

Enrico Pulsoni interviews Nancy Watkins

Born in Chicago, Nancy Watkins has lived in Rome since 1978. She is an artist, has shown in galleries and museums in Europe and in the US. and her work has been featured on dozens of book and magazine covers. She was the Art Editor of *Arsenale* Magazine and is the author of four books, *Autoritratti senza lo specchio*, *The Poet's Room*, *Il fiore è un'idea* and *Visionary Flowers*. She is the widow of Gianfranco Palmery.

It is impossible to think of Arsenale without thinking of its director, Gianfranco Palmery.

So true! To start a magazine of this sort takes a hard-working team and many, even outside of the editorial staff, made contributions that were decisive. Gianfranco, however, was central, absolutely the key figure for *Arsenale*. He was the one capable not only of theorizing what a magazine should be ideally, but also had the kind of universal knowledge, critical sense, keen curiosity and determination to translate that ideal into practice.

What was it like to be part of Arsenale?

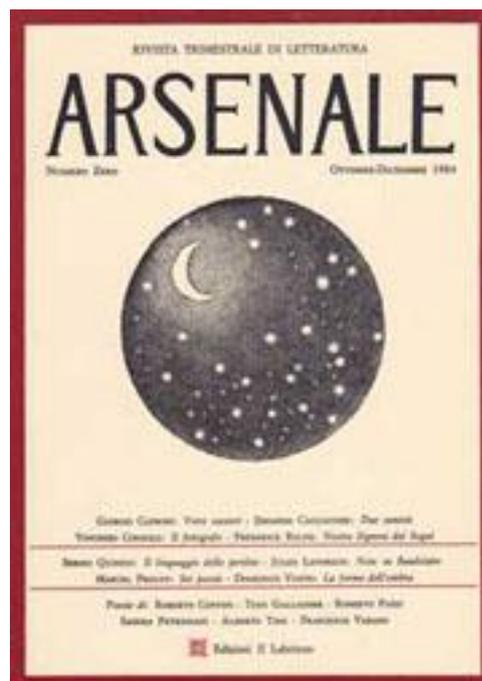
More than a magazine, it was a way of life. Just about everything Gianfranco and I did in those years – even dinners, travel or special events – revolved around *Arsenale*. It has been compared to the historical magazines of the first half of the twentieth century and certainly mirrors them both for its uncompromising insistence on quality and for its intense participation. When it was founded in the eighties, mass media and mass culture were already realities, although without the consolidation of today, but internet, email or digital text didn't exist. Was it coincidence that the first issue took nine months to see the light? On the other hand, the common project, the difficulties and even the slowness, brought everyone together. It would be impossible to count the relationships that were born from *Arsenale*.

How and why did Arsenale start?

Let's start with the "why": it filled a burning need. The established magazines didn't have much to offer to new authors. Every time writers would meet, it was the same music, "we should start a magazine!"

Gianfranco had already given the idea a lot of thought when Alessandro Ricci phoned in March of 1984 to announce that he had funding for a magazine and that – as Gianfranco was highly esteemed both for his articles in *Il Messaggero* and as a poet – everyone he'd talked with insisted he had to be the director. Knowing high standards and commitment were essential, Gianfranco had doubts, to say the least. How serious were they? Alessandro did manage to convince him to attend an initial meeting. When people gathered, the first thing that came out was that the funding Alessandro had counted on wasn't there. The disappointment was palpable so I tossed out a challenge: were they going to let lack of funds stop them from doing something they all really believed in?

We started meeting once a week, discussing various aspects, dividing up roles and Gianfranco pulled in a few other people. I agreed to be art director and, crucially, to do the graphics. I spent quite a lot of time experimenting, did a mock-up of the cover that included the masthead – a thick font I hand lettered to make "ARSENALÉ" stand out on the magazine rack – added a circular image, text, a red border around the edge and proudly presented it to the group. The reaction wasn't, however, what I had expected. Instead of just admiring the cover, jaws dropped in a collective, "wonderful – so we really are going to do this!" moment. Things further cemented when Gianfranco wrote the magnificent first editorial and then got serious fast as we started collecting texts and subscriptions.



Why the name "Arsenale"?

In addition to the word's various uses: shipyard, deposit, etc., Gianfranco liked its etymology: Dante brought it into Italian from the arabic «dar as sina' a», meaning the "house of the arts." In the first editorial he wrote:

“In quali di questi significati, beninteso traslati, si riconosce e si propone la rivista? In tutti certamente, o meglio nella loro contraddittoria unità; poiché progetto e fuoco, caos e costruzione, tecnica, sono concetti che vanno tenuti bene in mente apprestando un periodico di letteratura che non vuol essere espressione d'una tendenza.”

