

Verscio - Scuola Teatro Dimitri

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Opening the door on 19th century rural life

It's daybreak. In the kitchen of a cramped, two-room house polenta is being cooked over an open fire, filling the kitchen with smoke.

A few people huddle around the burning embers: an old woman is sitting on a wooden bench, a man and a couple of barefoot toddlers are standing close to her. The door is kept ajar to let out the choking smoke.



18th century house from Cugnasco/TI

This is how the days started in villages of upper Ticino – the Sopraceneri in the 19th century. A Cugnasco house is one of three rural buildings from Ticino that were disassembled, stone by stone or plank by plank, and transported north to Switzerland's open-air museum, Ballenberg, where they have been reconstructed.

The diet of 19th century rural Ticino was very poor and monotonous. There was polenta and rye bread. Chestnuts saw them through the winter months, and potatoes. The chestnuts were dried and either ground to make flour or cooked in water or milk. Often they had nothing to eat but chestnuts for three months at a time.

In the evening everyone moved upstairs to sleep in the single room above the kitchen. They slept in their clothes because they didn't have undershirts or nightshirts. Two or three children would share a bed, and in that way, they were each other's hot water bottles.

A typical family was made up of five to ten people – adults and their children, an unmarried aunt or two, an uncle and perhaps a grandparent who had reached the ripe old age of 50. They rarely lived under one roof. Children from the age of five and other young people would have moved between the various primitive structures tending the livestock – consisting of a couple of cows, sheep and a goat – only coming to the main house in the village a few times a year.

Even though conditions were primitive, daily life was governed by a complex set of rules. There were

statutes regulating how most of the land – held in common by the villagers – was to be used, who could use it and when. It was also regulated when a family was allowed to take their livestock up into the mountains to graze.

Chestnut groves were normally common property but the individual trees were privately owned, with a single tree sometimes belonging to several families. One chestnut tree could feed up to five families.

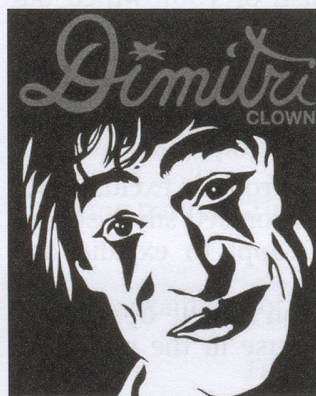
One cow was kept at the main house to provide milk for the children and older people. The little money they had served to buy material for clothes or salt.

Infant mortality was about 50 per cent, and most children who survived did not have the privilege of going to school and were therefore often illiterate. The few schools that existed were run by the village priest but not many of these men of the cloth were capable teachers.

Property was divided among all the children. As the fields got smaller and smaller, emigration became a desirable option. Often the family would borrow money to pay for one member to emigrate. Of course these emigrants were expected to get rich and then send money home to their poor relations.

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Dimitri founded the school in Verscio in response to the wishes of a group of young people who were interested in his type of theatre. The school teaches a non-verbal, artistic, poetic, musical, burlesque form of theatre. It was clear from the beginning that it would be a strict school.

The school started with the subjects pantomime, dance, acrobatics, improvisation, folk-songs and history of theatre. The school is now 25 years old and the disciplines have been reinforced, changed and new ones have been added. The main subjects are acrobatics, dance, improvisation, movement, rhythm, juggling. There are also summer courses.

Studying in a small village like Verscio is certainly unusual: an experience that leaves its mark. Relative isolation in a magnificent and inspiring setting makes it possible to work without distractions. The curriculum is very full, the timetable demanding. There are many opportunities to explore and develop one's own artistic interests.