OU School of Drama in Italy

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Warmed by the hearty welcome of the Duclaux family and armed with the thoughts of Italo Calvino and the words of William Shakespeare, we began our Journey to Italy in Arezzo with Kirk Duclaux’s enlightening lecture on the fabulous Piero della Francesca frescoes and a festive dinner on the Piazza Grande. The spectacle of the colorful (in every sense of the word) spectacle known as the Giostro di Saraceno which literally transformed the town of Arezzo into a medieval arena for the huge competition. Jason Houston’s frescoes would become a part of our discussions in the Shakespeare in Italy class, as would so many of our treasured experiences in Italy, caprese, pasta and gelato of the Tuscan trattoria. Not to mention fine lecture in the Casa di Petrarca on Dante, Petrarch and Boccacio, the “Tre Coronci,” also became part of valuable reflection in our classroom discussions. We attended an international production of Scaramouche which was ideal for exploring many of Shakespeare’s characters. The list of connections could go on and on.

The works I chose as the basis for our Italian exploration, Calvino’s Six Memos for a New Millennium and six of Shakespeare’s plays set in Italy (and did you know that more than half of the plays in the canon are so?), proved to be fine springboards for discussion of the 20 students’ Italian adventure. Majors from Letters, Marketing, Musical Theatre, Art History, Mathematics, Political Science and Engineering used our classroom discussions to inform the various excursions and experiences of their summer weeks in Italy. I found the course to be challenging for the students and for me, and was very gratified as I read their final papers to find that their insights reflected much deep thought and investigation in what was for many of them new territory in aesthetics, theatre, literature and art history. It was an added pleasure to find the connections between the thoughts and remarks of my colleagues, Kirk Duclaux, Randy Lewis and Jason Houston, and to incorporate those in the Shakespeare in Italy class. And so, I believe that we found a happy and successful union between the intellectual pursuits of the classroom and the joys of la dolce vita that is Italia.

Professoressa Shaughnessey with Michael and Hailey
La Pieve: An Italian Farm

Braedon Collins
Honors ’10

Hidden in the Tuscan hills, a short windy bus ride from Arezzo, one would find La Pieve an olive and grape vineyard. Small and seemingly unimportant against the vast landscape that it is found, this vineyard is anything but what it seems. At this vineyard there are not only olives and grapes waiting to be harvested, to be bottled and shipped out, commercialized to be sold to make a quick euro. Instead there is tradition, passion and respect.

At the top of the hill in front of the villa that overlooks this vineyard, we are introduced to our guide Sergio, a man that might be described as an Italian film star calm and cool as he smokes his cigarette and a crocodile hunter signatured by the tooth hanging around his neck. Beginning our tour he explains the act of the picking and processing that goes on, he also explains that since as long as the vineyard has been here, families from the surrounding areas of Arezzo, Siena and Florence come and pick olives for the vineyard in return to receive a portion of their harvest pressed by the La Pieve press, to take home to their family. This tradition still exists today. On further in our tour we are taken to the wine cellar. At this point I suddenly grasped how much Sergio enjoys doing what he does. As he talked about the grapes and the way they work together with the spices, or down to the very wood that it is stored in, emphasizing on the extreme importance of balance and the delicate nature of the art of wine making, I could see the passion that Sergio had for wine and how his passion in incorporated into producing his product. He spoke about this process like a painter might speak of using a palate of colors to blend together on a canvas to come alive and convey the message intended, or how a composer might speak of bringing together the pitches of the diverse sounds of the instrument inventory to come together in perfect harmony at the climax of his composition. After leaving the cellar we continued on to the dining area where I was able to experience one of my favorite meals in the many that I experienced in my travels, along with a Toscana cooking lesson from the vineyards chef. I also experienced a conversation with Sergio at dinner, one which I will always try and hold on to in remembrance of this experience. As I sat at dinner listening to the Italian conversation between my professor and Sergio, clearly not understanding a word, Sergio then explained to me about his culture in a way I could relate and understand. He told me “Pomodoro Penne” (two words I knew dearly because they were found on the typical Italian menu). He then took a tomato cut in half and spread its juices over a piece of Tuscan bread, cut the tomato in to pieces, seasoned the bread (and of course), doused it with olive oil. He then told me that although this tomato bread had few ingredients, and was very simple in composition, it was indeed very good. “This is like Tuscany” he explained, Tuscany is a simple place but even in its few components it is beautiful. He was right Tuscany was very beautiful and the tomato bread was delicious, and maybe the simple things in life are more important that all the things that I find myself getting caught up in.

