

## *Passion Day: A Project Review of Translation and Performance in Sicily*

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### **Introduction**

The present review focusses on a project I ran in the city of Naro in the province of Agrigento (Sicily) based on an annual religious performative event: Passion Day which took place on the 27th April 2025 and marked the seventh year of this tradition. The project was supported by the University of Glasgow's Impact Development and Evaluation Fund and co-created with Maki Rooksby (Research Impact Officer for the College of Arts and Humanities), Valentina Cralli (Research Assistant, PhD student at School of Modern Languages and Cultures), and Massimiliano Arena, the director of the non-profit theatre group, I Contemplativi. This review will provide an insight into the staging of Passion Day, offer an overview of the key features of our project, and conclude by underscoring the wider impacts on sustaining religious performance traditions through translation.

### **Passion Day**

Passion Day in Naro is an all-day event which re-enacts the Sacred Representations of the Passion of Christ — from Christ's condemnation to death to his resurrection. The event is hosted at the former monastery of St Augustine's church which is transformed into a large open-air theatre offering a deeply spiritual and cultural experience. A number of local theatre companies from all around Sicily are invited to participate in the event. This year 14 companies

(over 400 actors) took part. Each company performs a scene from the Passion of Christ (14 scenes in total in 2025). The script is adapted from *Adam's Ransom* (1750), also known as *The Martyrdom of Jesus Christ*, which was written by the Sicilian playwright, Orioles Philip (see Bancheri 2015).



Figure 1. St Augustine's monastery, Naro, Agrigento. Photograph courtesy of Massimiliano Arena.

Passion Day extends a long-standing tradition in Sicily of staging Passion Plays from as far back as the Middle Ages. Passion Plays are staged as street processions over Holy Week (Ballarò and Miceli 2023). One of the oldest Sacred Representations takes place in the city of Naro (De Francisci 2024). On Good Friday, volunteer actors re-enact Jesus's trial, crucifixion, and resurrection in front of large crowds of bystanders. Wooden statues of Christ and Mary are carried by a group of men through the streets and, as they reach a monumental cross situated in a central piazza, the statue of Jesus is gently roped around the top — in some cities, such as in Pergusa in the province of Enna, an actor is tied to a cross or holds on to two handles fixed on either side. More than a series of religious dramas, these performances are social celebrations that bring communities together and exhibit all the many vibrant artistic and creative talents among the participants, from the non-professional make-up artist creating the 'bloody' effects to the organisers of the spectacular fireworks concluding the festivities.



Figure 2. The Crucifixion interpreted by the City of Grotta, Agrigento. Photo courtesy of Massimiliano Arena.

### **Translating Minoritised Performance Cultures**

Passion Day had never previously involved any professional translators which meant that the performances had not been made accessible to non-Italian/Sicilian speakers. From this starting point, our project was aimed at inspiring new, more inclusive, approaches to staging the Sacred Representations and, more generally, at generating a new understanding of the value of preserving and promoting minoritised performance cultures through translation.

The underpinning research to the project was based on the work I have produced on Sicilian popular theatre and translating performance cultures (De Francisci, forthcoming; De Francisci and Marinetti 2025; De Francisci and Marinetti 2022). UNESCO has classified Sicilian as a ‘vulnerable’ language and with the rise of globalisation re-shaping Sicily’s religious landscape, the long-standing tradition of the Easter street processions is also at risk of disappearing. While translation strategies have often occluded the presence of non-standard languages and under-represented cultures, our project proposed to develop alternative strategies to counteract this.

For example, while Passion Day is usually attended by the local community and neighbouring towns within the Agrigento region, the project developed Italian-English bilingual theatre programmes to appeal to a broader audience. 2025 coincided with the year Agrigento was made Italy’s City of Culture and, therefore, the bilingual advertisement was directly targeted at the increase in tourists visiting the region. Indeed, for the first time, the event was able to attract a diverse range of spectators, including members of the audience from Gambia, Cameroon, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

Nuova Passione Day DE PRESSO CRISTI		Scaletta delle Scene Scene Schedule	
ALCAMO (TP) City of ALCAMO (TP) Pro Loco	<b>Vita Pubblica</b> Public Life		
PERGUSA (EN) City of PERGUSA (EN) Confraternita SS. Crocifisso	<b>Piano di cattura</b> The Planned Seizure		
DELIA (CL) City of DELIA (CL) Ass. Settimana Santa	<b>Spartenza</b> The Partition		
CALZANISSETTA (CL) City of CALZANISSETTA (CL) Ass. Teatro della Parola I Nauti (discepoli)	<b>Kaifas</b> Caiaphas		
FRANCAVILLA DI SICILIA (ME) City of FRANCAVILLA DI SICILIA Ass. A Passioni	<b>Sinedrio</b> The Sanhedrin Trial		
NARO (AG) City of NARO (AG) IContemplAttivi	<b>Disperazione di Giuda</b> Judas's Desperation		
RIZZICONI (RC) City of RIZZICONI (RC) ASS. E.S.A.T. ente Sacra Tragedia	<b>Pentimento di Pietro</b> Peter's Repentance		
GROTTE (AG) City of GROTTE (AG) Ass. I Giudeli	<b>la Colonna</b> Scourging at the Pillar		
RAFFADALI (AG) City of RAFFADALI (AG) Ass. Nuova Erbeso	<b>l'Offendo il cielo</b> <b>Estrema difesa di Gesù</b> Offending the Heavens The Ultimate Defense of Jesus		
SOMMATEO (CL) City of SOMMATEO (CL) Ass. Insieme per un sogno	<b>Ecce Homo e Condanna</b> Ecce Homo and the Condemnation		
JORPOLO JANCAIO (AG) City of JORPOLO JANCAIO Ass. La Fenice	<b>Via Crucis e Crocifissione</b> The Stations of the Cross and the Crucifixion		
NARO (AG) City of NARO (AG) IContemplAttivi	<b>Scienza Crucis</b> The Decent from the Cross		
PERGUSA (EN) City of PERGUSA (EN) Confraternita SS. Crocifisso	<b>il Pianto di Maria al Sepolcro</b> Mary Weeping at the Tomb		
	<b>Risurrezione</b> The Resurrection		

