Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2009

Benjamin Franklin / Richard Powers

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4672>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.4672

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFA)

Electronic reference

Margit Müller, "La dolce vita: Eudora Welty Scholars at the Centenary Conference in Venice 2009", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2009, Online since 02 February 2010, connection on 01 February 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4672> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.4672>

This text was automatically generated on 1 February 2023.

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La dolce vita: Eudora Welty Scholars at the Centenary Conference in Venice 2009

A Watcher's Eye

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- 1 When Pearl McHaney sent me the program for the Welty Centenary Conference that she organized together with her Italian colleague Rosella Mamoli Zorzi of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, at first I could not believe my eyes: what an incredible job they did in getting together all the scholars whose contributions I read five years ago for my thesis in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Nothing could hold me back from hopping onto an airplane and taking the chance to glimpse into this world.

The big hello

- 2 The Ruzzini Palace Hotel staff and I stand there astounded as we look at all the people gathering, while the lobby turns into the scene of a huge family reunion: big and excited hellos, hearty hugs and introductions of those participants who did not have the pleasure of having met each other. With the prospect of a great dinner and three thrilling days lying ahead, the crowd looks relaxed and cheerful, scholars of Southern literature from all over the world heartily chat about this and that, one or the other pulling out their Moleskine notebooks to write down the title of a book or some thought or observation that comes up while enjoying a wonderful Italian dinner and a good "talking wine". Exchanging ideas about books recently read and philosophizing about the experiences depicted in those works come to their heights when sitting together for one or two drinks in someone's hotel room. Especially for the American participants the word "jet lag" seems to have been eliminated from their vocabulary.

The conference

- 3 On my way to Campo Santa Margherita I meet two European Welty scholars. Since we all count on getting lost at least once in the narrow and labyrinthine streets, we take our time to sneak to a nearby little market. We pretend to be the typical Venice tourists, and start taking pictures of the fresh fish and seafood, while in the meantime enjoying the dry European humour of a member of our company, who comments on my remark on how wonderful it is to have so many Welty scholars gathered together for the Centenary: “That would open up an entirely new perspective on Welty scholarship in having them all vanish into thin air, now that we have them all in one place!” The reverent and almost sacral atmosphere of the Auditorium Santa Margherita, a former church, is definitely loosened up by Noel Polk’s appearance in an FBI baseball cap: thank you for this, Noel — that was simply awesome! The conference program shows many facets of the writer Eudora Welty: undoubtedly as many as the posters Pearl McHaney brought along from her Georgia State University office to use as podium decoration demonstrate her qualities as a photographer. The Tuesday session is dedicated to Welty’s translations in Europe (France, Germany and Italy) and to the art of translating her oeuvre. The Wednesday session is focused on Welty’s language as well as the themes of race and place in her works.
- 4 Agreeing on a spot for the lunch break on Tuesday turns out to be a rather difficult decision. By accident the group is split in half and we end up in two adjoining restaurants, each wondering where the others are. On our way out to join the missing half, sitting comfortably in the restaurant next door, we find ourselves chased by a sour-looking Italian waiter who sees his prospective turnover of the day hurrying away.
- 5 Much to my regret I missed many other thrilling and inspiring events, for example Brenda Currin’s performance of two Welty works set to music, a highlight of the conference days, as Géraldine Chouard’s lovely picture documentation underlines.
- 6 Enjoying these wonderful days in Venice, I’ve come to the belief that Welty herself would have loved to be part of that crowd — even if she might have been a bit surprised by the whole fuss about her person.

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