Most of all he felt it an apt metaphor for what he wanted the magazine to be: a place to build something of lasting value.

How did you decide what to publish?

Gianfranco established a formula that gave space to both established and new authors – poetry, stories, critical essays, translations, book reviews, art:

“*Arsenale* sarà un luogo di confronto. Confronto con la tradizione – o con le varie tradizioni –, e confronto con quelle, e tra loro, delle tendenze della contemporaneità, esteso, va da sé, ad altre letterature. Sicché vi appariranno riproposte di autori del passato, recuperi di testi in ombra o dimenticati (né mancheranno scoperte singolari e curiosità), e, naturalmente, lavori nuovi, di scrittori italiani e stranieri, con particolare attenzione agli autori giovani.”

At the very start we agreed on a cardinal rule: if we asked someone for a text, we would publish whatever they gave us. In general these invitations were to well-know authors: poets like Caproni, Luzi, Bertolucci, story writers like Consolo, Bonnani, or essayists including Quinzio, Agamben, Baldacci. For proposals that arrived spontaneously, a half sheet of paper with a list of the editor's names would be stapled to the top of the manuscript. A minimum of three editors would read each manuscript and put a yes/no plus comments on the sheet. At the weekly meetings, we went over where we were, what we needed. *Arsenale* only accepted unpublished material and we worked hard to put together the right mix. As you can imagine,

there was often very heated debate both on whom to invite and on which of the yeses to include in the current issue. Gianfranco was firm that it made no sense to publish anything unless we really believed in its worth.

Before the era of computers and email, how did you get the texts?

Believe it or not, most of the manuscripts were hand delivered, typically at dinner at our house or the home of one of the authors or other editors. This holds true even for seemingly unlikely cases. To cite an example, Raymond Carver and Tess Gallagher came to dinner at our house and Ray gave me a story that hadn't even been published in English, much less in Italian!

You convinced a famous writer like Carver to give you a completely unpublished story?

It was Ray's idea. I had hesitated to ask him for a story as, being a friend of Tess, I didn't want to put him on the spot. On the other hand, I also didn't want him to think we didn't want a story of his. When they came to visit us, I casually mentioned to Tess that sometime we would love a story of Ray's. Tess immediately called Ray over and his face lit up. He excitedly said, "Whatever story you like, you choose!" I was flabbergasted but managed to point out that his agent might not be thrilled. His face clouded momentarily, but after 10 seconds of thought, had the solution: opening his leather case, he took out 'Errand', the story he was working on, explaining that his agent didn't have it yet. Suddenly shy, he added, "You will be the first person – apart from Tess– to read it."

Incredible! What sort of budget did Arsenale have to pay contributors?

Money? We struggled to pay the cost of printing the magazine, much less the contributors. All of us were volunteers. In Ray's case, he not only knew that no check would arrive in the mail, but I later learned that a few days later, invited to dinner by one of Italy's largest publishers, he had refused to give them anything at all, whatever the price. The important thing for contributors like Ray was the astonishing culture, the authentic love of literature, the intensity of how much he cared, that they found in Gianfranco. Ray, like others, knew it was a pantheon only entered through merit.

I see the first issue and most of the others opens with poetry.

Poetry was the heart of *Arsenale*. Gianfranco insisted on giving it the respect it deserves as "a form of knowledge" and one way was to open the issue with important poets. What did he mean by "poetry as a form of knowledge"? He explains in an editorial:

"Vuol dire che intendiamo rivendicare alla poesia quella funzione conoscitiva da cui sembra ormai essere stata esautorata. Una funzione conoscitiva che si attua attraverso quei mezzi che le sono propri: l'immagine, la metafora, l'analogia, la stessa rima... I quali sono, è noto, i più antichi, e non per questo decaduti e inservibili, mezzi di conoscenza.

E vuol dire, allo stesso tempo, che la poesia, e in genere la letteratura, dopo il travaglio formalistico in cui si è andata estenuando da almeno un ventennio – e in questo in linea con una certa tradizione italiana –, deve ricollegarsi a un processo di pensiero più generale, irrobustirsi con vigorose meditazioni sui «grandi temi», approfittare anche di questo risveglio della filosofia, della riflessione religiosa; ma non per ingollare il tutto,

come è accaduto negli anni '60, per esempio con la fraseologia e il gergo scientifici, solo per attualizzarsi...”.

The magazine was also an interesting example of collaboration between writers and artists. How was the idea born?

Gianfranco again! :

“La presenza, accanto alle opere letterarie, di opere artistiche non avrà solo un valore illustrativo. Vorremmo che si ristabilissero quei rapporti fruttuosi, quel vitale contagio, che altre età hanno conosciuto, tra letteratura e arti figurative.”

