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Interviewee: Dr. Francesco Giambrone

Interviewer: Rushda Majeed

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MAJEED: This is Rushda Majeed on 28th March, 2012, I am with Dr. Francesco Giambrone and Bianca Anelli who is translating for us. Dr. Giambrone thank you so much for agreeing to speak with us. May I start this interview by asking you about your current position and the positions you've held in the past or your past experiences?

GIAMBRONE: *Now I am the President of the Conservatory of Palermo. In the past I was in charge of culture of the city of Palermo for four years from 1995 until 1999. Then I was General Manager of the Teatro Massimo, the most important opera theatre in Sicily, one of the big opera theaters in Italy from 1999 until 2002. Then I was General Manager of the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. That is the opera house of Florence from 2006 until 2010 for more than four years.*

Also I teach at the University of Palermo, management of musical performance. I am also a doctor.

MAJEED: Medical doctor?

GIAMBRONE: *Medical doctor, cardiologist. I haven't been a doctor for a long time. Now I work in the management of the hospital, but this is another story.*

MAJEED: When you were in the city of Palermo from 1995-1999 could you tell me what that particular position was and then you were Director of the Massimo from 1999 until 2002?

GIAMBRONE: *That was my first very strong and deep experience in my life. It was an experience in the public management. Especially it was important because it was a particular moment for the city of Palermo after the big murders of 1990. It was a very particular moment for Palermo because the people were quite annoyed about the past events and they were trying to retrieve the pride of the city. First because the city had been left to herself, to her destiny for a while and also again because of the big murders.*

Those years, the period of the '90s Palermo was in very bad condition. It was going through a very negative phase in all fields I would say but in particular the cultural side. The cultural events were completely left apart and the city was completely closed to culture.

I would just quote two main examples. The Massimo had been closed for twenty years and nobody would hope we would open it. We were completely hopeless concerning the Teatro. This was a very, very big wound for us, for the Sicilian citizens and Palermitans especially. Then Villa Trabia, which is a beautiful villa of the 1700s and it exactly in the city center of Palermo. It was a public villa belonging to the city hall but at that time the nobles of Palermo had set a club there and they would just play cards so citizens wouldn't have access.

So I think these were the two symbols that could express what I meant by a closed city to culture. Then the Villa luckily reopened and it is now a library and it is open to the citizens and there is also a beautiful park. The Teatro Massimo as you know is open.

The Teatro Massimo was closed not because of the bombing of the Second World War, not because there had been a fire, it was just closed. I just quoted these two examples because they were the main ones, but it was all closed.

Lo Spasimo, for example, it was a beautiful church of the 1500s and with no roof and it was closed, you know why? Just because it was full of garbage. The people didn't even know that this church existed just behind their houses. The library was closed, the Museo Pietro was closed, the archives were closed, everything was closed. The funny thing is that the people most of the time didn't know that these places existed. The list continues. There would be many other things that were closed at that time.

MAJEED: Why, how had this condition come to be?

GIAMBRONE: *Why were they closed you want to know?*

MAJEED: Right, how had this happened?

GIAMBRONE: *The reason I think is because the political bodies and the local administration didn't care at all about the city, about the beauty of the city, about enhancing the strength of the city which lay in the culture and the beauty of these historical things. Mainly because the politicians were looking at completely exploiting the city from a building point of view. In fact, you have to remember that in the '60s was the period where there was this wild building for either housing but mainly private buildings.*

I want to remember one particular night it was end of the '60s, beginning of the '70s, one night it was almost New Year's Eve and in one night, about a thousand permits were given in order to make new buildings. It was terrible. Another important event, we must not forget, that Palermo in one night, one of the most beautiful villas in the city center, in Piazza Croche, was destroyed to be replaced by one building, just because the people who had interest in it knew that the following day the region would not have allowed it anymore because there was a new law that was passing and it would have been safeguarded for cultural patrimony, for cultural heritage reasons.

So it is a city I can say that canceled its beauty and it has been replaced by business interest connected to dirty business. I can say that Palermitans the following day when they saw this big—the remains of the beautiful villa, they were completely shocked, they were disgusted I would say. Imagine, the anger was to such an extent that the building was never actually built and now there is a car wash and parking there.

