

Anima Festival: a theatrical battle for the soul of our societies

In the fall of 2025, thanks to UNIMA-Internationale's Passport Festival program, I had the opportunity to travel to Cagliari, Sardinia (Italy), to attend Anima festival organized by the Is Mascareddas company. The company has been creating puppet shows for adults and children for 45 years and contributes to the promotion of local and international artists through its festival.

The festival takes place at Sa Manifattura, a former tobacco factory turned cultural center. In the inner courtyard, surrounded by old industrial decor, behind wrought iron fences, a few steps suffice to enter another world. There, a stuffed gorilla sits enthroned on a pedestal, tiny carnivorous plants await adoption, and a board game forces you to make ethical choices both profound and absurd. The theme of this year's festival is rights. Human rights, but also the rights of plants to breathe (or to eat us?), of nature to flourish, of other animals to live in peace around us. Before each show, a gorilla (yes, you read that right!) comes out to introduce the work to the audience. They read an article from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then they describe a current situation: statistics on violence against women, the rise of authoritarianism, the climate crisis... the festival team reminds us that rights are never guaranteed, that they remain fragile. And perhaps also that art is essential for remembering and continuing to fight together.

I feel this political force of the festival throughout the five days. Several shows address issues of war, forced displacement of populations, and mistreatment of the vulnerable. Artistic director Donatella Pau actively champions art that disturbs as much as it inspires, works that give visibility to those whom society often tries to erase. For the Anima team, art is not separate from life. Rather, it is an essential tool to see our world more clearly, and act.

Every evening, one or two different shows. From Italy, France, Chile, Palestine. Several puppetry techniques are showcased, from physical performance to object theater, from glove to rod puppets. Among my favorites was the impressive solo performance by Teatro Medico Ipnottico, which adapts the novel *Flowers for Algernon* in a Pulcinella-style puppet theater. A beautiful reflection on technological mirages and the true quest for happiness, full of humor and slapstick!

I loved the short piece *Brigitte et le petit bal perdu*, set in a miniature decor where three spectators observe the intimate scene, in the style of Brazilian lambe lambe. The effects are magical in their technical simplicity, and it is a pleasure to admire all the details of the world invented by the creator, Nadia Addis. Bravo!





Another hit: *Questo non è un amore*, a solo piece in object theater by Crepamuro Teatro, which skillfully recounts a romantic tragedy on the high seas using only pipes and tobacco as props. Scenes of the story are cleverly interspersed with vignettes about the history of the tobacco trade, and let's just say that it all takes on even greater meaning when performed in a former cigarette factory!

Finally, the show *Le scriptographe* by Théâtre de la Massue (France) is presented twice, and I return to see it again because the first performance struck me so deeply. A large table from which mysterious little characters emerge, performing various actions in silence for several minutes before disappearing. The technical mastery is exceptional, the mechanisms surprise and delight the audience, but the heart of the show lies beyond. Six audience members are seated around the table from the beginning, pen and paper in hand. During the performance, they must write, inspired by the images they witness. At the end, each person reads their text aloud. It is wonderful to have access to six minds, six different sensibilities, which respond so differently to the same images. All the texts are rich in their own way, and it is precisely that diversity in the worlds they construct from the same experience that allows us to touch on the deep complexity of each single person. A simple and precious moment of humanity.



In addition to the performances, several activities are organized, including an inspiring community philosophy workshop led by Giulia Balzano. An opportunity for a rich discussion on freedom and democracy among strangers... and a great challenge to practice my Italian! Not to mention the venue: the Is Mascareddas workshop! A timeless setting, surrounded by hundreds of books on puppetry, art, and theater from all over the world, and puppets from the company's most memorable shows of the last four decades. Every time you walk into their studio, it feels like a living museum, rooted in its past but always looking to the future. I am very grateful for getting to spend some time there admiring the traces of their artistry.



During the week, I also had the opportunity to participate in a training session offered by Daria Ivanova and Kateryna Lukianenko from Sixth Sense Theatre in Ukraine. Their project is to create works for audiences who are blind or blindfolded. Since puppetry is often seen as primarily a visual art form, I was very curious to learn how other senses can inhabit the stage and allow us to tell stories in a different way. Over a three-day workshop, we explored how the other senses awake when we are deprived of sight, and we created a short scene for two groups of spectators to experience at the end of the festival. It was very rewarding for me to learn about this new technique, which will enrich my future projects. But the greater gift was the opportunity to meet other local artists who took part in the workshop. For me, this is the most valuable aspect of this UNIMA Passport: encounters with puppeteers from all over the world. Thank you to Daria, Azzurra, Giorgia, Noemi, Bobore, Alessandra, and Donatella for their insight, their unique perspectives, and the pleasure we shared in creating and performing together.

The hospitality shown by Is Mascareddas and the festival team was fabulous. I immediately felt at home among them, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart for this memorable experience. Thank you to Marco, Donatella, Alessandra, Claudia, Tonino, and all the volunteers, technicians, artists, and friends I met during this extra-intense week!

Even though it's at least 20 degrees Celsius every day of the year in Cagliari (let's just say their "fall" is a lot warmer than mine in Canada!), the real warmth of the Anima festival comes from the people who bring it to life, night after night, year after year. I can't wait to come back and see you all again, and I hope to see you in Montreal soon!

Thank you for everything. A *presto, carissimi!*



Antonia, with Donatella Pau (director of Is Mascareddas) and Daria Akhmatova (workshop leader)

Photo credit : Alonso Crespo