



Giovanna Taviani. A New Generation of Documentarists at SalinaDocFest

Benedetta Grasso (June 07, 2010)



Interview with Giovanna Taviani, Artistic Director of the SalinaDocFest

The fourth edition of Salinadocfest is approaching in the Fall (September 12-19 2010). It is a festival which brings to life the voices of the Mediterranean area, the tales of immigrants, the history of Italian cinema and snapshots of real life. You have two options...: one is to go and visit this beautiful island and attend the Festival enjoying this unique side of Sicily during a season when tourists don't crowd the streets and the beaches; the other, easier, is to go to midtown New York at the Calandra Institute and meet with director Giovanna Taviani, watch her first documentary, and get to know the forces behind the festival. This fantastic event is sponsored by I-Italy and ANFE (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Emigranti), and perhaps after the presentation on June 11th you will want to do both things...



We have met with Giovanna Taviani, a talented young film-maker who grew up surrounded by the world of cinema, being the daughter and niece of the famous Taviani brothers, who redefined film-making in Italy with their compelling and inspiring stories.

Giovanna has become a scholar and critic on cinema and literature, but her true talent can be seen in her documentaries. Giovanna has also founded the Salinadocfest with a specific vision in mind, a vision she shared with us in this interview.

How did you come up with the idea for Salinadocfest?

Four years ago, I came across this idea almost by chance, during the summer, in Salina. The hotel owners of the islands had complained to me for years about the decrease in tourism during the most beautiful months, such as September, during the vintage season. So, one evening, an old friend of mine, Alberto Oliviero, President of the Association SalinalsolaVerde asked me: "Giovanna, why don't you come up with something that will also help us promote cultural tourism here in the islands, aside from the summer holidays?"

As far as I'm concerned, for years I had dreamed about bringing the job I love to the island I love. Furthermore, I knew that the Eolie Islands are not only protected by Unesco as some of the most beautiful islands in the whole world, but they were also the location of great movies of the past, from Stromboli terra di Dio with Ingrid Bergman, to Vulcano with Anna Magnani; from Antonioni's L'Avventura to the Taviani Brothers' Kaos, in which I acted as a young child; also Troisi's Il Postino and Nanni Moretti's Caro Diario. One cannot forget the great documentaries by Vittorio De Sica, who shot in Stromboli one of his greatest movies, Isole di Fuoco, and the submarine documentaries of the Moncada group, Marain, D'avanzo and Alliata, who founded in Salina the legendary studio "Panaria Film". So that's why I said: let's create a documentary film festival in Salina, kind of a crazy idea, given how difficult it is to reach the island; it was almost a bet. And that is how in September 2007 we started the first edition of the festival.

The Mediterranean sea has always been a melting pot of people that has allowed for great encounters among civilizations and has brought great cultural and artistic collaboration. Is this concept still valid and true today?

The Mediterranean area, as you say, has always been a crossroads of exchanges and encounters, arrivals and departures. A very famous Italian writer, Vincenzo Consolo, awarded by our Honorary Committee during the 2008 edition, places these constant movements across the Mediterranean as the heart of civilization itself, when he declares: " We are blind in trying to avoid that encounter and mix of ethnic groups, languages, religions, memories and cultures; an encounter that has always been linked to the progression of civilization". Now that that sea has been turned, today, into a barrier of separation, a "Western Wall" that evokes sorrow and mourning, betrayed in its very essence by the strict Italian immigration policies that refuse entry to others, the concepts of civilization and identity are in danger of being affected and compromised. Because without the culture of the "Difference" (of the Other), you cannot have the perception of an identity; in other words, he who is afraid of knowing others, is afraid of knowing himself. To the Mediterranean and its people is dedicated the Salinadocfest. Images, Cultures and reality in the Mediterranean"

What do the island of Salina and the island of Manhattan have in common?

They are both islands of tears and hopes. During the past century the Eolie islands experienced the pain of emigration and the strife to find a new world. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th almost 6000 people left Salina, who had only 7000 inhabitants. They wanted to escape because of a crisis caused by an insect that poisoned all the vineyards. The island became less and less populated - almost deserted - for a long time. One of the favorite destinations for the Salinari was Ellis Island and then Manhattan, as you can also see in the movie Nuovo Mondo by director Emanuele Crialesi who actually found a lot of his documentation and background for the movie in Salina, in the beautiful museum of Emigration in Malfa.

In America our immigrants organized their life really well, creating the Società di Mutuo Soccorso



(the Mutual Aid Society) for their fellow country-men who arrived without money and not speaking English. They really had to struggle to be accepted in the New World, which looked down on them with suspicion and diffidence, in the same way “we”, the Italians, look at the new immigrants coming from third world countries.

To the America-Sicily “bridge” Salinadocfest dedicates the next editions along with Anfe (National Association of Emigrated Families), remembering the time when we were the immigrants, forces, yesterday like today, to emigrate far away to search for fortune somewhere else.

Within the very vast documentary genre how would you define your work?

I think that the documentary, compared to a fiction narrative feature, has the privilege to offer a slice of reality, at the same time telling stories. That’s why we chose the tagline “Festival of the narrative documentary” for Salinadocfest. I myself as a director tend always to start from reality- an inquiry, a newspaper article, an experience I actually lived- so that then I can reinvent it through a personal point of view, the construction of a narrative plot, and characters that come into play: basically through the language of cinema. I believe that a documentary is a movie first of all, with its own screenplay, directorial style, editing, photography, with the difference that it doesn’t use professional actors but real people met along the way. In Italy there is an excellent generation of directors of documentaries who take their inspiration from the documentaries of the highest tradition (from Flaherty to De Seta) re-interpreting it in a subjective, personal and creative way.