So yes, again, the core is that Palermo was a closed city that opened eventually with Orlando to the future. When Orlando says that he opens the gate of the city hall, this is the main thing. It is very important. In truth, the arrival of Orlando enabled the citizens, they could go in, could have access to the city hall symbolically but it meant again that they could again participate in the Palermitan cultural atmosphere in the sense that the citizens could go in the buildings, could have access again to culture. They could again belong to the city and the city assets belonged to them.

The operation was very difficult but very important because what we wanted to do is to create again the sense of belonging to the city, this was the main concept that we had lost in the previous years.

MAJEED: Whose idea was this in terms of focusing on culture and focusing on the physical spaces in the city and revitalizing?

GIAMBRONE: *The base of the project was part of Orlando's election program. In fact he often quoted the example of the state of the German cities like Berlin and others. As I said, the start came from him but the important thing that I want to underline is the fact that we were a team and worked together all the time and we shared the same thing. So what is not important is who had the idea because I had the idea to open the monuments and the Teatro and everything, and the churches, it came from me. But in truth the result was—. And the new library and the new achieves were my idea, but yes, we worked together. It was a common thought. We all shared the same thing. That represented our big force, our strength. We all said something but we all agreed on that.*

We all had the same aim, the same thought again. So it was like a natural process, it came automatically. We didn't have to fight to say no I want to do this or I want to do that, we all had the same agreement. The final concept is that we had the same idea of the city, this is the thing, we had the same idea of how we saw the city.

I will tell you another episode because these stories can help you to understand the climate that we were experiencing. In 1994 the city hall bought an old factory. It was 55,000 sq meters. I didn't know that area so one day I went to see it and straightaway when I saw it I thought of how I could transform it because it was very varied. It had roads, green, square, hangers. It was really interesting. It was like a piece of the city in the city. So I thought I could devote that area to cultural events.

The day after I called Orlando and said, "Luca, come with me."

"Where?"

"Come with me. Don't ask. Come with me." We went to the area and there was [phone interruption].

MAJEED: So you said you went to the area.

GIAMBRONE: *I said, "Come with me. Don't ask." We went to the area. He said, "I know this area, what's the problem?" No, come with me. At that time Orlando was with a lot of bodyguards, fourteen bodyguards with him. Guns, armored car, terrible, and helicopter. But it was night. We began to walk into the area and there were weeds, it was very—the grass was very high. It was destroyed and abandoned.*

I said, "Luca, I have an idea."

He said, "I understand."

"No, I want to say my idea. This could be a museum and a cultural center, a library."

“Yes, in fact, it is a perfect idea.”

And we stayed two hours walking in that area and dreaming the future with the same idea, without words. The same idea. Then the area is Cantieri Culturale alla Zisa. It became very important cultural center in Europe. There were performances of Pina Bausch and Lev Dodin, the most important directors and choreographers and artists and the architects of the world were in Cantieri Culturale alla Zisa. But I didn't need to tell him what I wanted to do because it was like wishful thinking.

This explains the fact that all the other parts of the community, he, and I had the same idea and this is the strength, the real strength of that period of our commission. Is that a good example?

MAJEED: Yes, that is a good example, thank you so much. Before we move on to your position as Director of Teatro Massimo, could you tell me about the period between 1995 and 1999? When you came into office did you have priorities set into place? What were some of your priorities and how did you go about implementing them? You were part of the executive committee?

GIAMBRONE: *Yes, in charge of culture, Commissioner of Culture. Municipal, not regional. There were many priorities, many priorities. The first one was to open the spaces that were closed. The second was to give back to the citizens spaces devoted to cultural services. This was all the first priority, both together, it was like one. The space. To open what is closed, to give back to the citizens, that was the first priority.*

The second priority was to spend money, to use the money that we had available. At that time the city of Palermo had a lot of money. So to spend the money was a priority because the municipal system wasn't able to spend it in a correct way. In fact, when I arrived only 40% of available money was used, had been spent. There was still some money to be used every year. Sixty percent—we were not able to use it.

MAJEED: Why was that?

