

# **OPERA DEI PUPPI**

## **TEACHER'S**

### **RESOURCE GUIDE**

**Shadows, Strings and  
Other Things**  
**Mallorie Francis**



# OBJECTIVE

The objective of this teaching guide is to provide educators with the opportunity and resources necessary to explore the tradition of Sicilian marionette theatre. Through the use of text, visuals, activities, and discussions, students will be able to learn about the history, content, and cultural context of the *Opera dei pupi*. Students will also gain a better understanding not only of puppet theatre and its role in Sicilian culture, but of global cultural heritage and the ways in which we interact with art and storytelling.

## Goals:

- Learn about Sicilian culture through traditional puppet theatre
- Understand the importance of family, tradition, and cultural heritage
- Experiment with storytelling and visual art to explore core themes and perspectives



# INTRODUCTION

The *Opera dei pupi* is a traditional form of marionette theatre from the island of Sicily. Combining romantic tales and grand adventures, it uses large, handcrafted puppets to enact a selection of medieval and Renaissance epics. Many of the characters are knights, adorned in decorative armour and designed with articulated limbs that allow for such intricate movements as jumping on a horse or drawing a sword. Additional characters include kings, ladies, and civilians, as well as a number of animals and supernatural creatures. Although this tradition was once more widespread, today there are two distinct practices in Catania and Palermo.

*Pupi* performances are characterised by their foundation in traditional themes and codes of conduct, including honour, chivalry, and the preservation of faith and justice. For many early theatre goers, the puppets personified hope, victory, and a variety of other values and emotions. Audiences connected with the characters, supporting and admiring their heroes while despising the villains. Thus, the *Opera dei pupi* emerged as a form of cultural expression, identity, and remembrance for the working class.

## Video Resources

*I'M A PUPARO - How a Sicilian puppet is made*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=5&v=J0CoP27SIkU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=J0CoP27SIkU)

*Opera dei Pupi, Sicilian Puppet Theatre*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ql7DxcWILE>

# SICILY

Country: Italy

Population: 5,002,904

Size: 25, 711 sq km

Capital City: Palermo

Religion: Roman Catholicism

Major Industries: Refined oil, natural gas, textiles, ships, wine, wheat, olives, citrus fruits, cotton, livestock.

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. It is separated from the mainland by the Strait of Messina, and is one of five autonomous regions of Italy. Inhabited as early as 10,000 years ago, its location has made it a crossroads of trade, conquest, and civilisation throughout history. It wasn't until 1861, however, that Sicily joined the new united kingdom of Italy, later gaining regional autonomy in 1947.

The island is divided into nine provinces and boasts a largely industrial and agricultural economy, despite its mountainous terrain. It is well known for Mount Etna, Europe's tallest active volcano at 3,220 metres, as well as being a source of many cultural traditions and folk arts, including Italian lyrical poetry, embroidery, painting, and a number of religious festivals.





**Palermo**



**Mount Etna**



**Catania**



*Tyrrhenian Sea*

*Mediterranean Sea*

Messina

Trapani

Palermo

Enna

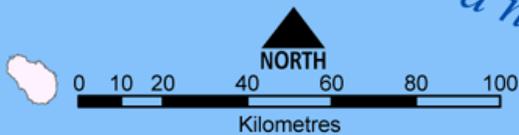
Caltanissetta

Agrigento

Catania

Siracusa

Ragusa



# HISTORY

While puppet theatre in Sicily may be traced back to the fourth century B.C.E., the *Opera dei pupi* is first documented on the island in the early 1800s. It is during this century that the tradition achieved its greatest popularity.

Originally the plays were long, cyclical events, loosely improvised and presented in nightly installments to a familiar audience. Competition from television and more affordable cinema in the early 1950s, however, proved detrimental. Few companies continued to perform during the 70s and 80s, and many struggled to keep their puppets. Since then, in an attempt to draw contemporary audiences of tourists and school children, performances have developed into shorter, independent episodes that emphasise rapid action and dramatic moments. Finally, in 2008, the *Opera dei pupi* was inscribed as a masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

- United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation

“endeavour[s] to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage... and to support creativity, innovation and the emergence of dynamic cultural sectors.”

