

How and why I wrote **CAZZAROLA!**

Norman Nawrocki

2014

As an anarchist writer, I'm no different from other scribes who try to be socially engaged in their work and lives. I drink beer, write, and do my best to live according to my anarchist principles. And I try to incorporate anarchist thought, experiences and visions in all my creative work.

It's a daily, lifelong challenge.

So, when the *Fifth Estate* asked me to write a piece about my first novel, *CAZZAROLA! Anarchy, Romani, Love, Italy*, I thought maybe it could be useful for anyone interested in the arts and anarchy. Maybe someone might be inspired to dig out a moth-balled manuscript and finish it. The five-year creative and investigative process of writing *CAZZAROLA!* and the same-named companion theatre piece and musical soundtrack, is one example of how and why I work as a writer, a musician, an actor and an anarchist. It was no non-stop flow of ideas, research and writing.

Life often got in the way. As did death and illness and breakups and paying the anarchist's bills. But despite all the setbacks in my writing schedule—I wanted to have the book out in one year—it took five—and given the current rise of neo-fascism across Europe, the book is actually more relevant now than I could have ever imagined.

In the beginning

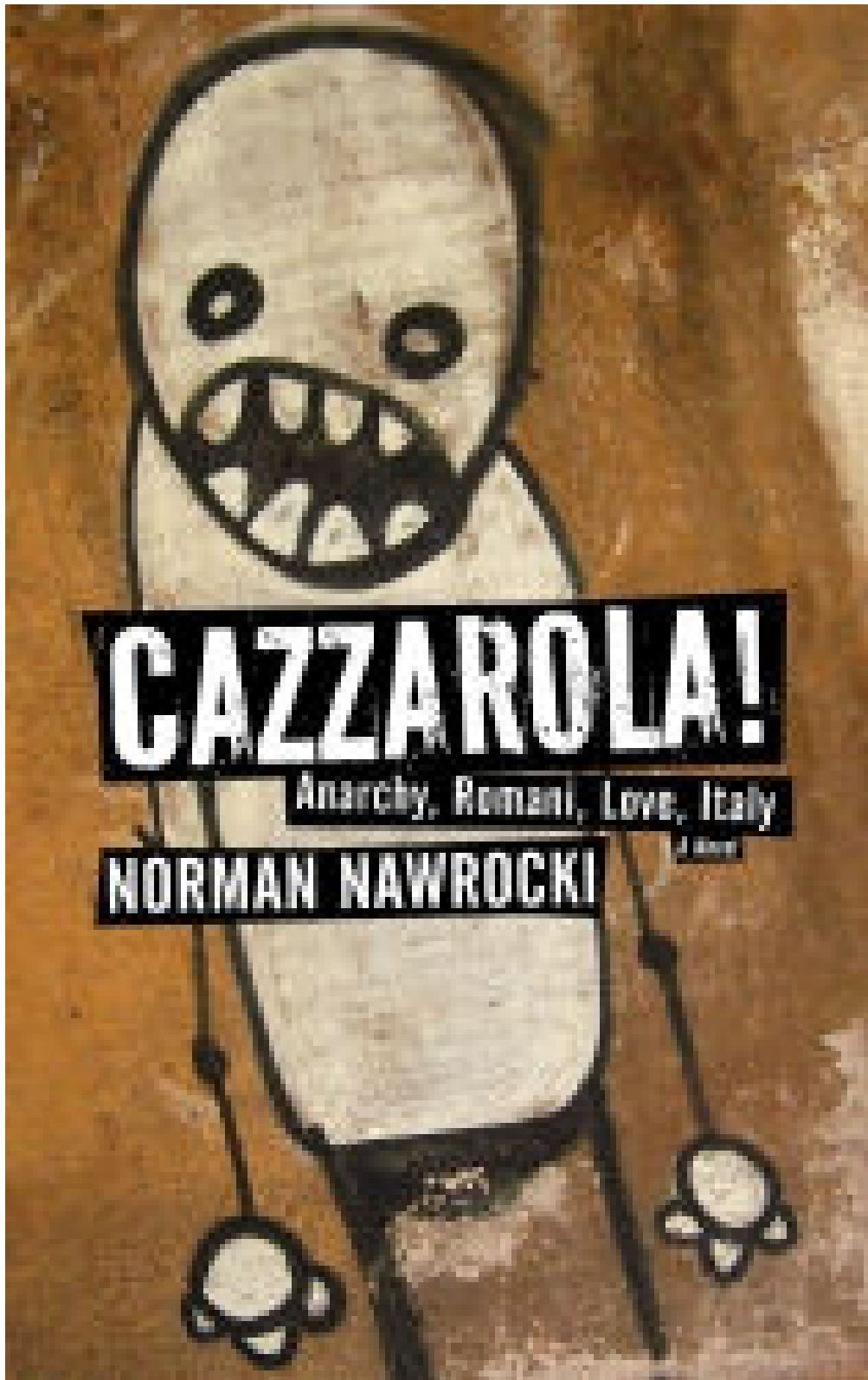
In 2007, I head to Italy to promote the Italian translation of a previous book (*The Anarchist & The Devil do Cabaret*, Black Rose Books, 2003, translated into *L'Anarchico e il Diavolo fanno cabaret*, Editrice Il Sirente, 2007). My Italian publishers organize an incredible tour jam-packed with shows, interviews, appearances at the Rome Book Fair, visits to anarchist squats and endless convivial meals where tables are crammed with paninni, pizza and beer. It's full-on red carpet treatment unlike any I have ever experienced before.

