrepreneurs, with sponsorship from corporations such as the French auto manufacturer Citroen and EMI Music Italy as well as funding from the Rome city government. Gay Village is an official component of Roman Summer, a seasonal festival inaugurated in the 60s by the municipal government so that Romans who couldn't afford to leave the stifling city on holiday could enjoy free and low-cost outdoor entertainment.

But there would be no Gay Village had there not been World Pride Roma 2000. The success of that landmark event - a week-long program of cultural and political activity that culminated in a march through the center of Rome—inspired an activist-minded dance promoter named Federico Assenza to conceive Gay Village as an annual event that would promote "gay culture in all its forms and manifestations." Coinciding with the Roman Catholic Jubilee celebration of two millennia of Christianity, World Pride triggered virulent opposition from Italy's political right and the Vatican, who decried it as an affront to the Pope, Catholicism, and Italian culture. Anti-gay forces, not content with engaging in ugly rhetoric—"Italy needs children, not homosexuals," according to a popular slogan of the homophobes—tried to force the government to either move the event out of Rome or cancel it altogether.

But the clerical-rightist alliance overplayed its hand. Italian gay activists mobilized to defend World Pride, and they were joined by a broad range of liberals and leftists who saw in the machinations of the Vatican and its conservative allies an assault on the freedoms guaranteed by the Italian constitution, and on the stato laico (secular state) itself. Cultural figures, including celebrated filmmakers Roberto Benigni and Nanni Moretti, Nobel Prize-winning playwright Dario Fo, rock star Jovanotti, and popular movie actress Maria Grazia Cucinotta (Il Postino), came out in support of World Pride. The president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities expressed solidarity with gay men, noting that they were among the victims of the Holocaust.

Even the wife of Rome's mayor criticized him publicly when he tried to withdraw municipal support for the Pride march.

World Pride 2000 happened, notwithstanding threats of counter-demonstrations and actual violence from right wing extremists, and it was a great success, the march attracting several hundred thousand participants and observers, according to Italy's leading daily newspaper, La Repubblica. (Rob and I were among them, and it was the first time in years we'd felt excited about a Pride event.) Not only that, it opened up an unprecedented discussion about homosexuality—in the media and among Italians nationwide.

Italy has no anti-sodomy or other homophobic laws, and the age of consent is 14, for both hetero- and homosex. But there is no national legislation protecting the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, either, although instances of outright discrimination apparently are rare. That's not to say that heteros and homos are equal before the law. Only married people can adopt children, and same-sex couples enjoy no legal recognition.

But the struggle in Italy is waged mainly on the terrain of culture and civil society, not the law. And that inevitably means a confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism is no longer the state religion, and the Vatican's power to intervene in civic and political life has markedly diminished. But the Church's stance that homosexuality is both sinful and unnatural still strongly influences social attitudes. Persons who engage in sinful and unnatural conduct should be tolerated only if they suffer their condition in silence—they must not demand rights or social acceptance as homosexuals. When they resist this repressive status quo—as in the case of World Pride—the Church deploys all its still-considerable power and authority to smack down the queers.

"In Italy, invisibility has been the price for tolerance," observed Sergio Lo Giudice, president of Arcigay, the national gay rights organization, in the midst of the World Pride controversy. "But gays don't want to be invisible anymore."

Coming from (southern) Italian background, and having gay friends in mainland Italy and in Sicily, I'm quite familiar with the power of a family—and church-centered culture to shape—and distort—gay lives, and with how much strength and courage it can take to flout those entrenched cultural imperatives. All of my friends participate in organized gay life, and most are "out" to varying degrees. But only two of the gay men I know have come out to their families. One Sicilian friend, a university professor, plans to buy a house with a group of gay and lesbian friends and create an alternative family to replace the biological one from which he is estranged. A few have rejected the Church, while others remain attached to the Catholic culture in which they were raised.

Another friend, whom I'll call Carlo, has just begun to come out, in circumstances hardly conducive to gay self-assertion. An attorney living in a small city south of Rome, Carlo had been engaged for several years to an architect who designed his stylish apartment in the expectation that she'd live there with Carlo, as his wife. He broke off the engagement last year, after he had his first sexual affair with a man, an African American living in Rome whom he'd met through the Internet. When my partner Rob and I met Carlo, barely a year ago, he was calling himself a "hidden bisex." But as we got to know him, we realized he wasn't a formerly hetero guy who suddenly discovered he also liked men.

He'd been aware of his same-sex attraction since he was a teenager, masturbating to photos of Carl Weathers, of Rocky fame, and Burt Reynolds. Now, in his early 30s, he knows what he wants: a full time, live-in lover, a man with whom he can share all the ups and downs of la vita quotidiana, daily life. Carlo will need a lot of luck finding that in his town, one dominated by conservative politics and lacking any organized gay life whatsoever, not even a bar, just a very down-low cruising scene at a local beach.

And it's not only the external environment that poses obstacles; Carlo's not quite ready to think critically about, much less jettison, traditional family and religious values. I fear that Carlo's dream—to live as a gay man in an environment that offers no support for such a choice—is next to impossible. He could move to Rome, enjoying the freedom and anonymity of a big city and its gay world, but he's too rooted in his hometown. And why should he have to cut himself off from friends, family, and the world he has known all his life?

Italy, too often thought of as tradition-bound, is a dynamic nation whose social, economic, and political landscape has undergone tremendous change, particularly in the past 20 years. Gender and sexuality also have been transformed (if not as radically as elsewhere in Europe), creating new possibilities for many and evoking increasingly hysterical outrage from the Vatican and the right. "Gay villages" are in fact emerging all over Italy, and not only in the sense of physical spaces and venues. Sexual minorities are coming out and building community, despite still-formidable hurdles. And that drive for freedom and la dolce vita cannot be denied, no matter how much families may disapprove and popes may fulminate.

©GayCityNews 2007