GIAMBRONE: *Because the municipal system and all the civil servants didn't know how to spend this money. Also because the previous administration didn't do it. So they didn't know that they could spend money, of course, to provide services to the public, to the citizens. When I arrived—I'll tell you two stories.*

When I started, after just two weeks, I had on my table one Act to be signed, to be approved and this Act wanted to give money with no project. All the different commissions wanted to get money with no particular project. So the first thing I did was to set this aside. I didn't accept it.

MAJEED: So the money was there?

GIAMBRONE: *Yes, I was asked to distribute this money without projects.*

MAJEED: This was the culture budget?

GIAMBRONE: *Forty percent.*

MAJEED: Forty percent?

GIAMBRONE: *The only thing the other people knew how to do was to distribute money among friends or acquaintances.*

MAJEED: Who were these other people?

GIAMBRONE: *Civil servants who were there and had already been there before we arrived.*

The other story, another example, I thought it was very important to strengthen the culture side again like libraries and museums. So I decided to put some extra money in the budget for museums and libraries. I was very happy about it; I was very proud of it.

When the civil servants who were working with me saw this, noticed this, they came to see me and they were quite upset. And I said, "Why are you upset? You should be happy."

They answered that "You are happy. We are not because now we have to spend this money." The reason why was because their mentality couldn't go beyond this in the sense for them it was better not to have money than to work. Because having money to be spent meant that they had to work. I see that it is difficult to understand.

So the third priority, change the mentality of the civil servants, the workers, the employees.

After four years when I went to the—I took the management of the Teatro Massimo what happened was that the cultural commissioner could have the money, the budget available for culture had risen to 95% which was a lot. This meant—the important thing is that the civil servants who worked for them were still the same. So what did this mean? People changed their mentality. In the four years they managed to change the mentality. They didn't before, they didn't want and didn't know how to spend the money. Now they wanted and they knew how to spend the money. That was my third priority.

MAJEED: How did you do it? How did you work with civil servants to change the mentality?

GIAMBRONE: *I managed to do this with lots of patience and lots of determination but in particular believing in this idea. I managed to make them believe in the same idea too. This I think was the most beautiful thing I could do, to create a sharing climate, an atmosphere that was shared by everyone at the same time. When I started, as I said, they pretended not to believe in it, but by the end of my mandate, when I finished, they believed in the same project as I did. It wasn't very easy but it wasn't impossible.*

MAJEED: So what steps did you take to bring this about? Did you have a system in place? Did you appoint people who would monitor civil servants? What were some of the specific things you did to manage civil servants better and change?

GIAMBRONE: *I didn't set up a particular system, a scientific system. What I tried, I can say I tried to apply the principle of responsabilization, the sense that I wanted them to be aware and responsible for making a choice. I wasn't forcing them. It was of*

course done through meetings, working together, explanation, long debates. It was mainly this. The principle, the core theme was to give them back the dimension of their responsibility within a project that was shared by everyone. I also wanted to give them back the pride of people who participate in the project. They were part of the project. So I gave them this awareness and this was very important.

So when I started no one among the civil servants knew anyone in the cultural field. They didn't know any writers; they didn't know any singers, any artists. When I finished, instead, the opposite process happened in the sense that everyone knew the artists, the writers, et cetera. Those people, the artists, never came to see me again. They just went directly to see the civil servants of the managers of them to ask for things, as in a normal city.

MAJEED: Did you set up regular meetings with writers or singers? Did you invite them or having training for staff? Was there any other thing you did to build up the staff?

GIAMBRONE: *Yes, there was a constant dialogue, a mutual contact with them, with the artists and the people who were part of the cultural class. Whenever I did meetings or something like this, all the civil servants who used to work with me they would always attend the meetings.*

MAJEED: Did you provide any kind of bonus or monetary incentives to civil servants?

GIAMBRONE: *In general there were bonuses, monetary, but they were not for specific objectives. If you want to know about this—. Some had little incentives in their wages, some of the managers I mean, but they were more bonuses because of higher responsibility and involvement in the project.*

MAJEED: Very good. How many people did you manage? How big was the cultural office?

