

Befana: When You're Lost and Found

Interview with Pina Marchese

Pina, can you tell me where Befana comes from?

Befana comes from Italy originally. I asked my mother this morning, I said, "Ma, growing up as a little girl in Italy, did you know about Santa Claus?" She said, "No, we had Befana." So she grew up with Befana.



Who was Befana to your mother?

Befana was a woman. She wasn't a woman of status. She didn't have a great job or anything, she didn't have fancy clothes. She had a worn out coat, worn out shoes, and she carried a bag full of things that she found throughout the world to give away.

When I was a little girl, my mother taught me this little verse of Befana:

La Befana camina di notte,
Con le scarpe tutte rotte,
Il vestito alla Romana,
Viva, Viva La Befana!!!!

Wonderful! What does it mean?

*The Befana travels through the night,
with all her shoes torn up
and she has a worn out coat
hurray hurray for la Befana!*

How far back does Befana go?

My mother's generation, my grandmother's generation too, my great grandmother. She goes back a long, long way. When I asked my father, "What were the origins of La Befana?" he said, "Oh, she was always around!"

And, you, Pina, as a storyteller, when did you first encounter Befana, and what was it about the story that drew you into it as an adult?

I learned La Befana as a child, and when I went to school I learned about Santa Claus, so I had the two, and I was grateful for both stories. We'd have Santa Claus on December 25th. Then, on January the 5th, we'd put out our stockings on the radiators because we didn't have a fireplace at the house, and wait for Befana to come. In the morning we'd wake up to tangerines and money, you know, quarters, and a dollar bill and candy. I was always connected to her.

Did you know the elaborated story, or was that something that you discovered later?

It was something I discovered later, not too long ago. About five years ago. I was curious, I wanted to know more about her. I had never told her story before, but I was ready to tell it. So I experimented with it. I started with a day care, with three and four year old kids. And I thought okay, let's see how this works out. Either they'll scream and leave, or they'll be okay with it. So I walked in, all dressed up in Befana's clothes, and all the children were quiet and silent and waiting to hear what was going to come next.

I walked in with my rubbage-luggage and my broom, all dressed up as Befana, and I had my basket of goodies. I said, "I'm LOST! Can I stay?"

And the children said, "Yeah, you can stay."

"But where am I?"

And one of the kids said, "You're in TORONTO."

"TORONTO? Where is Toronto?"

The kids knew exactly where we were. "Canada. You're in Toronto. You can stay for a little while."

I asked them, "Do you want to hear a story?"

"Yeah, we want to hear a story."

"Okay, I'll stay here for a little while and then I have to go, because, you see, I've been flying around the world and I'm a little tired."

And one kid I remember saying, "Is that a magic broom?"

I said, "Well, it takes me places."

"Wow."

So then I told them the story. Since then, I haven't had one child that broke out screaming, or crying. They listened to a story.

What is it in the story that keeps you telling it, would you say?

Befana's lost. She reminds me of me. My whole life has been, you know, it's been a little journey. Not always what I've anticipated. Befana has taught me that wherever you are, that's where you're going to



find yourself. And that's where you should be.

Wherever you are. You see, Befana has a lot of loss. She lost her husband, she lost her child.

After she lost all those things, she became crabby. When I was a child, I didn't know that Befana was crabby. That was a revelation.

And she was afraid to be alone in the dark. But Befana has taught me, it's okay to be lost. Because you're not really lost. You're always guided. There's nothing to fear, because you have the night sky. There's a brightness in the night sky that guides us.

The whole story takes place in the night, doesn't it? Befana's landscape is the night sky.

Oh yeah, and as the verse goes, *La Befana camina di notte*, La Befana she walks through the night. She doesn't travel through the day. She travels through the night. Just as she is, with her worn out shoes and her worn out coat. Just as she is. Nothing fancy.

What guides her is the star, the night star. And she has her broomstick which points the direction for her. Wherever she goes, she sweeps the place, cleans her surroundings, and leaves her goodies. And then she takes off to the next place, wherever that may be.

Does that translate to the way you live your life?

Now it has. I was very much like La Befana, Michelle. Very much like La Befana. I had my whole life planned out. I was going to finish university, and then at the age of 26 I was going to get married, and then I was going to buy a house. Then I was going to have all these kids, and a minivan. I was going to have this normal life! I had it all planned out. Then I realized the loss of the fiancé, the loss of this big dream that I had planned out for myself. Loss of the house, loss of the husband, loss of the minivan, loss of this image I had created for myself. I was left in the night sky. I was left in the dark.