Not only did *Arsenale* publish works of art inside the magazine, but for each issue, a different artist was invited to create a circular image for the cover. In turn, several artists very generously supported the magazine by giving us numbered prints for the special subscriptions.

Where were the editorial meetings?

Almost all were at our house. We had a round table and everyone would put out manuscripts, take notes. I always made a cake and often Giovanna Sicari or, on occasion the whole group, stayed for dinner. The taco dinner was the most memorable! One problem however was that Gianfranco and I were the only non-smokers and his request that people step out onto the adjoining terrace before lighting up was laughed off. Hours and hours of group smoking meant that the apartment would reek of cigarettes for days afterwards, almost until the next meeting. Luck had it that Valerio Magrelli got his tiny first apartment near Via Giulia and offered to host the meetings and then Ginevra Bompiani also offered her home. Both were more central but neither worked as well. Instead of sitting around a table, people were on the sofa or chairs (the chaise longue at Ginevra's was popular) so the meetings didn't have the same concentration, but I can't tell you the relief of going home to breathable air.

How was the magazine printed?

Arsenale was of the last examples of glorious linotype printing, with text and drawings physically impressed onto the paper: running ones fingers over the cover, one can feel the relief. In the eighties linotype was already rare, having been replaced by offset, but Gianfranco insisted we find a *real* printshop – and what a printshop – a thousand square meters with enormous old machines gathering dust. We spent days there and were almost the only clients left. Reopening the fat envelopes containing the originals of the various issues reminds me why people settle for less in printing back then and now. It simply was a ton of work, especially for a graphically complex magazine like *Arsenale*. In linotype, every word has to be retyped at the printshop on massive machines that spit out the individual lines set in lead. Proof reading is a serious job and doing the graphics meant trying out pages in pencil mock-up. Certainly even then there were plenty of faster and easier ways to print something, but he wanted the "dress" to be on par with the contents.

Why did it die?

The real question is how it survived so long. In its 12 issues, *Arsenale* published the work of 145 writers and 35 artists, for a total of 870 pages. We had no institution or funding behind us and all the group really had in common was the desire to start a magazine. In one of the final

issues, Gianfranco wrote an editorial that reflects on the experience, both its significance and its frustrations:

“Un’idea pigra ed egotista trova spesso voce e credito in questi tempi: che le riviste letterarie non servono a niente, che se ne fanno troppe, ecc. Bisognerà ancora ricordare che la letteratura moderna è stata fatta sulle riviste?”

His parting question/answer in that same editorial provides a key to his innermost desire for *Arsenale*:

“Cosa conferisce a una rivista il suo potere magnetico, polare? Avere uno scopo anteriore: non essere un luogo di concrezione di testi vari, ma uno spazio di risonanza spirituale; stare nel tempo, ma lontano dalle sirene dell’attualità. Le riviste attualiste sono come le attardate: morte gore della letteratura; l’attualità è per i quotidiani e i rotocalchi – i luoghi dello spreco del talento – : una rivista letteraria sarà il luogo della custodia e dell’accumulo, e il riparo «per il talento futuro» (Copeau).”

Are there archives of the magazine and of its director Gianfranco Palmery?

The *Arsenale* archives contain the complete collection of manuscripts - everything that was ever published. They are divided according to issue and are full of indications in red for the printshop: font type, spacing, etc. There are over a hundred photographs of both Italian and foreign writers that were used in the "Notes on the Contributors" pages, and a collection of artwork including the original works for the covers. In addition are letters: contributors commenting on issues, critics, letters that accompanied submissions or subscriptions, plus drafts of letters written by Gianfranco. To end, are things like the old metal plates, quite peculiar objects with their reversed images incised on sheets of zinc.

The archives of Gianfranco are even richer. They range from his original notes and manuscripts, divided according to book, essay, article; to correspondence, photos, artworks, curiosities, newspaper clippings, limited edition books, manuscripts of other authors, not to mention his phenomenal book collection.

Can the archives be consulted?

I welcome requests for research and am even considering giving the material to a library to make it easier for scholars. My email is: nancywatkins2@gmail.com

Links for *Arsenale* Magazine

Editorial Staff and Tables of Contents :

<http://www.labirintolibri.com/arsenale2/arsenale.html>

Editorials: <http://www.labirintolibri.com/arsenale2/arsenaleeditor.html>

Authors and artists published: <http://www.labirintolibri.com/arsenale2/arsenaleautori.html>

Reviews: <http://www.labirintolibri.com/arsenale2/recensioniansenale.html>

Links for Gianfranco Palmery

Biographical information: <http://www.labirintolibri.com/palmery/palmery.html>

Special section in Teccani:

http://www.treccani.it/lingua_italiana/speciali/Palmery/mainSpeciale.html