GIAMBRONE: *Including museums, libraries, about 200. The staff, my staff in the office it was about thirty people. Then including the museums, the guardians, it was about 200.*

MAJEED: And the budget?

GIAMBRONE: *The budget was about 50 billion liras, 25 millions Euros per year. Not bad.*

MAJEED: And all this money, where was this money coming from? Some of it was left over from the previous administration but did you work with the Europe office for example or any other sources?

GIAMBRONE: *At first, the money left was from the old administration who wasn't able to use it but then as the money finished we got some money from the European office for projects and the particular project linked with the historical center, with the restoration of the historical center.*

MAJEED: So most of the money was already there or from the Europe office but not from any other sources?

GIAMBRONE: *No.*

MAJEED: What was the relationship of your office to the office of Emilio Arcuri and also Dr. Franco Micele?

GIAMBRONE: *Very strong. For example Arcuri restored the space and I used the space. Arcuri would restore historical buildings and other places and would give them the designation, like for a museum or something else. So there was very close collaboration.*

MAJEED: Did you also work with the Office of Public Works, the Commission of Public Works?

GIAMBRONE: *Yes, a lot. We also followed the same logic, the same way of thinking. Emilio Arcuri only dealt with historical center areas while Micele looked after the general plan and the outskirts of Palermo and the neighborhoods.*

MAJEED: What would happen if there were some things you did not agree on? How did you reach consensus?

GIAMBRONE: *In general we were almost always in agreement. Otherwise we would talk about it. In general we had the same ideas. There was little space for contrast but if there was something that we wouldn't agree on of course we would talk about it and we would involve the Mayor Orlando as well. But basically, as I said, because we all had the same idea of the city, of how the city should be, it was easy for us.*

He was thinking it would be an ideal place to have a museum or other cultural thing while Micele also thought it could be a registry office apart from having a museum et cetera. We talked together and I said why not together. The citizen comes into this big area and could see an exhibition or a performance, or at the same time go and do their identity card. It is the concept of service delivery to the citizens. This is the basic concept. This is better because the citizen—my idea was that maybe the citizen who went there just to renew his passport or ID, and saw that there was an exhibition, maybe had a quick look at it and saw there was a garden for his children. Probably the following time he would go just for the event instead of going for the passport.

So it was again a way to open the city and a chance for the citizens.

MAJEED: One of the things I wanted to ask, actually among your initiatives as Commissioner of Culture, which one do you consider the most successful and then which ones do you think were not as successful and why? And Dr. Giambrone, I know we are already over an hour so again thanks for your time.

GIAMBRONE: *Do you want to know about one initiative in particular?*

MAJEED: You said your priorities were using the budget and then working with the civil service and then opening cultural spaces. So those were the priorities, were all of them successful or were there any particular projects that were very successful and some things that didn't work? Like, for example, you seem to have worked with the civil servants but was there something like that that you thought could be done?

GIAMBRONE: *Yes. The three priorities worked very well and I consider them to be a big success. So I consider two main elements a sign of success, one the fact that I*

managed to change the mentality and that in the end all the civil servants shared the same project. The second is the fact that I felt that all the citizens of Palermo were proud of Palermo and were proud of what we managed to get as far as the cultural point of view.

I want to say another thing that I am particularly proud of is the opening of a library in the neighborhood of Brancaccio which is a highly Mafia popular hit area. It was really hard. It took me two and a half years fighting terrible opposition, but then we opened it. Just in front of the church of Pino Puglisi, the priest who had been killed by the mafia in the '90s.

If you ask me about my failures—it's that when I left everything was over, everything finished. It is not of course all our fault, maybe some for sure. We had our share of it. But my question still today is where I was wrong and where we were wrong, in which part and why.

MAJEED: Two questions related to both of these points. One is that I really want to learn more about the library that was opened in the neighborhood of Brancaccio.

GIAMBRONE: Yes.

MAJEED: What kind—because with this project and there must be other projects where you must be facing resistance from Mafiosi.

GIAMBRONE: Yes.

How did you—? What kind of process did you put in place to overcome the resistance? You said it took you two and a half years. How did you manage to do it? What were some of the steps? How did you see the opposition? What was the kind of opposition and then the steps you took?