But in the dark, in the dark, I created again. Another image in my mind. And I thought I would do it all over again. So all over again, I found another man and I was engaged to him. And I was ready to live the normal life again, and then kaboom! Lost again in the dark.

But this time, in the dark, I found the night light. I found the star that guides me.



And what was that for you?

For me it was—well, the second time, you know, it was really dark. The first time was scary, really more scary than dark. The second time it was DARK. I thought I was going to go deeper into the dark, and I'll never forget, I was in my kitchen. Lost in the dark. In the deep dark. And a feeling, like a bright light, came out from within me, it was inside me. It opened up my heart, and it dispelled all this fear. I felt the strength was within me. This feeling lasted about a week. I was on a high, joyful and peaceful. Blissful. It picked me up, just like Befana's broomstick! I was flying around on my broomstick for about a week. And then, it subsided slowly. Slowly, slowly, slowly it subsided, but it was enough for me to carry on to the next stage of my life.

During that dark time, everywhere I went, at meetings, at work, anywhere I would go I would be faced with a picture, on a wall, an image of our divine Mother of Guadalupe, the divine mother of the Americas, of Mexico. I wondered what was going on, so I delved into her story. She appeared to a poor man named Juan Diego when he too had lost his wife. He had lost his wife and he was living with his uncle, and he was minding his own business when Our Lady appeared. She wanted a temple to be built on Tepeyac hill in Mexico. Juan didn't want any part of it. But to make a long story short, she imprinted her image on Juan Diego's *timla* (an outer garment worn by men like a long apron) and the Bishop believed him finally. So the temple was built in Mexico to our Lady of Guadalupe. She's known as Our Lady of Hope to people who are alone, or feeling hopeless, or in the dark. And she lifts them up. Just like Befana. She lifts them up.

During that time, I felt she was around. She was telling me, there's nothing to fear. And actually, that was Our Lady of Guadalupe's message to Juan Diego, when she appeared again to him on the second day. He said, "Oh no, not you again. I have to find a doctor. My uncle's not well." And her message to him was, "Don't ever fear or despair of anything. Am I not your divine mother? I will be with you always. I'm taking care of things. Don't you worry." So, during that dark time in my life, she came around. She came to lift me up.

Did you also encounter Befana when you were in the dark?

Michelle, it's interesting you ask that. It was during the dark time that I started telling her story. I got myself a luggage, and pulled out some of my grandmother's clothes, and aprons and shawls, and I started telling the story.

How have things changed for you now that you're flying around with Befana?

I'm learning, and I'm still learning that we have nothing to fear. Befana and Our Lady of Guadalupe, are connected, along with the fairy godmothers. The fairy godmother is Befana, is Our Lady of Guadalupe is Befana. The divine light that comes through for Cinderella is Befana. As she's picking up the lentils, Cinderella is in that dark state. That's when her fairy godmother comes and gives her the light that gives her the strength to go the ball. And that's what Befana does, this is what our fairy godmothers do, this is what our divine mother does. She appears. The divine light appears to give us that light, that strength to carry on. I am now convinced, from what has happened—what I've felt, what I've seen, what I have experienced—that there is nothing to fear. When we're faced with the dark times, there is always a light. There's a light in the darkness, in the tunnels, in the caves, there's always a light.

I've also learned that we can plan things, but when things may not go as planned, that's okay. It's really okay. All is well. Because we are where we should be.



I'll speak from my own experience. The universe is always speaking to me. A dream will point the direction or give me information, or a conversation will happen when I'm searching for something, an answer will come to me when something's bothering me, or something will happen the following day that tells me, that's it, that's what I'm supposed to do ... we are guided.

What I'm really learning is how to listen, to pay attention to these messages, and trust that the universe constantly takes care of us. I'm learning to trust the messengers and to follow through with the messages. That's the process of my life right now.

Trust that these are valid messages, not just a dream, or just my imagination.

The sun, the moon and the stars, are speaking. And you know I think the stars were saying to Befana, "You know Befana, we know you're afraid of the dark but we're here. Things are going to be okay."

Pina, as a storyteller, as a person who has really been in a field of stories for a long time, what would you say is the power of myth and story in life? Why do we need these stories?

We need these stories to guide us. The star is in these stories. Bethlehem is in these stories. There's birth in these stories. They help us to awaken, these stories.

There's a little child in me that wants to ask, "Yes, but why is it important to awaken? Why, Befana? Aren't these stories supposed to put me to sleep? Aren't they bedtime stories!"

You know, Michelle, once you find the star, and you truly wake up, you can live your life. You can feel it, you can smell it, you can hear it. And you don't fear it.

How would you say that in Italian?

Quando scopri la stella, la vita è gioiosa...

Thank you, Befana!