

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE ROHRWACHER



Alice Rohrwacher © Fabio Lovino

**DIRECTOR OF “LAZZARO FELICE”,
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES**

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BY KARIN SCHIEFER

“LAZZARO FELICE” CONSISTS OF TWO FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT SECTIONS: ONE RURAL, THE OTHER URBAN; ONE SUMMERY AND DRY, THE OTHER WINTRY AND WET; ONE LOCATED IN THE RECENT PAST, THE OTHER IN OUR PRESENT. WAS THE IMAGE OR THE IDEA OF A BREACH, A FRACTURE – NOT ONLY IN ITALY BUT ALSO IN OTHER WESTERN SOCIETIES – WHAT PROMPTED YOUR INITIAL REFLECTIONS IN THE CREATION OF THIS STORY?

That idea was certainly always there. From the very beginning I conceived “Lazzaro Felice” as a diptych. I had this idea about a memory of the past and memories of the future. The fracture in Lazzaro’s story, his collapse, represents the fracture that has taken place in my country, Italy. Over the last 50 years we have fallen off a cliff. From today’s perspective it’s hard to say whether the situation is now better or worse. Everything has changed, yet everything remains the same. As soon as you tell a story in two time periods, you tend to establish a comparison. But that wasn’t exactly what interested me. I wanted to use the two periods like two mirrors,

reflecting each other. It wouldn’t have been possible to develop all those ideas if I hadn’t had my producer Carlo Cresto-Dina from *Tempesta*. For a film like this, the most important thing is to find an accomplice. My ideas about Lazzaro and his travel through time were able to grow because Carlo was listening and discussing them with me. The relationship with a production company is like the sounding board of an instrument – it allows the creation of music.

ON THE ONE HAND A TRUE EVENT SERVES AS ONE OF YOUR SOURCES, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND YOU DELVE DEEP INTO THE REALM OF FANTASY BY USING BIBLICAL MOTIFS, LEGENDS, FAIRY TALES, ETC. HOW DO YOU HANDLE THESE TWO POWERFUL BUT OPPOSING FORCES – REALITY AND FANTASY – DURING THE WRITING PROCESS?

I have such an incredible number of things to do in my life, the fact that I succeed in finding time to write at all verges on the miraculous. So when I do find time to write, I simply write – without thinking. Fantasy or reality – it’s all in my head. I never have to

face the question of what I should write, just when I can write I can't explain it. There are stories that were always there: I only had to begin writing them down as everything is in my head. These stories come from far



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away. Over time they have matured and they can't be hurried too much. Things which are carried along by water either sink to the bottom or rise to the surface. Quite possibly different forces are in operation. There is a sphere of the realistic, which lends form to the fantasy, and there is a sphere of the fantastic, which equips reality with the imaginary power to interpret the symbols of reality. If you study even a very small stone in the road, it consists of various layers and lines. What I mean is that in one single form there are numerous layers, multiple time periods and multiple perspectives. Another important point, which is crucial for my work, is that I perceive many tragedies all around me and I attempt to narrate them with as much humour as possible. They still remain tragedies, but at least we don't weep about them.

LAZZARO HIMSELF IS A SYMBOL OF PURE GOODNESS. HE BELIEVES EVERYTHING HE'S TOLD, AND HE IS PROFOUNDLY GOOD AT HEART. HE ALWAYS OBEYS; HE ALWAYS DOES WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ASK HIM TO. THE TITLE OF YOUR FILM DESIGNATES HIM A “HAPPY” PERSON. IN MY VIEW LAZZARO IS BOTH A PROMISE OF HAPPINESS AND AT THE SAME TIME A SYMBOL OF OPPORTUNITY THAT HAS BEEN LOST, NOT SEIZED. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

I would agree. Lazzaro represents a missed opportunity, but also an opportunity that always arises again. In Italian, if you describe somebody as a “Lazzaro felice”, you mean a poor guy who is satisfied with any situation. He has nothing, but he doesn't aim to

achieve anything either. When I read books about how to write a good screenplay, it was also about analysing the screenplay structure in order to explore the fundamentals of narrative. Ever since then I've had problems with the trajectory a hero normally has to follow within a story in order to construct a so-called developmental arc: his departure from A, his arrival at B, the event that changes him fundamentally and makes him into a different person, etc. When I start writing a screenplay, I have to ask myself the following questions. How does my hero understand the world? What is going on inside him? How, and in which direction, does the hero's narrative arc unfold? But when I take a look at my own life, I come to the conclusion that changes have never taken place on the basis of one single event. There have been events which only triggered changes years later, and there are also changes that have never been completed. I do have certain problems with narrative prototypes. That's why I have focused on something immutable. You need to look at more than the history of literature, film or art. When innocence confronts mankind, it remains intact. When it appears, it's pure and untouched, and it appears to people in the most varied forms. This image of innocence, travelling through time unharmed, is what I had in front of me – permanently unchanged. My hero remains the same person, while the world around him changes. I would actually go further: even when we consider a world which believes itself to be undergoing change, we can see that it remains fundamentally the same. Lazzaro's battle remains the same: in the first section, people exploit his naivety and abuse his good nature, while, in the second section, it is precisely this innocence which people find suspect.



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I'm also thinking there of my own experiences, of the thoughts that occur to me when I sit in a subway train or a plane. Our projections are more powerful than the options we have available.



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DID YOU HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT LAZZARO SHOULD LOOK LIKE? OR DID YOU MEET HIM BY CHANCE ONE DAY AND THEN REALISED THAT WAS HIM?