GIAMBRONE: *Unfortunately it wasn't very easy. The fact was that the premises where the library had to be built was part of the municipal offices but of course there was a director of this office and I had problems. I fought with him for about two years. He would say, "No, it's not possible, we can't." He always found an excuse. Then suddenly he had been arrested because of Mafia and after two months I managed to open the library. So that was the opposition, the resistance you were asking about.*

When he was arrested I thought I see why it was impossible to open the library, now I see. He would find excuses, "No, we can't use this room because I have things, we can't move them. There are people." He would find excuses after excuses for two years.

MAJEED: And after two months you said you were able to open the library.

GIAMBRONE: Yes, and it is open now. It is still open.

MAJEED: The other thing you mentioned was that—sorry, just related to this, were there any other occasions like this where you had resistance because of people being connected to the mafia?

GIAMBRONE: *There were other things but this was the most important.*

MAJEED: You mentioned that one of the things you regret is that when you left everything was over and the reforms you had put in place did not continue. Why was that? Do you think anything could have been done to build sustainability?

GIAMBRONE: *This is the most difficult question. The one with the mafia was easy, this one is difficult. I don't know. What I can say for sure is those who came after us, the new administration, went back to the old mentality, the old way of thinking. They didn't look after the city, they didn't care about the city, they didn't want the city to improve.*

So the whole city went back, it was a period of regression as happened in 1992 after the murders. It was like after the big murders, people, the citizens were all very motivated and excited by the disgust from all the murders. As time passed and the memories of these terrible murders faded, it was like when they were leaving at the end of their mandates. The change wasn't felt as strongly as at the beginning. It was something that faded slowly away. But I think the big responsibility lies in the hands of the people who took charge after us. They maybe wanted to stop the good process that started with us in order to cancel a happy moment in Palermo's history.

But because we can't always blame other people I still ask myself what we did, what was wrong with us, what we did wrong. One possible answer is that maybe we didn't have enough time to change the mentality and the process and to put roots in it. We had only seven years, no more time. Maybe seven years were not enough or maybe we were wrong because we could have done more in those seven years. I still don't know, I still ask myself this.

A friend of mind during my period as commissioner of culture wrote a letter to me, a journalist, a writer, wrote to me, "Dear Francesco. It is all very beautiful. Great project, great change. The city is new, the city is open, it is all very exciting. But I fear that when the rains arrive the mountains will erode because the trees have no roots. I never forgot this sentence because the mountain eroded. I still don't know whether it was the fault of the trees who didn't have enough strong roots to save the mountains from the rains.

MAJEED: Thank you so much. I have a few minor questions but it depends if I can have your time.

GIAMBRONE: *No, no, no, continue.*

MAJEED: One thing you mentioned earlier in terms of the budget and spending the budget and making sure that there were projects when you were giving out money, in public works and in construction and in restoration there are opportunities for bribes and corruption. We see that in other countries, in the US for example we see that. Did you put any particular systems or checks and balances in place to minimize corruption?

GIAMBRONE: *This is the biggest problem in public administration, not only in Italy. How did I deal with this? How did I face the problem? I tried to be surrounded by people, by honest people. I tried to avoid the mechanism that can support corruption and I tried to concentrate myself on the administration and giving the majority of the responsibility to the direct managers of the projects. Again because these were people I trusted who were honest in my opinion.*

What does this mean? Let's do an example. For example, if somebody asks me to organize like the party of the patron Saint of the city or event and he asks me for 50,000 Euros of course I wouldn't give him the money directly but I would provide him with all the necessary things he asked for, for example the fireworks or the chariots or the parade equipment, etc. So these, all these things are for me tools of controlling and avoiding making an opportunity for bribe and corruption because I wouldn't give him the money directly again, I would just provide him with the things he needs. I would provide these things through public tenders.

MAJEED: With public tenders how did you make sure that some of the companies that bid were not connected to Mafia?

GIAMBRONE: *Through the police headquarters always. By law we had to ask the police headquarters for references always.*

MAJEED: For certificates?

