

Spoletto: thief of souls

Cheryl Hardacre

Movement brushes past me in the dark. There's a whiff of musk and sweat: damp and sweet as it stains brocade, satin and lace ... my nostrils and hair awash with the scent, both sour and floral, as a woman and her entourage brush past me on their return to Rocca Albornoziata: the great castle on the hilltop above. Was it her? Nostrils to the breeze, I listen for the clink of chain mail, the thump of lance against cobble, the crack of hoof: my eyes searching for any stirring of shadow.



Moonlight flares off the deep blue-grey of the medieval alleyway as I quicken my pace, following its steep and winding thread, down and around the natural curves of the hill and through the ancient city from castle above to river below. The slate surface is slickened by the late afternoon wet but not dangerous to the step because of its shattering into a million jostling cobblestones: cobblestones that grip the tread and delight the eye as their jagged corners refract and reflect the light until it seems you step upon a quilt of blackened diamonds. In places the fierce gold of the street lamps burn out the moon's white light and allow it to rest, pale and shadowy, against the walls of an ancient palazzo or rippling within the watery gutters of a stable that once held the steed of an Umbrian knight. Was it her? Was it really she: returning from a secret rendezvous ... a meeting of political intrigue? Perhaps returning from a fierce act of independence: a simple walk through the city streets to show that she will be beholden to no man, to no rules, to no limitations of aristocratic law that tell her she cannot freely venture where and when she wills? For this captivating city was the haunt of that most infamous woman, the wild and beautiful Lucrezia Borgia.

This captivating city: Spoleto.

Northeast of Rome, in the rolling Umbrian hills, with the great, snow-covered Apennine Mountains at its back, Spoleto is a fascinating medieval city whose citadels, spires and ancient stone walls cascade down the mountainside from its peak: the great golden fortress of Rocca Albornoziata. In a country famed for its art and architecture, and a region known as the green heart of Italy, Spoleto takes a step further in bedazzling the eye and stirring the soul. The city, its jumble of ancient buildings and walls like a great stone cloak draping from the castle at the crown of the hill to the river at its base, is a jewel of art and architecture: from Roman amphitheatres to 7th century churches; from elegant palaces to the small bottega of a violin-maker; from great fountains in medieval piazzas to the heraldic stamp of a knight in a stone wall; from fading Madonnas painted high up on the buildings of medieval alleyways to the magnificent mural of Filippo Lippi in the Duomo with its startling blue that defies the seven hundred years between your breath on the

wall and the perspiring hand of a Renaissance master as he applies wet paint to stone.

But it is the incredible history of this place that makes Spoleto outstanding in comparison to other cities of great medieval beauty. This city was the realm of a Borgia, a hub of the Romans, a medieval seat of great power, the divine habitat of Saint Francis of Assisi, and the destroyer of Hannibal. It is from this place that the famous Italian saying comes, a threat made to all misbehaving children for two thousand years, "*Hannibal is at the gates!*" For it was here in Spoleto, 217 years before Christ, that the feared Hannibal arrived with his last elephant after crossing the Alps, seeking food and rest on the final leg of his great journey to destroy Rome; only to be thwarted by the strong-willed Spoletini, who fought him back at their city gate, close to the present-day Porta Fuga ... forcing Hannibal to take the long route to Rome, a longer journey that weakened his men and their resolve, and thereby saved Rome and influenced the outcome of the Punic Wars.

It is here, in Spoleto, that the Romans worshipped their beloved god, Jupiter, upon the green hillside of Monteluco ("mount of the sacred wood"), a hill that sits alongside the mount of the castle. The Roman forest of worship still stands, the soul swept to another place as you enter this hall of ancient green: gnarled branches of holm-oak and cracking roots of juniper supporting a framework of flickering leaves that lace their verdant fingers above and around you, the evergreen trees rising from a carpet of crackling brown flecked here and there with the brilliant red and white of cyclamen and the myriad colours of heather, boxwood, thyme, bramble, holly, cane apple and wild rose. The Roman inscription stone, from the 3rd century BC, still exists; its replica in place within the forest, warning all who venture there that, by law, they are not to harm the trees or any part of this sacred forest: punishment being the sacrifice of an ox to Jupiter and the payment of 300 aces. And it was here a thousand years later that Saint Francis of Assisi set up his hermitage. The Franciscan hermitage stands to this day within the forest, a newer church surrounding the cells where Saint Francis and his followers slept; an inscription of 1202 sits above the doorway: a fitting place of repose for the world's most famous saint, a lover of animals and nature, for here too, the nature-loving Romans worshipped their god.

How do I convey in a few words the magic, the mystery and the energy of Spoleto? It delights the eye and stomach as well as the soul. Food shops and fashion abound, for it is a stylish place that reveres its past but also embraces the present. Fashionable boutiques staccato their way along the narrow, winding routes from river to castle, windows of elegant shoes and chic raiment pushing in between small shops of food and craft. They say there are 55 churches and 55 restaurants within the city, the Spoletini balancing the needs of soul and stomach well, and the regional foods are grown and produced with that love and reverence for food seen throughout Italy. Locally grown olives, superb veal nurtured on nearby farms, soft crumbling porchetta, the delicious garlic and spice of the cured local meats, the piquant red wine from regional vineyards are but a small taste of the gustatory pleasures on offer in a warmly lit place behind the ancient stone walls of a Spoleto osteria, trattoria or ristorante.