It was definitely the second. This part was Adriano Tardiolo's first experience on a film set. We looked in schools and one day by pure chance we came across Adriano in an accounting school.

HOW SHOULD WE PICTURE YOUR WORK WITH THE ACTORS? YOU HAD BOTH PROFESSIONAL AND NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTORS, AND YOU CONCEIVED A PAST UNIVERSE WHICH SEEMS AS AUTHENTIC AS LIFE IN A MODERN TOWN IN THE SECOND SECTION. HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO TRAVEL THROUGH TIME AND YET REMAIN SO AUTHENTIC?

I have worked with both professional and non-professional actors. In the first section the world is very simple: the professional actors play the people who represent wealth and middle-class society. In contrast, the non-professional actors take the roles of the rural workers. In the second section the division is less clear: everything is mixed up and it's less easy to identify the roles. With me there is always very intensive rehearsal work, where I work closely with my acting coach, Tatjana Lepore, who helps me ensure that the rehearsals proceed organically. You have to bear in mind that we sometimes worked with 54 non-professional actors, as well as the professionals. We really do rehearse a lot, with the professional and non-professional actors, because for me the crucial aspect of the preliminary

work is that the foundation, and particularly the set, should be so consistent and close to reality that everyone feels as comfortable as he or she would at home.

THERE SEEMS TO BE ANOTHER PERSON WHO IS INDISPENSABLE IN HELPING YOU ACHIEVE THIS INCREDIBLE FLUIDITY IN YOUR NARRATION. I'M THINKING OF YOUR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY, HÉLÈNE LOUVART.

We have worked together from the very start and we have developed a method which isn't rigid but instead undergoes constant development, just as we do. We take the screenplay and divide it into three levels. First there is what I would describe as the pure narrative, then we have the scenes which justify Lazzaro's presence and provide a reason to want to see him, even though he's not a character who pushes himself into the foreground. The third level is what takes place beyond the human sphere – the natural world which observes mankind. We establish these three shades. Then, before we start shooting, we adopt a position and simply attempt to pursue the requirements of the position during the filming. Hélène is above all one of the most wonderful people I have ever encountered in my life. And making films provides me with the opportunity to work with people I like very much. Apart from the story I want to tell, that prospect is the main source of the energy I need to write a film. On top of all that, Hélène and I have developed a very strong method of listening to one another, and listening to what happens between us and the scene.



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I'D LIKE TO REMAIN ON THE THIRD LEVEL. "LAZZARO FELICE" HAS BREATHTAKING LANDSCAPES. FIRSTLY, HOW DID YOU SELECT YOUR LANDSCAPES? AND SECONDLY, THE AERIAL VIEWS OF THESE ARID, INHOSPITABLE AND STEEP MOUNTAINS SUGGEST TO

ME AN INTERPRETATION OF MODERN SOCIETY, WITH SHARP RIDGES THAT DELINEATE TWO EXTREMES – THE UP AND THE DOWN – AND NOTHING SOFT IN BETWEEN.

First, a little story. I gave the actors the screenplay to read, and Adriano, who plays Lazzaro, said to me: “I understand everything, but what does it mean when it says ‘nature observed them?’” I was looking for a landscape that reminded me of something. You could perhaps compare it with someone you fall in love with; when you have the impression you have known that person forever. I wanted the place in the countryside to be modest but at the same time to contain something essential. I wanted the workers’ houses to convey some sense of loss, but without it appearing exaggerated, either too little or too much. It seems to me that the landscape we found could be the background in a Renaissance painting. It’s archetypal, and it also has a fairy-tale aspect. The same applies to the town. We were looking for something that was at the same time symbolic and realistic. We wanted a town that everyone could feel



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they recognised without being able to say exactly which town it was. In the end we were obliged to film in various Italian towns and to blend them together. We were looking for symbolic images that rose above reality somewhat, precisely so that they could then come across as more realistic than reality. I would say the same about the mountains. They are realistic but at the same time they transport something essential.

THE MARCHESA CLAIMS THAT THE CHAIN OF EXPLOITATION IS A NEVER-ENDING, DOWNWARD SPIRAL. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOMEBODY IN A LOWER POSITION EXPLOITED BY SOMEBODY SLIGHTLY MORE POWERFUL. THE PEASANTS’ FATE IN THE CITY

CONFIRMS THIS THEORY. ON THE OTHER HAND, IN LAZZARO YOU PROVIDE EVIDENCE OF THE CONTRARY. DO YOU CARRY THESE TWO APPROACHES INSIDE YOU? YOU MENTIONED HUMOUR AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF YOUR STORYTELLING. IN THE SECOND PART EVEN YOUR HUMOUR IS MORE SARCASTIC AND ACID. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE TWO SOULS INSIDE YOU?

Antonio Gramsci said: “What is necessary is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will”. That gets very close to my character. If something touches me very deeply about people, it’s this thin line that straddles the laughable without making something really laughable. Walking this fine line is extremely difficult and also extremely risky. You have to be like an acrobat and at the same time treat serious matters like a child. If I apply this in concrete terms to the current situation in Italy, I perceive a time where chaos and vulgarity rule. As if every kind of logic has been lost. And I think a story which has the aspect of a fairy-tale might make it possible to say something about the reality. In my view, the speed with which things appear and then vanish again these days means that every sensibility becomes lost. For us film people, sensibility is the tool we use, but we can’t achieve a great deal with it.