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Sleeping Beauty: Marco Bellocchio Addresses Euthanasia

NATASHA LARDEIRA (January 30, 2012)



Marco Bellocchio

The celebrated Italian filmmaker proceeds with his retelling of Eluana Englaro's story, a story of life and death that nearly divided Italy. Despite the lack of public funding and incessant controversies, production started in Udine with Toni Servillo, Alba Rohrwacher, Michele Riondino and Piergiorgio Bellocchio.

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"When I prepare to shoot a movie I tell people, 'judge it for yourself, make up your own mind.'" Italian film director Marco Bellocchio thus commented, in an interview published in the newspaper La Libertà, on the decision of the **Regional Council of Friuli Venezia Giulia** to refuse, without having even read the script, any public funding to his *Bella Addormentata* (Sleeping Beauty), a film inspired by Eluana Englaro, a young woman from Friuli whose story plunged the Italian government into a constitutional crisis.

Eluana Englaro was left in a vegetative state after a car crash in 1992 when she was twenty years old. "For years (17 total), Englaro's father, Beppino, fought to have her feeding tube removed, saying it would be a dignified end to his daughter's life. He said that before the crash his daughter visited a friend who was in a coma and told him she didn't want the same thing to happen to her if she were ever in the same state,"

CNN reported back on February 9, 2009 when Eluana's life was ended.

“After a decade-long court battle, doctors reduced her nutrition on Friday in preparation for removing her feeding tubes, which her father claims would be in accordance with her wishes,” **The Guardian** wrote two days earlier, “But in an extraordinary turn of events, the country’s prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, after consultation with the **Vatican**, issued an emergency decree stating that food and water cannot be suspended for any patient depending upon them, reversing the earlier court ruling. On issuing the emergency decree, Berlusconi declared: ‘This is murder. I would be failing to rescue her. I’m not a Pontius Pilate.’ Justifying his campaign to save Englaro’s life, the prime minister added that, physically at least, she was ‘in the condition to have babies,’ a remark described by **La Stampa** newspaper as shocking.” But President Giorgio Napolitano refused to sign the decree as “an emergency decree cannot be in contrast with a court decision.”

The case was very controversial as Italy is a heavily Catholic country where the Vatican has great influence. “Pope Benedict XVI told pilgrims that ‘euthanasia is a false solution to suffering,’” CNN reported, “Euthanasia is illegal in Italy, but patients have the right to refuse treatment. It is on that basis that Englaro argued his daughter should be allowed to die, because some time before her accident she had expressed the wish not to be kept alive while in a coma -- indirectly refusing treatment, he said.”

And now the debate continues. Public funding or not, the film director is planning to proceed. The cast has not yet been finalized, but as of now the few that have been confirmed are: Alba Rohrwacher, Toni Servillo, Michele Riondino and Piergiorgio Bellocchio. *Sleeping Beauty* was written by Sandro Rulli and Stefano Petraglia and it is produced by Cattleya in collaboration with a French partner.

Udine’s mayor, Furio Honsell defined all the controversies against shooting in town “puzzling,” on location production costs have indeed been significant, and “censuring the work of such a great Italian filmmaker, an artist the whole world wishes to have” is simply something that should not be done.

Meanwhile, Cattleya has not asked the Cinema branch of the **Ministry of Culture** to get financing for a film of cultural significance. “We might do it later, meanwhile we proceed knowing we have all the requirements needed by the regulations,” Riccardo Tozzi, the film’s producer has said. “This film is a beautiful meditation on life and death, a declaration of love for life and all those who talked badly about it did it because of ignorance and misinformation. This has been seen as a film pro euthanasia, but it is not so. It has been seen as anti-religious, but it is not so. There is a deep love for life in each of the three stories that are told in the film.” Tozzi continues to say that by refusing, the Friuli region is guilty of intellectual obscurantism, “it is a question of ignorance not politics.”

This is a work of fiction that meets the real story of Eluana during the last week of her vegetative life, when, after the judgment of Milan’s Court of Appeals authorized the father to end the treatment that was keeping her alive. Beppino Englaro had a difficult time finding a place... he then found a clinic in Udine where he was allowed to pull the plug. “There are shots of real documents and of Beppino Englaro himself (Bellocchio had the man’s authorization), and there are scenes shot in front of the clinic. This is all there is in the film that has to do with Eluana, everything else is pure fiction. There is, for example, the story of a doctor who desperately tries to help a drug addict who wants to kill herself. The message is to help life not help death.”

Obstructing a film before it has been shot simply is anti-democratic, and Bellocchio’s stories of life and death started shooting in Udine today, January 30, 2012.



Shooting is planned outside the clinic where Eluana died



Eluana’s story divided Italy in two



Eluana’s father, Beppino Englaro, is featured in Bellocchio’s film

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