GIAMBRONE: *The anti-Mafia certificate. And if we had any doubts at all, either we or the mayor would go to ask for more specific details about the companies.*

MAJEED: What about subcontractors?

GIAMBRONE: *In culture there were not any.*

MAJEED: One of the things I wanted to ask earlier, there was this focus on culture and there was this focus on taking, restoring public space and giving back to the public. What made you think, or the whole team of commissioners that this would be something that would help fight against the Mafia?

GIAMBRONE: *Because Mafias reign where there is need and there is no education. Because Mafia needs people who believe that the Mafia is the state. Mafia needs a state that doesn't act as a state so it can perform as a state itself. And wherever there is no education, in the sense that people are ignorant, they don't read or go to museums, and wherever there is a lack of jobs, this is the basis for the Mafia to thrive. So this is why I believe that culture can fight Mafia.*

MAJEED: So some of the restoration work and so on has also helped to provide economic opportunities and employment to people?

GIAMBRONE: *Of course, many, many job opportunities of course and very important economic development. Today it's something normal that jobs, opportunities and economic development from a cultural point of view are linked but at that time it was something completely new. In 1995 it wasn't like this, now it is written in books, it is something normal.*

MAJEED: Yes, that's interesting. In terms of the—

GIAMBRONE: *At the beginning of our conversation I said that the Spasimo was closed with garbage, tons of trash and the neighborhood was abandoned and dark. When the Spasimo reopened, just by taking away the trash, the citizens who lived near the Spasimo looked at the magnificence of the church and went to the Spasimo. Before, they tried to, but it was closed. In fact, it is incredible. Look at the magnificent church and they said this magnificence was near my house and I didn't know, incredible. Suddenly nearby [there opened] a bar [and] a restaurant*

and the houses restored and the square that was abandoned [had] a wonderful garden. The people respected the garden and respected the building. Is it [an] economy? Yes.

Go now near the Spasimo. The Spasimo is closed unfortunately but the bars, restaurants, pubs, two museums are near the Spasimo. Before when the Spasimo was closed it was impossible to go in that area, impossible. Before the re-opening of the Spasimo I said to a friend, "Go to walk to Piazza Majon." He replied to me, "You are crazy. Why should we go there? Why? It is all abandoned. It is very probable that we will get robbed. Why?"

When the Spasimo reopened the people who lived near the Spasimo became the guardians of the Spasimo. I can't forget that one day in Villa Trabia, because my office was in Villa Trabia, arrived two terrible men who were ex-prisoners and now were guardians of the Spasimo. They came into my office and nobody would dare stop them. They said, "You have to call the mayor."

"Why do I have to call the mayor?" Because near the Spasimo somebody had been robbed. I thought why are ex-prisoners saying to me—it was so surprising because that kind of act—shippo is a Sicilian word for when you take a bag from somebody.

MAJEED: Grab a bag?

GIAMBRONE: *But shippo you can't really translate, it is Sicilian. They were surprised because they thought this didn't exist any longer. Before the opening of the Spasimo I think that the two men probably did the shippos. After the opening, they came to me and say you have to go to the mayor because it is impossible that near the Spasimo that someone, a tourist was victim of a shippo. So it was very interesting.*

There was a change of mentality before and after the opening of the Spasimo. People were protective. Before when there was trash inside, that area was abandoned and seen as the Bronx of Palermo and they were themselves the criminals of the area. When it opened then they started to feel in a different way and they started to defend the area, to protect the area as it was their own home.

One of these gentlemen one day told me that he would always thank Orlando because he was wrong. He had been wrong. But Orlando gave his son an opportunity not to make a mistake. And you know why his son had an opportunity not to make a mistake? Because his son started to work honestly and opened the bar in front of the Spasimo. So he had an opportunity to start a new life, an honest life.

MAJEED: The Spasimo is an excellent example.

GIAMBRONE: *Yes, the Spasimo is formidable [extraordinary].*

MAJEED: The Teatro Massimo was also a very symbolic thing for Palermo. Can you describe if there were any problems you encountered in terms of—you were the director but it had already opened around that time in 1998.