Day and night I am pummeled with questions about the book. Meanwhile, out of the corner of my eye, I catch glimpses of TV news clips—something about Roma (“Gypsy”) refugees and their camps. At the time, I can't make sense of it. My Italian isn't good enough and I'm busy performing shows and promoting the other book (it also included a musical soundtrack and a theatre piece).

The tour is a huge success and I return home to Canada vowing to churn out a collection of Italian-themed short stories. But after a few weeks of intense writing day and night, I stop. Whoa! Sure, I can fictionalize all my wonderful tour experiences, but something is nagging me. What's actually happening to the Roma over there?

I Google-translate the Italian daily press. Jaw drop. Thousands of Roma refugees are being persecuted across Italy as a result of deliberate political policies targeting them by the neo-fascist Berlusconi government in power. There are daily attacks in the streets and violent evictions of their camps.

The attacks are intensifying. My growing collection of short stories now makes less sense. Instead, previously faint images from Italian TV news clips I caught over there come into focus. I set aside the dozen or so pieces I have



written and switch gears. Time for serious research into the history and politics behind the attacks on the Roma. But how to tell this story? How do I make it truthful and engaging?

I dig up the roots of the current neo-fascist cancer consuming Italy and provide a historical context for its regeneration. At the same time, I explore the multiple forms of resistance to neo-fascism and fascism from the 1920s to today.

I'm thinking: the book has to reach a broad audience. So I base it on the life of a not quite ordinary, fictional Italian family from 1880 to today—the Discordias—and the life of a contemporary fictional Roma refugee family, the Dinicu. My aim: an historical novel interwoven with a contemporary love story. Because what's an anarchist novel without a love story?

I give myself a one year writing deadline. Shelve the new poetry, new albums, new shows. Priority creation: novel. Given the gravity of the situation in Italy, it has to come out ASAP, ring alarm bells and direct attention to the plight of the Roma—right now. But a novel is a massive undertaking. It demands 24/7 feeding. In return, it can be all-consuming. After countless setbacks and revisions, this one takes five years to complete. (Meanwhile, the impatient one in me fast forwards two poetry collections and gets them published.)

I spend days and nights researching Italy and the Roma and immerse myself in the two cultures. I buy and borrow countless books, try to watch an Italian or Roma movie every night and teach myself more Italian. I borrow hundreds of music CDs from the library and listen to a century of Italian and Roma music—all genres.