Braedon in the Colosseum
The night before the joust, the different neighborhoods in Arezzo have a celebratory dinner or what could be compared to a tailgate party. It's kind of a “pump up” for the big jousting competition to take place the following night. Although a medieval joust might not sound as exciting as a football game to us, or some other popular sporting event, the amount of people that come to cheer on their horse and rider that night and their enthusiasm create a very exciting atmosphere.

As we walked through the streets of Arezzo towards the neighborhood of Sant' Andrea, we started to hear the music and the chanting of the crowd… this was not what we were expecting at all. In fact, I was picturing something along the lines of a small cookout: maybe some locals and some bad picnic food, and then us standing awkwardly to one side as we tried in vain to communicate with anyone that cared enough to try to talk to us. But when we finally got close I realized how wrong I had been. Instead of my vision of us intruding on a small cliquey gathering, we walked into the biggest block party I'd ever been to. There were hundreds of people and the DJ was blasting music from big speakers on a stage set up against a building. We rounded the corner and saw the strips of picnic tables, which had been placed end to end in the street, stretching almost the entire block and already filled with excited fans. Kirk's wife Charlotte led our group through the crowd to a table already reserved for us, right in the thick of it.

When we had finished getting over our initial shock, everyone started to relax and really enjoy the party. Fruit juice and bread were brought out to all the tables and people started to get even louder. The DJ never stopped playing music, except of course when someone started the neighborhood chant, which I unfortunately never learned the words to, but enjoyed all the same.

We realized after we sat down that the people doing the chanting, and in fact almost all of the crowd, were younger people around our age. They were so fun to watch because they were so excited. It definitely reminded me of an OU football tailgate, only, I hate to admit, maybe a little wilder. Everyone, including most of our group, had a scarf with the green and white colors representing Sant’Andrea, and they were either waving it around wildly in the air or wearing it proudly tied around their neck or arm.

As the night progressed the party just kept on escalating. The food was served, surprisingly quickly when you think about how many people were eating, and it was pretty good too – definitely not the bad picnic food I had been expecting. We had meats and cheeses and the main course was ravioli, and of course the unlimited supply of bread.

After people finished eating, everyone in the crowd got up and started mingling. Most of our group joined in and the people ended up being incredibly nice. I think they even taught a few girls in our group the neighborhood chant. The DJ stayed the whole time and everyone was dancing in the street, to American music mostly, definitely songs we recognized, which was neat. So long story short, everyone stayed out too late that night and had too much fun, but it was such a unique experience that I wouldn’t have done it any other way. We were definitely excited for the next day to come, so we could watch the joust and see what all the excitement was about.
No one really knew what to expect as we walked down Corso Italia to Piazza Grande, where the yearly joust was going to take place on that typical, warm Italian Saturday night in June. After seeing a number of medieval parades on any given night of the week fill the streets of Arezzo, marching in beat to loud drums and dressed in vibrant, straight out of a Monty Python film style, we knew it would be something extravagant. And something we could only see in Arezzo. And something we'll never forget.

Colorful flags hung from the windows on each street, displaying the pride of each of the city’s four districts, or neighborhoods, which would be competing in the joust that evening. The colors of our neighborhood, St. Andrea, were green and white, and we all made sure that we had scarves to show our loyalty, much like sporting the crimson and cream at every OU football game. It’s all about the pride, and the competition.

So we followed the crowds and the obscure signs and joined the large group of people waiting to enter the piazza. Every few minutes they would allow only a small group to go in. The anticipation kept rising. So, little by little, we fought our way through the Italians and into the Piazza Grande, where we climbed the bleachers and took our seats. It was dusk by this time, and the sun was setting behind the rustic and weathered tower of Town Hall, which had without a doubt witnessed many jousts in the past.

The bleachers lined the edges of the circular piazza which quickly overflowed with onlookers donning scarves of every color. There were ceremonial parades and processions, and performers hurling flags into the air. Finally the joust began, after each competitor made an individual entrance on their horses, walking across the long path they would soon be speeding down.

Each jouster, dressed as an armored knight, had to charge down the path holding a lance, and hit the target at the other end of the piazza. A joust could receive up to five points depending on where he hit the target with his lance. The district with the most points wins.

The atmosphere filled with concentration when the first competitor charged down the piazza. Crowds of people jumped out of their seats to see him hit the target with his lance. “Cinque! Cinque!” yelled a family of Italians sat in front of us, demanding the highest score for their district. Even the kids were hysterical while waiting for the judgment. The chanting and clapping grew louder with each competitor.