GIAMBRONE: *When I was councilor for culture the Teatro was reopened. So I worked for the reopening as a commissioner. The Massimo was reopened in 1997. I became*

General Manager, not director, of the Teatro in 1999 so it was opened two years. It was very symbolic. It was the most important monument of the city, closed, in the center of the city. It was not hidden, it was there in the center. It was closed because the door was closed, the gate. There was a fence. So you couldn't even see because the shape of the fence was like waving so you couldn't even see inside.

It was closed, inside there was no music, no singers, no culture, no art, closed. Why? It is impossible to say. A lot of money, a lot of years, a lot of mafia, a lot of investigations. Many people were arrested but why it was closed is impossible to say. At the beginning the problem was the security exits. One of the excuses was the security exits, but when the Teatro was reopened there were no security exits, so we don't understand why. The previous excuse for not opening was that there were no security exits but when it was reopened there were still not.

Then the stage, the [indecipherable 1:31:19], a lot of work without any project. When Emilio Arcuri started the problem of the Teatro Massimo as Deputy Mayor he said to me, they worked for 23, 24 [years], I don't remember, without any project. He never found a project. A 100 million Euros had been spent but we never found a project.

The mayor, because Orlando is crazy, was crazy and is crazy still. The mayor went to Claudio Abbado in Berlin, I think Berlin and said, "Claudio, I want to reopen the Teatro Massimo." And Claudio said, "Yes, it is a good idea. I see in 1997 you have to reopen the theatre because it is the centenary."

Orlando said, "Yes, that is a good idea, in 1997. When?" And Claudio looked at his schedule and said, "I think the 12th of May, 1997. Okay, so see you the 12th of May 1997, bye, bye." It was 1995, only two years.

He came back to Palermo and said that the Teatro Massimo will be opened the 12th of May, 1997. We said, "Luca, you are crazy, it is impossible."

He said, "No, no, we have to reopen." It is a big commitment I made with Claudio Abbado." Then 1995, 1996, the end of '96 and Claudio Abbado said, "How about the Teatro Massimo?" And Luca Orlando, "Perfect, the 12th of May, there is no problem."

Five days before the opening a very important journalist from La Repubblica Nazionale came to Palermo and visited the cantiere with me and said to me, "When?" I said, "The 12th, five days."

"You are crazy." I said "No, no. Don't worry, the 12th of May." She said to me, "We are friends and I will write the article and say that you will reopen the 12th of May. But if on the 11th you are not ready, please call me because I am finished if I say you will open and you don't reopen."

"Don't worry, don't worry." And she said to me, "It is impossible." There were a lot of people working. Okay, Claudio Abbado arrived on the 11th of May, and a lot of friends of Claudio Abbado arrived to understand if everything was ready or not because he was really worried. He arrived with the Berlin Philharmonic, he arrived with his orchestra. He came to the theater and said, "Incredible, it is ready, good work mayor." They had rehearsal, "Good acoustics. Not bad."

The day following—no, the 11th, the day before. At the end of the rehearsal he said, “It is all okay mayor but there was some velvet at the base of the stage and they said this velvet is not a good idea, I prefer wood. But in the future change it.”

And Emilio Arcuri, when Claudio Abbado left, took a lot of people and took off the velvet and put the wood because Claudio wanted it. When he arrived the following day, the last rehearsal and went on the stage and began to conduct he noticed. He looked at me. “Wood?”

I said, “Of course, the 12th.” He said, “Incredible.” Also the Berlin Philharmonic, incredible. But there was an atmosphere around, surrounding the opening of the theater. The night of the opening of the theater we stayed long hours into the theater. When everybody left, Emilio Arcuri and other people were going out through the artists’ exit and Luca said, “No, I want to go down from the main staircase.” I said, “Okay, then.” We reopened the doors and started to go down and the square was full of people. When the people looked and saw Luca Orlando, they started to applaud. When we went down he started to talk to people.

One person said, “Mayor, I have never been inside the theater and maybe I will never be able because I don’t like lyrics [opera]. But today I am very happy to be Palermitan.” Very symbolic. So Teatro Massimo is one of the few things that still exists that we made. I never thought that anyone could ever close it again and in fact, no one ever closed it down again.

MAJEED: Thank you.