I read classic and contemporary Italian novels, poetry and short stories, Roma, too. I attend lectures about Italian history, call old Italian friends, meet new Roma ones, interview Italian and Roma political activists, neighbours and friends of friends. I try to absorb everything. I live in my book, breathe in and out the idea of my book. I imagine myself in Italy and in Romania, home of my Roma family.

I dream in Italian, cook and drink only Italian, and in my mind, create and imagine the characters that will bring my book to life. It's more of a challenge to live and dream in Roma, but sporadically, the dreams come.

In 2008, I return to Italy for another book tour and firsthand research into endless questions. What are the historical origins of Fascism? How to understand the problems of a mono-cultured, ethnocentric country like Italy, now post European Union, undergoing profound change in a globalized 21st century? Who are these neo-fascists? Who is resisting them? Where do the Roma fit in?

When I tour a Roma refugee camp on the edge of Rome and see the pathetic living conditions, I ask the people: "How can I help? They say: "Tell the world our story. Write your book."

The collective editing

Meanwhile, I invite some 15 close friends, comrades and respected colleagues—academics, activists, bibliophiles, editors, authors, booksellers, and more—to read and critique the manuscript. Each has their specialty: Roma culture, Italian history, antifascist history, Italian culture, anarchist or anti-racist movements, editing, etc. Each has something important and useful to contribute. Each makes a difference to the book. Again, I thank them all.

As the critical feedback and fact checking notes trickle in, I begin the first of several rewrites of the manuscript. The process is both exciting and painful, slow and demanding.

At times, it feels like I'm wrestling with a great blue whale—slippery and beyond my puny grasp.

The book heads in multiple directions as I try to re-direct it while making sense of it and making it make sense. I also find myself confronted with characters in my novel who have their own agendas apart from the project as a whole. Over Italian wine or Romanian beer, we have long discussions. They make compromises; I make compromises. The book makes progress.

One day, many revisions later, all the characters in the book and myself agree: done. A distinguished editor and respected comrade from PM Press, Terry Bisson, handles the final edit.

CAZZAROLA! The theatre piece

After my 2007 visit to Italy, I realize that my one year book deadline is unrealistic, but I still want to get the message out now. The solution: a short, dramatised version of the story. I take four characters out of the book and reconstruct them in a 30 minute solo theatre piece. The soundtrack for the performance inspires the subsequent full-length musical CD soundtrack for the novel.



Norman Nawrocki in character as Cinka, the Roma refugee violinist in *CAZZAROLA!* the theatre piece. It began as a novel and is also CD.

Living Theatre, with Judith Malina.

Four hundred people attend. Post-show, audience members approach me, incredulous.

“This isn’t happening in Italy today, is it? It’s from the 1930s, right? It’s fiction, yes?”

As I performed the piece, I was unaware that on the same night across the Atlantic, gangs of neo-fascists and local citizens were physically attacking and driving out hundreds of Roma from two Napoli refugee camps which they burned to the ground. I read the report in the morning news. It was a horrific incident, worse than what I was portraying on stage. The situation had deteriorated. I return to Italy that summer for more research.

In the Fall, I tour Canada with the theatre piece. The story resonates. Everyone wants to read the book and get the soundtrack. They’ll have to wait a bit longer.

CAZZAROLA! the CD, by me & amici

I’m a writer but also a musician/composer who can’t resist the temptation to create and release a companion musical soundtrack for the book. Hence, *CAZZAROLA!* the CD. I imagined a musical invitation to read the book. Another entry point into the novel that would complement the story with real period soundscapes and songs reflecting, based on, and inspired by the novel. I wanted an album, too, that could stand on its own as an audio document, a brief musical survey of Italy from the last 130 years covering key historical events in song from an anti-fascist and anarchist perspective.

I consult ethnomusicologist friends, Italian musician friends and others for suggestions, and issue an open invitation on Facebook for collaborators. I also again do endless research online and in person, more interviews and scour the Montreal library’s Italian music collection. In the end, I choose some traditional period songs, compose new ones and ask for contributions from Italian friends. I visit Italy a few times to do field recordings and meet and work with local musicians. Amazing collaborations follow.

