

Days of Wine and Fatalism

Maria Laurino (August 31, 2008)



From Carla Bruni's words to recent Italian films -- a summer revealing Italy's fatalistic streak.

This summer, I've been thinking a lot about Italian fatalism. During a recent vacation in France, I decided the appropriate reading material for the flight over should start with Vanity Fair's interview with my favorite first lady, Carla Bruni (see *Carla Bruni, Old World Italian*). The beautiful and talented former supermodel/singer gushed on every page about her new husband, French president Nicolas Sarkozy to Vanity Fair correspondent Maureen Orth. She told Orth that it would be a "dream" to have Nicolas's children (the quote landed on the cover of every French glossy magazine). "I hope to, if I am young enough," said the forty-year-old Carla.

What about fertility treatments? Orth pragmatically asked.

No, Bruni replied, she wouldn't want to "tempt the devil."

The cosmopolitan former mistress of French philosopher Raphael Enthoven (the father of her son) is no rational woman. She happily reveals her fatalistic Italian roots – and here, I mean fatalism in



the classical sense – that life is dictated directly from above. (Roots which I thought ran mainly through the veins of those of us who are southerners). While most Americans would readily turn to science and invest years in extensive fertility treatments – Carla won't "tempt the devil." That's why I like Carla -- it's comforting to see someone as poised and successful as she is as inherently nervous about the world as I am.

And still the world seems to shine down upon Carla. If the gossip rags are right, Carla may be getting this dream too. After Sarkozy was seen patting her bikini-clad belly this summer, rumor has it that Carla Bruni-Sarkozy is pregnant.

The happy fatalist. I wonder how she feels about airplanes, I thought, closing the magazine to face the rest of my flight.....

A more brutal fatalism surfaced in several Italian movies playing in New York this summer, reminding those of us who sometimes fantasize about a life in Italy, the difficult, often impossible conditions of those who live there. *Beautiful Country* (a play on the southern Italian pronunciation of English) is a devastating documentary about the Mafia control of waste in Campania, and how a compact between corrupt government officials and Mafia bosses contaminated one town for decades with illegal waste.

The sheep are dying, the crops ruined; the once-prized buffalo mozzarella is contaminated. The film reminds Italian-Americans of the genesis of our fatalism: man is powerless to the actions of greater forces. With a corrupt government and no where else to turn, the residents of this village can only lament the land that they once cultivated. One of the town's activists spends most of his time in this film yelling into the camera, trying desperately to tell his unimaginable story – that for money men become animals, dumping toxic waste and destroying the lives of their paesani.

As an American, it's hard to watch this film and see the impossibility of fixing this problem. We no doubt have our own deep levels of corruption and lack of government concern (Hurricane Katrina for starters), but it's hard to imagine that an environmental movement with the help of a state or local government agency couldn't stop the illegal dumping. Watching the film, I thought about my old Italian relatives, and their "what can be done?" attitude to life's difficulties. They had hundreds of years to cultivate this belief – one that still has ample reason to exist in southern Italy today.

The second film, *Days and Clouds*, is set in Genoa, a rather unattractive port city, but still a world away from Campania's desultory people and desiccated sheep. The film is also about people succumbing to circumstances beyond their control. Michele loses his high-paying job and hides this fact from his wife, Elsa, for months. He uses a chunk of their paltry savings to give her a surprise birthday party and beautiful earrings. He cannot bear to tell the woman whom he loves that their entire life savings is less than 30,000 euros.

The plot of the film sets this couple on the worst possible course – part of the equity of their apartment was borrowed against Michele's company, so they lose their home too. Elsa, earning a degree in art history and working on the restoration of an ancient fresco, must give up the work she loves but doesn't get paid for, accepting jobs as a phone salesperson and evening secretary.

The ancient fresco that Elsa helps renovate serves as a metaphor for the film: this gem of a country is stuck in its past. With little room for mobility, the fatalistic countrymen must accept their lot. Elsa may write an art history dissertation but there will be no room at the academic inn for her talents. Michele, once displaced from his vaguely described shipping job, ends up working as a bike messenger as his list of work possibilities dries up.

Italian filmmaker Silvio Soldini leaves us with one piece of hope. His ending seems to suggest that what damns Italy may also save it. The country's traditionalism, its refusal to change, its museum-like quality has also created a tightly connected family. Michele begins to slide out of his depression by becoming an informal accountant to a restaurant his daughter opens; and both Michele and Elsa realize that whatever happens to their lives, they'll do their best to remain a couple



and help each other.

It's not Carla Bruni's happy Hollywood ending, but maybe it's a start.

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