Figure 3. Bilingual theatre programme. Image courtesy of Massimiliano Arena

Furthermore, the event was inaugurated with a speech in both Italian and English by me as Principal Investigate (PI) and the theatre director, Massimiliano Arena. The inauguration was aimed at raising awareness of the importance of safeguarding lesser-spoken languages and subaltern performance cultures. The speech, now subtitled, can be accessed via our project website devoted to protecting Sicilian dialect through translation: a dialect which has been an important vehicle for so many great artists, such as Nobel-Prize winning Luigi Pirandello: <https://translatingpirandello.gla.ac.uk/en/follow-on/>.

Above all, the project introduced an English voice-over to the day's event. As PI, my role was to offer a summary in English — heard live over the loudspeaker monitors — of each scene before each performance. With the core narrative of Christ predominantly well known, this also helped international audiences to follow the action. By including the use of a voice-over to the event, the project allowed wider audiences to follow the interpretations without having to erase the source language from stage. In fact, many of the companies performed the scenes in Sicilian. While the original script is written in literary Italian, various companies translated the text into Sicilian dialect to help make the action more contemporary. The use of the voice-over, therefore, helped to preserve the vulnerable language which was retained in the re-enactments.

The switching of the different linguistic codes, from literary Italian to dialect, is in no small part rooted in Italy's sociolinguistic makeup. Italian as we know it was codified at the beginning of the sixteenth century, based on the fourteenth-century Tuscan used in particular by Petrarch for poetry and Boccaccio for prose. It remained for centuries above all a literary language, beyond the reach of many, as it needed to be studied and acquired from books. In everyday life people used their local vernacular, the so-called Italian 'dialects'. It must be noted that, in the

Italian context, the term ‘dialect’ refers to cognate languages, all derived from Latin. These are Italo-Romance idioms in their own right, and not variants of Italian as such (Richardson 2001).

To conclude the event, surveys were distributed in both Italian and English to help capture audience responses. Questions recorded where audiences had come from and, importantly, whether there had been a chance of perception in terms of how spectators viewed religious celebrations and the safeguarding of cultural heritage. These were followed up with subsequent interviews with a range of theatre practitioners who took part in the event, including the directors, Giusy Amato from (Teatro Alcamo in the province of Trapani) and Stefano Rizzo (from the city of Pergusa), and various actors from I Contemplativi. Results show that the practitioners had never experienced a Passion Day event involving translation, and that audiences were eager to return to similar events, valuing the new knowledge gained around popular traditions and artistic patrimony.

### **Conclusion**

By, therefore, offering an overview of translation resources developed by the project to both attract broader audiences as well as to protect vulnerable languages and traditions — namely through the use of bilingual advertisements, a voiceover, subtitled digital media, and surveys capturing audience reactions — it is hoped that this review will help to increase understanding more widely around the importance of safeguarding the religious performance cultures through translation and, moreover, to offer the ‘tools’ to inspire similar working models for future practice. To finish, a question which emerges here is what can our research do to help protect the future of minoritised performance cultures. An answer could be simply that of increasing understanding among international audiences of our heritage and patronage by raising the visibility of our cultural traditions, such as today’s Easter celebrations and the re-enactment of the Passion of Christ. It is hoped here that, in drawing attention to current practices in Sicily, through translation, collaborations, and digital media, this will work towards raising the status of popular theatre more widely. It is my belief that closer relationships and clearer communications with academics, theatre practitioners, and translators are crucial not just to productivity and ensuring a high quality of our performances, but also to creating and maintaining good relations with wider audiences.

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### About the Author

**Enza De Francisci** is Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Glasgow and program director of the Glasgow-Nankai (China) for MSc Translation Studies (double degree). Recent publications include her monograph, *A "New" Woman in Verga and Pirandello: From Page to Stage* (2018), and her co-edited volumes *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange: Early Modern to Present* with Chris Stamatakis (Routledge, 2017) and *Translation in the Performing Arts: Embodiment, Materiality, and Inclusion* with Cristina Marinetti (Routledge, 2025). Her work has been featured several times on BBC radio, including a World Service Forum episode on Pirandello and another one on the 19th-century Italian actress Eleonora Duse.