~ unesco.org

Protecting our Heritage and Fostering Creativity



## Video Resource

*Sicilian puppetry in Ortigia - Part I*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijeNiWr0SzE>

# THE STORIES

Early epic poetry describing the Crusades and Emperor Charlemagne were passed down orally until the Renaissance, when such works as *Orlando innamorato* (Boiardo, 1494) and *Orlando furioso* (Ariosto, 1516) were composed. Giusto Lodico, publishing in Sicily during the mid-19th to early 20th century, consolidated a number of these literary works in his telling of the *Storia dei paladini di Francia* (History of the Paladins of France). Lodico's edited compilation brought together multiple plots and characters, weaving together pre-existing written, oral, and improvised material into a single, linear narrative. This volume emphasised the traditional themes of love, death, and the struggle between good and evil, and was accepted by many *pupari* as an authoritative account. In addition to chivalric literature, however, biographies, Shakespearean dramas, and historical events are included in the performance repertoire.

What is an epic poem? How and why were they told? How do we tell stories today?

## ACTIVITY

Have students write their own version of a traditional story, bringing together plots or characters from multiple sources.



### Literary Resource

*Stories of Roland - Told to the Children PDF*

[https://www.heritage-](https://www.heritage-history.com/site/hclass/christian_europe/ebooks/pdf/marshall_roland.pdf)

[history.com/site/hclass/christian\\_europe/ebooks/pdf/marshall\\_roland.pdf](https://www.heritage-history.com/site/hclass/christian_europe/ebooks/pdf/marshall_roland.pdf)

# CHARACTERS



## Roland (Orlando)

Roland is a skilled knight and popular hero who rescues his uncle Charlemagne and avenges his father's murder. He eventually falls in love with a princess, Angelica of Cathay, before going mad and dying in the battle of Roncevaux.

## Charlemagne (Carlomagno)

Historically, Charlemagne was a medieval king and the emperor of the Romans who united much of Western Europe under a single empire. In many legendary accounts, he is depicted as a righteous leader and symbol of Christianity. Following the battle of Roncevaux, Charlemagne sets out to avenge Roland's death.



# PERFORMANCE

The puppets are controlled using two iron rods. One is secured through the head, and the second is connected to the right arm. From this rod extend auxiliary strings which move the left arm. This allows for carefully choreographed and fast-paced battle scenes, accompanied by rhythmic stomping and expressive vocal tones. Additionally, music is often played between scenes.



Depending on the local tradition, puppets can vary greatly in size. In Palermo, puppets are approximately 1 metre in height and weigh around 8 kg. They are controlled from the wings where puppeteers stand with outstretched arms. In Catania, however, puppets can reach up to 1.4 metres tall and weigh over 16 kg. They are controlled from above, by standing on a raised bridge behind the backdrop. Due to their large size, manipulating the *pupi* requires great strength and endurance.



## Video Resources

*Opera dei Pupi - L'Orlando Furioso (Catanesese tradition)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwtwFK9dHfs>

*Mimmo Cuticchio "L'Opera dei Pupi" (Palermitano tradition)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsXD9vUkduo>

# VISUAL ARTWORK

Visual artwork plays an integral role in the tradition of Sicilian puppet theatre. All backgrounds are carefully painted to depict castles, forests, and battlefields, and sometimes help to convey special effects. *Cartelli* are also painted to advertise plays. In Catania, these posters illustrate a single scene, while in Palermo they are divided into six or eight segments. Each illustration is titled, and will correspond to a nightly performance. Often a paper will be attached to a *cartel*, providing a detailed description of the upcoming play and its plot.