With two recent tours of Italy behind me, endless research material burying my desk and overflowing my bookshelves, and my characters having dialogue with each other and keeping me awake at night, I am primed for a show. The themes: current Euro-politics, Italian history, the backlash against immigration—specifically targeting Roma refugees—neo-fascism, and a heart-breaking love story.

I hang out with Italian and Roma friends to fine tune my fictional and historical cast. I walk the streets of Montreal in character as the 1926 would-be anarchist anti-fascist assassin, a contemporary arrogant suit-and-tie, nationalist, racist senator, a pining, naive Italian boyfriend and his street-wise Romanian Roma girlfriend who lives the refugee nightmare.

CAZZAROLA!, the theatrical show, premieres at the May 2008 Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival. The bill includes the first Montreal visit of New York’s phenomenal anarcho-cultural institution, The

Driving through the mountains of Abruzzo for example, in search of any shepherd and his herd, we find one in a vast meadow dotted with brilliant alpine flowers. With his permission—and that of his seven sheep dogs—I walk through the grazing herd recording them live.

Musician friends in Italy introduce me to other musicians. I run into people in the street and invite them to play on the album, recording them after their workday in an enclosed town square. One day it's a spontaneous recording in a 15th century Italian abbey. One night, it's a marching band in a mountain village with local fireworks. I record everything on the spot with a portable H2 Zoom recorder.

In another village, I accidentally hear random pings from a metal sculpture dedicated to emigrants who died in search of work. I record the sounds and give them to musician friends with a request to compose a piece based on these precise notes. I am incredibly fortunate to meet generous, creative, talented musicians all over Italy and deeply grateful for their contributions.

In the end, the 100 minute long album offers music that ranges from traditional Italian folk—kind of world beat—but updated—to contemporary Italian-themed compositions of my own that are folkloric, ambient, electro-acoustic and somewhat indie. The songs, arranged chronologically following the story in the book, span 130 years of Italian history from 1880 to today. There are waltzes, folk dances, love ballads, prisoner songs, and different soundscapes, from a 1920 auto factory about to go on strike, to Rome street music today.

The Book Tour

I realized I was competing with a gazillion other books circulating on and offline if I want to get word out about this book. So I offer a cross-promotional packaged tour event.

Each book launch includes a roundtable discussion with local community Roma/refugee/immigrant and migrant worker/human rights advocates—where available—to open the evening, followed by the solo theatre piece (with soundtrack and visuals), and a live music show based on the CD (solo violin) with a sing-along of new skool Italian anarchist songs. This is a free offer! “Who wants it?,” I ask.

I devote the summer of 2013 to organizing events in 25 cities, Quebec City to Denman Island, B.C., with some 30 different presentations in church basements, cafes, bars, theatres, community centres, universities and book-stores.

There are youthful, now university educated sons and daughters of Latino immigrants who worked in hog slaughter houses testifying about the racism and discrimination their parents and they faced once having arrived in Canada. There are Hungarian Roma refugees talking about their fight against the current wave of Canadian deportations. This country has shut the door on Roma refugees.

There are reps from migrant farm workers groups describing the massive injustices these overworked, underpaid labourers confront on a daily basis. It's like labour conditions the IWW fought 100 years ago. All across Canada, I think I count fewer than 10 Italians or descendants of Italians who attend the launches. The ultra-conservative, old school Italian community is just not interested.

For this tour, I do a massive social media campaign, enter dozens of online chat-rooms, and aim for major media exposure. Local comrades poster, flyer and write articles for their community press. The media hype works for the west of Canada, but, apart from a 120 person plus book launch extravaganza in Montreal, kind of pans out for the east.

No explanation. Books or music, it's the rock 'n roll truism of touring.

Norman Nawrocki is a Montreal cabaret artist, violinist, actor and educator. He has written a dozen books, several theatre musicals and cabarets and recorded over 50 music albums, solo and with his diverse bands. He tours the world performing music, theatre, poetry, anti-sexist 'sex' comedy shows, and giving 'Creative Resistance' workshops about using the arts for radical social change. nothingness.org/music/rhythm

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