There are many immigrants from Sicily in the United States. Do you think this festival can have a particular significance to these people?

I would think so and we were able to test their interest during the past edition, in our section “Superotto in Famiglia” (Home-movies), organized by Anfe, dedicated to the memory of our immigrants in the United States. Inside a Church in a beautiful bay on the island, we projected the 8-mm films brought there by Sicilians who have lived in the United States for generations and who had documented their experience throughout their life. While playing the piano, in front of the screen, a Sicilian musician commented the images like in the early silent films. The people in the island, whose families have each at least one person abroad, responded with an emotional silence. We aim at this audience with our Festival, with the hope and mutual interest in a project that will gradually build an archive of all the immigrants all over the world, to keep remembering who we are and where we come from.

What do you expect from this NY presentation of the festival?

The Salinadocfest, -along with the Editor in Chief of I-Italy, Letizia Airos, whom I met through Gaetano Cala’, Director of Anfe - has in mind a web contest aimed at Sicilian immigrants in the United States, which could open interesting new perspectives for our festival. A few days ago in Rome we met with Studio Universal, an important cable network in Italy, dedicated to the American movies that in different ways have roots within our country: from Turturro to Coppola, from Vincent Schiavelli to Robert De Niro, to obviously Martin Scorsese whom we’d like to have as an honorary guest for our 2011 edition. Therefore this presentation in New York is the first important step to take.

What do the artists of this edition have in common? What’s new this year?

The theme we chose as a common thread for the next edition is “My country: the identity”. In a moment when in Italy, in Europe and more in general in the Mediterranean area, the concept itself of identity, private and public, personal and social, female and male, seems to shift, we thought it was about time that we focused on the research for identity in a fragmented and disjointed era. I think the directors, the writers, the artists that will take part in the 4th edition feel united by the necessity of redefining a common horizon of values and to ask ourselves who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

Do you see the United States as a launch pad for future collaborations with the myriads of



documentary film festivals in this country?

I really hope so. In the United States the documentary is a rising genre and the festivals are very important. Tribeca is one of the many examples. Salinadocfestival has paired up with one of the most important festivals in Brasil, The International Exhibit of Cinema in San Paolo, directed by Leon Kakoff. I hope that, now, arriving on the American shores like our grandparents did in Ellis Island, we can get our name out there and be appreciated there, as well.

What led you to documentaries? What was the first one you shot?

I think my generation has been driven by a clenching thirst for reality that the omnipresent power of television has overshadowed and taken away through a constant spectacular representation, very distant from the things that happen around us. We live in a bubble, unable to clearly see a horizon beyond the blurred glasses. This might be the reason I started working on documentaries and when someone asks me: - when are you going to make a "real" movie? - I answer: but we are making real movies! - It's just that we are showing reality, from which we start and to which we return, sometimes even in a visionary or surreal way. Truth, as Balzac used to say, is never completely plausible! I really like the possibilities that the documentary genre offers to work with archive footage, with memory, and I often use scenes from movies of the past to narrate the present. It's what I did with my first documentary, *I nostri 30 anni, Generazioni a Confronto* (Our 30s: Generations Face to Face) a journey through Italian Cinema, through four generations of directors, to discover how we were and perhaps how we will be.

Let's talk about young people. In the United States the general teaching is that age doesn't matter to tell an original and well-crafted story. Do you think this message could be applied also to Italy?

Well, I can talk about my personal experience. I shot my first documentary when I was over 30, maybe for the fear of the inevitable comparison with my father and uncle, with the environment I came from. I wanted to get to prepare my project, with my own personal touch. I come from the literary world and from a long and complicated academic career, filled with battles and defeats, within the university. Today I think that education has helped me and has shaped who I am now and my documentaries, that are always born out of a thought, a careful analysis of the reality in which we live. That's why I always tell the students who are eager to express themselves: don't rush it, first try to develop your own point of view of the world and everything else will follow.

Can you talk briefly about the movie you'll be showing in New York?

It's a "roadtrip" through the streets of Rome, that I did when I turned 30, meeting four generations of directors along the way, from grandparents to fathers to sons; I asked them to tell me what it meant for them to be young and have a camera in their hands through which they could capture the youth of their time. I started with the 30-something "vitelloni" during the Baby Boom portrayed by Dino Risi and Mario Monicelli (e.g. Gassman in *Il Sorpasso - The Easy Life* or *I Soliti Ignoti - Big Deal on Madonna Street*), to then go on to the young revolutionaries of 1968 (Bellocchio, Bertolucci, Taviani), who were followed by the "anxiety years" captured by Nanni Moretti in *Ecce Bombo*, shot in '78, the year in which Aldo Moro was held hostage. Finally I wanted to close with the new generation of 30-something people today that I reunited around the table of Biondo Tevere, a historical restaurant in Rome where Visconti shot *Bellissima*. What we see is a downfall, from the passion and utopias of our fathers to the oblivion of the present, in which the ideologies died and with them the great hopes of the past. Nevertheless there is no resignation: along with the need to go back to tell the truth in our country, as in the best cinematic traditions, a new generation of directors is born today, from Garrone to Sorrentino, from Crialesse to Munzi, from Marra to Vicari, all of which are reinventing Italian cinema with a new language and a new expressive vitality.

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