Perhaps Spoleto is best encapsulated in the walk from river to castle peak: beginning at the ancient Roman amphitheatre sitting at the hemline of the city's great stone skirt, and upwards through the ancient streets to a castle that still hugs to its inner walls the brilliantly coloured murals of knights resting and women dancing: murals painted 800 years ago, murals that would have caught the eye of Lucrezia herself. This walk through the city distils diverse worlds: it leads you to the food and wine offerings of medieval Piazza Mercato...through the architectural delights of a wealthy Roman's house with its



vaulted ceilings, atrium well and delicately patterned tiled floors...past small shops with rolling shutters that disappear from view for the afternoon siesta...into restaurants of delicious regional cuisine or bars with their crisp pastries and rich, golden coffee that you drink standing up ... past the artisan painting nudes in his studio, the artist sculpting plates, or the craftsman creating musical instruments in his workshop in a medieval alleyway ... until you find yourself accidentally drawn into the thrill of passeggiata, a ritual performed at 5pm every evening. For this is the moment that the city comes alive after the quiet siesta hours ... people flowing into the streets, dressed in their finery with their dogs and children, to talk and walk and meet friends: this ancient ritual so entrenched it occurs every evening, even in the chill of winter.

But to experience the soul of Spoleto, the day must begin and end at its summit. Atop the hill, and just below the castle, the lookout on Via del Ponte watches over city, hill and valley; its wondrous views at days' start and end heightening the emotions and causing the soul to reflect upon itself. Here you will find the captivating *La Portella* café with its garden patio cut into the olive-treed slope dropping from castle to river; with the café's music speakers lodged in the branches of trees overlooking the roadway and a sudden game of soccer breaking out between the owner and local children in front of the cafe, the lookout and its environs becomes a place of music, community and joy, even for the passer-by. Bedded into the slope beside the lookout, in a magical position betwixt castle and river, and with a unique view of the adjacent 13th century stone viaduct whose pillars drop one hundred metres into the river below, sits the gracious boutique Hotel Gattapone. Run by several generations of the Hanke family, upon the soft, plumped pillows of this hotel have lain the heads of Brigitte Bardot, Andy Warhol, Henry Moore, Jeanne Moreau, Visconti, Zeffirelli and many other creative greats who came for repose or to take part in the world-famous *Festival of the Two Worlds*, the annual arts festival of Spoleto. However, despite humankind's remarkable creativity, it is nature herself who puts on the greatest show at Spoleto's summit.

Capturing the warmth of the Umbrian sun even in mid winter, the hilltop lookout leads the eye across to the magic forested hill of Jupiter with its Franciscan hermitage hidden high in its leafy realms; from this viewpoint the eye is caught by a crumbling stone edifice here and there amongst the green: one of the small convents or churches built over the centuries that now lie broken within Monteluco's forest, a reminder of the eternalness of nature. As the wind whips through leaf and hair, other sounds reach you: the soft flurry of distant voices and activity from the city dropping below you and the peal of church bells from spires and campanile ... a timed, rhythmical pounding that has comforted Spoletini ears for a thousand years ... and, of course, it is from this place that you capture the sunsets. But most moving of all are the rolling hills in front of you, each layer laced with mist until it seems you look far into the

distance at a mystical land of corrugated green interspersed with grey-white mist, the soft, drifting breath of the gods; the peaks grasping in silhouette, here and there, a cluster of tall, slender cypress beside a homestead.

Ah Spoleto, I hunger for you and long to be back. You wash over my soul, you haunt my dreams even when I am far, far distant; you remain with me, in a sweet agony of remembrance, when I am no longer there. For I, like all others who enter your realm, am captured. And now ... nothing equals the pleasure of being with you, being held within your loving embrace of medieval stone, verdant hills, sun and mist. Ah, Spoleto ... you seduced Rome's Jupiter, the great Christian god, and every being that has stepped within your walls, so what hope have I? My heart is yours.

© Cheryl Hardacre 2013

*Cheryl stayed in a beautifully renovated apartment in Spoleto's medieval centre, one of the many historic properties managed by **Umbria Holiday Rentals**, a business run by the vivacious, the delightful, the attentive, the informative and the highly professional...in fact, the best hosts on planet Earth...Norma and Laurie. See: www.umbriaholidayrentals.com*

***Cheryl Hardacre is an international author and artist** whose work is published by major publishing houses on three continents. Cheryl holds 10-day writing workshops in the medieval centre of Spoleto: improve your story structure, dialogue, narrative drive, success with publishers, and your appreciation of local wine, delectable Umbrian foodstuffs and interesting Italian men (last three subjects optional) within a fun and creative environment. Join her for a fascinating learning experience in a city that is unequivocally one of the historic and cultural gems of Italy.*

Visit Cheryl at: www.cherylhardacre.com