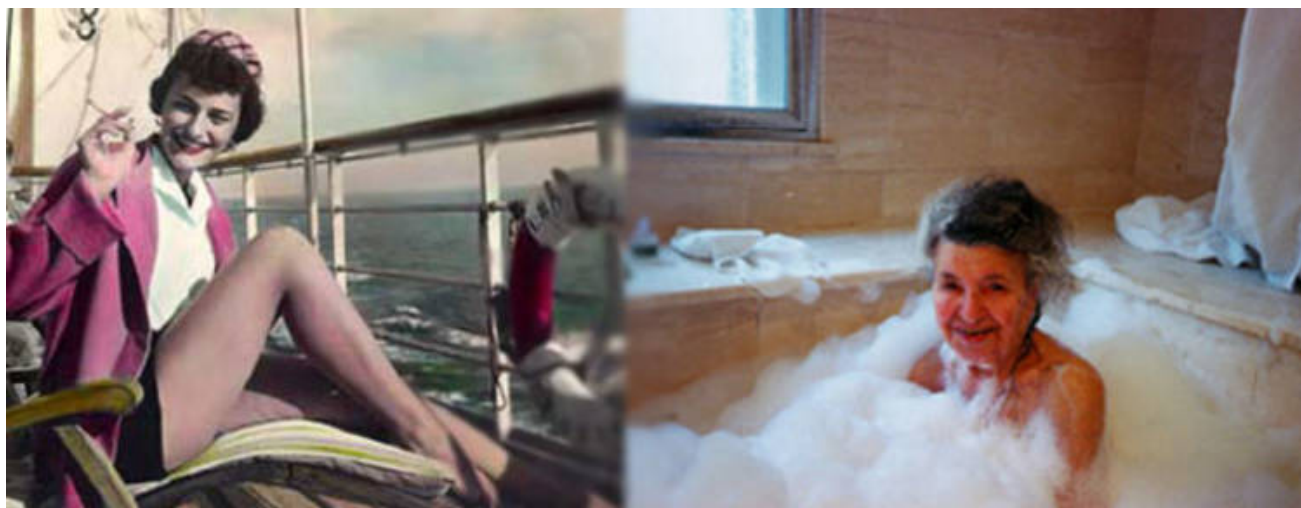


Mary Reveals Her Secrets

Letizia Airos Soria (February 13, 2008)



In “Nine Good Teeth” filmmaker Alex Halpern tells the life story of his one hundred year old Italian/American grandmother Mary Mirabito Livornese Cavalieri. It is a story that is accompanied by many voices, but it is Mary’s straightforward approach to life that makes one reflect on the everyday.

The filmmaker does not use stealthy methods to portray his grandmother. He enters her life with a bang and with the affectionate irreverence that only an unruly grandson can pull off. This dynamic is ultimately at the heart of their happy relationship, one that often exists and spans dissimilar but intimate generations.

It is the extremely personal history of his family which fascinates the young filmmaker, and one that asks various questions about our relationship to the past and about the women in the context of an Italian/American family. Halpern has the ability to bring to the screen the story of a strong and independent woman, who in her own way is the family’s hinge and point of reference; she deviates from many female stereotypes but at the same time she is wholly integrated in telling parts of the past that no longer exist.

Halpern documents Mary’s story with film, photographs, and parts of a large family archive that paint important moments in the lives of immigrants to the USA. It is the story of many families: from Stromboli to New York to Brooklyn with joy, pain, dreams, and illusions.



Why did the filmmaker choose to make this film?

"I began the journey into my grandmother's life at 18, when I saw family photos and home movies my father took," recalls the filmmaker. "Then during a trip to Stromboli, the island where we are from, a fortuneteller predicted that Mary would die at 96 years of age..." So the documentary begins with a superstition, and grandson and grandmother begin an adventure. They are incredulous as they film one scene after another. Magically a film of great artistic value and human interest develops, and Mary's life proceeds from the accomplishment of the feature film into ninety-six years.

The film withdraws into the routine of daily life, showing us those details that grandchildren often spy from the threshold of a door, picking up on the most irreverent elements of the habits of the old people they love. We see Mary in the bathroom and in the kitchen while she puts in her dentures, proud that she still has some of her own teeth. We pick up on her vanity, so sweet that it makes us smile. We see all of her determination, her youthful wisdom, and her powerful personality.

We see gestures from everyday life, and many who have lived with the elderly will recognize them. Here these gestures take on a symbolic value thanks to the irony of the protagonist. They become a lesson. We notice Mary's energy and her big secret: to know how to downplay drama, beginning with herself.

The family revolves around her and her decades of family history. The filmmaker delves into the most controversial aspects of his family's immigrant history through a female member's point of view. And the secrets drip out slowly by force of their irreverent truth. The secrets revealed tell of extramarital affairs, illicit loves, conflicts, quarrels, mourning. They are heard or seen through the voices of other family members and friends and they are seen in Mary's intense eyes, half-closed with age. The portrait of Mary is highly individual. She is certainly not a traditional mother (for example, her daughter reveals a youthful love affair that Mary had with the writer Jack Kerouac), nor a classic wife, and she had a very difficult relationship with her sister (her refusal to meet her until the end is symbolic). There are different problems that are revealed in the film, sad events that are experienced in all families, internal battles that are difficult to discuss.



But Mary has incredible energy to experience it all, thanks always to her straightforward humor. Despite all of her grandson's nosey questions, she is never annoyed; she even declares: why can't I have an orgasm at my age!

Mary Mirabito Livornese Cavalieri lived a vibrant life. After the death of her first husband, she married an old boyfriend who she had not seen in forty years. She listens to old vinyl records as she did when she dreamed of becoming a singer. There are many moments that remain after having seen the film. Mary likes to make fun of herself and to laugh. She carries with her wisdom that comes from experience and the ability to look at reality through the detached eyes of someone who knows how to live.

““She was the repository of more than one hundred years of family secrets,” recounts the filmmaker-grandson in a short interview with Edvige Giunta (New Jersey City University) at the end of the screening. “I was fascinated by her archive when I was 18 years old, by her things, her photos, her letters that were part of her intimate story but also a public one as a daughter and the second of thirteen children in a Sicilian family who immigrated to America.”

“For me it was important to view her in her totality; there are intimate parts in the film but my responsibility as a filmmaker was to tell the truth in the best way possible,” says Alex Halperm as he described his approach at the same time as necessarily invasive in order to understand his family's secrets.

“I knew that she was the subject of the film: matriarch, grandmother, mother, wife, lover, and daughter.” And we have seen her courageous candor, her irreverence, and her perhaps unconscious conflict with traditional roles frequently assigned to first-generation Italian/American women.

While Giunta responds, we gather in the filmmaker's eyes a placid sadness. His grandmother Mary passed away only three weeks before at the age of 108. “It is the first time th



at I have seen the film since her death,” he confesses, overcome with emotion.

He also admits: “In telling her story, I realized that our heroes are ordinary people.” He has told the story of his own special grandmother, but she is like other women in that her story had not been previously told. The documentary is significant for this reason in addition to being artistically very interesting.

His grandmother lived a full life and Halpern wisely knew to catch it on film, disarming the passage of time. He made Mary well-known in her no-nonsense approach to reality, scene after scene. Using other voices, he was successful in paying tribute to her and making us reflect on the commonplace.

“Nana” Mary Mirabito Livornese Cavaliere (1899 – 2008)

Nine Good Teeth by Alex Halpern was presented last Wednesday at the Graduate School of Journalism of the City University of New York (CUNY) as part of the film and video series “Documented Italians” sponsored by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College, CUNY.

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)

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