## ACTIVITY

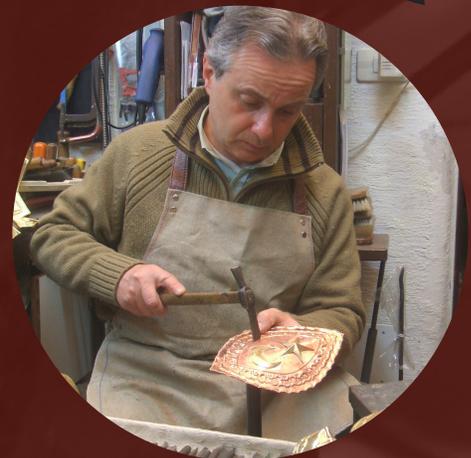
Have the students draw and colour original *cartelli* advertising their own stories or family traditions. Then have them write and attach a brief summary explaining their illustration.

# MAKERS

The Fratelli Napoli theatre company, established in Catania in 1921, is a fourth-generation family of puppeteers and puppet-makers. They are one of the few families who have continued to perform without having to close down. Their techniques and teachings are passed down from generation to generation, and thus hold great historical and cultural value. Even today, traditional materials are still used; wood for the head and torso, satin and velvet for the fabric, copper, silver, and brass for the armour, and iron for the swords. All members of the family participate in some aspect of staging, either giving the puppets a voice and bringing them to life, or helping to design sets and construct costumes.

Like many theatres, the Fratelli Napoli have struggled to strike a balance between tradition and innovation, adapting their performances to suit the demands of a modern audience. In 1973, Natale Napoli developed the concept of “little puppets”, approximately 80 cm in height, which have enabled them to perform plays in smaller venues and to larger audiences, while still maintaining traditional techniques of production and staging.

**What are the cultural values of tradition and innovation? How are they reflected in Sicilian society? How are they reflected in our own society?**



# Elementary School (1-5)

## Big Ideas - Curriculum Connections

### English Language Arts

- Language and story can be a source of creativity and joy.
- Stories and other texts connect us to ourselves, our families, and our communities.

### Arts Education

- Engagement in the arts creates opportunities for inquiry through purposeful play.
- Artists experiment in a variety of ways to discover new possibilities.
- Engaging in creative expression and experiences expands people's sense of identity and belonging.

### Discussion Questions

- Why do we tell stories? What do you think might have inspired the origin of puppet theatre?
- What is a tradition? How has the *Opera dei pupi* balanced tradition and change over time?
- What role does family play in Sicilian puppet theatre? What are some personal cultural or familial traditions?

## Middle School (6-8)

### Big Ideas - Curriculum Connections

#### English Language Arts

- Exploring and sharing multiple perspectives extends our thinking.
- Texts are socially, culturally, and historically constructed.

#### Arts Education

- Engaging in the arts develops people's ability to understand and express complex ideas.
- Artistic expressions differ across time and place.

- How do we relate to stories?
- What can we learn from the *Opera dei pupi* about reading, interpreting, and writing texts?
- What is cultural heritage? Why is it important?

#### Discussion Questions

## High School (9-10)

### Big Ideas - Curriculum Connections

#### Arts Education

- Traditions, perspectives, worldviews, and stories are shared through aesthetic experiences.
- Identity is explored, expressed, and impacted through visual arts experiences.
- Art experiences can build community and nurture relationships with others.

#### Discussion Questions

- How is identity expressed through the *Opera dei pupi*? What is the role of the community, family, and audience?
- What are the different kinds of cultural heritage?
- Why might communities want their cultural heritage to be recognised by UNESCO?



# GLOSSARY

## *Cartelli*

Painted posters displayed near a theatre to advertise a play. They depict the most important scenes, and are often attached with a summary of the plot.

## **Chivalry**

A code of conduct valuing honour and courage that was followed by knights during the medieval period.

## **Epic**

A long, elaborate poem often linked to an oral tradition, depicting past events and adventures surrounding a legendary figure or nation.

## **Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills, including associated objects and spaces, recognised by a community as cultural heritage.

## *Pupi*

'Puppets' in Italian.

## *Pupari*

'Puppeteers' in Italian. Those who craft and perform the *pupi*.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<https://wepa.unima.org/en/pupi/>

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/opera-dei-pupi-sicilian-puppet-theatre-00011>

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