

## ***Ditelo alle Stelle* – The tragedy of the SS. Arandora Star: a theatrical rendition**

*«In memoria dei periti nell'affondamento dell'ARANDORA STAR / 2 luglio 1940  
/... il ricordo che è vivo nel cuore dei parenti, dei superstiti e colonia italiana»*

Memorial plaque - St. Peter's Italian Church

Two-hundred and forty-two names carved on a memorial plaque. Two-hundred and forty-two lives lost in the tragedy of the SS. Arandora Star. Many others remain unrecorded by name.

It was in the early hours of 2nd July 1940 that the SS. Arandora Star – a British passenger ship requisitioned for military duties at the start of the 1939 conflict – sailing unescorted from Liverpool to St John's, Newfoundland, was intercepted and torpedoed by a German U-47 submarine patrolling Atlantic waters, seventy-five miles off the Irish coast of Donegal. In excess of 1,500 people, Italian civilian internees, German prisoners of war, and Jewish refugees were on board. Painted battleship grey, the SS. Arandora Star had not been marked as a prisoner of war ship, the railing of the decks had been heavily layered with barbed wire to prevent any attempt to escape, the lifeboats available were insufficient for the number of people embarked. When a German torpedo struck its target there followed first panic, then mayhem. Sergeant Norman Price, one of the British military guards, later recalled:

«I could see hundreds of men clinging to the ship. They were like ants and then the ship went up at one end and slid rapidly down, taking the men with her ... Many men had broken their necks jumping or diving into the water. Others injured themselves by landing on drifting wreckage and floating debris near the sinking ship».

The SS. Arandora Star sank in just over thirty minutes taking with her more than eight-hundred men to their death. Over the months that followed bodies washed up on Irish shores and Hebridean islands. Often unidentified, they were given a Christian burial, but only a few victims have a marked resting place. The seven-hundred and twelve Italian civilians on board had been 'rounded up' and held captive not for any other reason than their just being 'Italian', enemy aliens considered a 'Fifth Column' and, by assumption, a menace to national security. Four-hundred and forty-six of them perished, one of whom was Decio Anzani, a long-standing opponent of the Fascist regime and friend of George Orwell and Sylvia Pankhurst. Winston Churchill's policy of 'collar the lot', was the panic response to the threat of a military invasion.

England had a long tradition of receiving migrants, both economic and political exiles. From Ugo Foscolo and Giuseppe Mazzini to several anarchists and antifascists, such as historian Gaetano Salvemini, who had described his new homeland as 'the land of my heart' where he felt 'free among free people, a man among men'. The 1940s were a calamitous time however and the British Government floundered in its responsibility. War, the sleep of reason, brings forth monsters, and the sinking of SS. Arandora Star, remains a tragedy which might, or one could say, should have been avoided.

Drawn from these tragic historical events, director Federica Vicino of *Officine Solidali Teatro & Arte* has been inspired to write a play. The London *premiere* was performed at the Italian Cultural Institute on 11th November last. Beyond the story of the SS. Arandora, comes a skillful exploration of controversial, yet contemporary issues: emigration, racism, prejudice, selective memory, and the complexity of human nature. In the relationship which develops between Ingo Willefram (played by Davide Clivio), a Nazi German Luftwaffe officer prisoner of war, and Emanuele Conti, an Italian immigrant (played by Andrea Fuorto), with no political connections but a spontaneous hostility toward Fascism, a glimpse of hope is perceivable. A glimpse of hope which can flicker even in the most tragic of situations. Above the two main characters ... the stars, just about visible through the gaps in the grate lock which secures the ship's hold where the two men are forcibly held. The stars ... to which both men, so different and yet so close, confide their hopes and dreams, finding unexpected support in each other and in their moral fortitude. Both victims, though – and this remains indisputable – a choice of life can be the wrong choice. Empathy, the ability to put prejudice aside, even for those universally considered evil or dangerous, wrote Jewish historian George L. Mosse, he himself a victim of the Nazi regime, is key to seeking understanding. Though empathy does not mean withholding judgment. At the end, the stars above the Atlantic Ocean can only offer a sympathetic ear, helpless witnesses to a tragedy when the torpedoed Ship sank, engulfed by complete darkness.

The evening was introduced by Domenic Pini, President of the Mazzini-Garibaldi Club, whose father, Serafino, was numbered among the survivors, Peter Capella of the Arandora Star London Memorial Trust, and young Italian community activist Roberto Stasi. A cast of young and talented actors gave a compelling and powerful performance, with moments of high tension and convincing pathos, leading the play to its devastating ending. The sinking of the SS. Arandora Star remains little known and not much talked about, especially outside the London's Italian community. In fact, to her credit, director Federica Vicino has succeeded in bringing the terrible story of the SS. Arandora Star to the fore through her theatrical rendition. One might add too that she has treated the tragic event with profound respect. Reflecting on our past, even when this remains too raw or divisive, is a way of greater understanding and moving forward. *Ditelo alle stelle* is a play which invites the scrutiny of many themes. Some of these retain a connection with deep and unresolved problems of our age, whilst the memorial plaque on the façade of St. Peter's Italian Church in Clerkenwell remains a humble reminder and an admonishment to us all, at a time when the southern waters around the Italian peninsula – even though not as treacherous as the Atlantic Ocean in wartime – continue to claim innocent lives.

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