It was a tight competition as the event neared the end. The last jouster was up, and this final run would decide the winner. He stormed down the path and hit the target. Anticipation rushed through the dull roar of whispering Italians as we waited with hopeful expectations that St. Andrea would win again this year. But it was the red and green neighborhood of Crucifera that ran away with the golden lance. And, like rowdy college students tearing down the goal post after an unexpected victory, the locals of Crucifera swarmed the square to touch the lance. Even though St Andrea didn’t take home the gold, they hosted a great party the night before!
Recently, much of the driving force behind this new emphasis on an OU in Arezzo program comes from the International Programs Center (IPC). Under Vice Provost for International Programs and Executive Director Dr Zach Messitte, IPC has taken the lead in making OU in Arezzo a signature or flagship program with English as the main language of instruction – in conjunction with the regularly scheduled UNISI classes taught in Italian. The new flagship OU in Arezzo program seeks to create more tailor-made curricula that appeal to a wider range of faculty and students and that will facilitate access to possible scholarships and funding. The flagship OU in Arezzo program also seeks to assure OU students and faculty that upon completion of a semester or year abroad that their experience will prepare them for political, cultural, and professional leadership roles in an increasingly global community.

In order for the OU in Arezzo program to be successful for everyone interested it is absolutely fundamental that we encourage OU faculty to consider teaching in Arezzo for a predetermined period of time without fear of losing precious time in their respective departments or to their peers across the country. A faculty generated, tailor-made curriculum will help ensure all prospective students and faculty that studying in Arezzo will not be a wasted semester. Our primary goal is simple – increase the number of OU students in Arezzo. The first step in making this happen is to publicize the Arezzo program more effectively through student and faculty outreach.

Much of the success OU is having in Arezzo is due in large part to the important groundwork laid by the OU Education Abroad Department under Dr Millie Audas. Her 22 years of experience in guiding the OU study abroad programs and it’s staff have created the proper foundation for the more expansive program now being developed in Arezzo.
Considering that fewer than 1% of OU students study abroad for a semester (roughly 150 students compared to UT-Austin's 2,244 and TAMU's 1,162) there is certainly room for growth. For the month of September I will be in Norman working with Ed Abroad and IPC talking with faculty, staff, and students (past, present and future) about generating more interest in OU's flagship program in Arezzo. The following are key points that need to be addressed for the program to be successful:

- Coordinate a larger core of classes taught in English on the UNISI campus in Arezzo via independent studies or visiting faculty and which correspond to the OU academic calendar thereby encouraging non-Italian proficient students to study in Arezzo

- Guaranteeing OU students a seamless study abroad experience without fear of loosing time, credit or scholarship money thereby encouraging

- Collaborating with faculty in an effort to customize curricula based on their students and departments specific needs and interests thereby encouraging innovative semester and intercession programs for non traditional study abroad students to study in Arezzo (e.g. business, engineering, and physical sciences)

In the end, OU students will have access to a study abroad experience that compares to other Big XII schools. The experience will enlighten their global consciousness and enhance their career skills, making them more valued by employers.

In spite of the sorry shape of the US Dollar, the recent Journey to Italy (JTI) 2008 program was the best attended and according to this year's participants "the best year ever" - past participants may beg to differ which year was indeed the best!

Regardless, it's safe to say that OU's Italian summer study abroad program to Rome, Florence, Arezzo, and Venice is a roaring success. For the first time in a JTI program the Weitzenhoffer Family School of Fine Arts was represented by School of Drama Professor Susan Shaughnesssey who taught a multidisciplinary class on Shakespeare in Italy. Her time in Arezzo allowed her to cultivate important connections for the School of Fine Arts many of which bode well for the near future – more on that as ideas progress.

OU Honors in Arezzo is generously continuing their support by contributing both Honors students and award-winning Professor and Associate Dean Dr Randall Lewis to the JTI program, as well as the semester program. As a result, in the near future the Arezzo programs will be able to include a program more conducive to an Honors specific course of study. In fact, one Honors student was able to utilize two of the programs running in Italy this summer – Honors JTI 2008 and the Archaeology Dig in Orvieto. The flexibility of the Honors College, made this student's dream of studying in Italy a credit earning reality.

The new flagship program that is being considered for OU in Arezzo as well as the established Journey to Italy program seek to bring OU students into a closer dialogue with a larger spectrum of Italian issues ranging from the study of ancient Italian cultures, to Renaissance art, history and music, to modern business practices, to political issues and EU integration. This type of holistic curriculum to be taught in English is welcomed both on campus at UNISI and in the corridors of power among the Arentine political and business establishment. OU has the support of Arezzo, now it requires the support of the entire Norman campus for a signature OU branded flagship program to be functional and successful.