

INTERVIEW WITH SILVIA BRUNELLI

RECIPIENT OF THE 2019 VENICE-BIENNALE SCHOLARSHIP
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SILVIA, YOU STARTED WORKING ON FILM CONTENT AT A YOUNG AGE – 16. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHERE YOUR PASSION FOR FILM COMES FROM?

I started editing for fun. I edited holiday memories, for example, learning the rudiments of editing and software programs. Then, in high school, I had a friend who always had a camera at hand to shoot short films, and what he did resonated with me. One day, I shot my first short film for a screening at my school theatre and it was a wonderful awakening. I fell in love with the ability to tell stories through film. I started to work on film sets in my town, like an intern, while I studied law. This on-the-side experience considerably improved my skills so that when I finished law school, I was immediately able to work as an assistant director. Make no mistake, this is a hard and complicated job, but being part of a crew and experiencing life on set feels like living in a parallel world. I feel privileged to live this.

YOU ARE THE RECIPIENT OF THE 2019 VENICE BIENNALE RESIDENCY FOR “LA SANTA PICCOLA”. WHY DID YOU APPLY? WHAT WAS IT LIKE ATTENDING?

My producers from “Rain Dogs Film” (Cattaneo and Quarantini) insisted on my participation. I was

skeptical at first. To believe that my dreams can come to life is always very difficult for me to imagine. This is true especially considering those who know how harsh the reality of the Italian film industry is. Certainly, the road to success is difficult and not always well defined. You can imagine how the residency was an unexpected, unique and wonderful journey. I met fantastic people, both among the participants and tutors who worked there. I am sincere when saying that in my heart we have become a small and colourful family.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THE RESIDENCY?

The most important lesson I learned is that there is no such thing as an unattainable dream. And that’s the biggest gift the residency brought me. I learned so much in terms of screenwriting. Writer and producer Francesca Scanu and I have immersed ourselves in creating the story for “La Santa Piccola”, constantly working on its development. This led us to make difficult choices: we created central characters, yet changed their story arc many times. I learned how useful it is to let go of what you love because it can bring something equally beautiful and useful for the story. What surprised me most was how Francesca and I were able to overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable, thanks also to

exchange with other professionals of the highest level.

“LA SANTA PICCOLA” IS BASED ON A BOOK BY YOUNG ITALIAN AUTHOR VINCENZO RESTIVO. WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO MAKE A MOVIE OUT OF THIS BOOK?

The producer asked me to read Restivo’s book because it had a theme in common with a short film that I wanted to make. However, during the residency, the story that we developed moved away from the book’s central storyline. In the end, we chose to entirely revolutionise the story and the relationship between all the characters, creating a new plot. The film is inspired by, rather than based on the book. It served as a starting point for us to organise our ideas and create the story we now have. Francesca and I wanted a story that pulsates with realism and exudes humanity, similar to the book, yet with different tones.

YOU HAVE WRITTEN THAT YOU WANT TO WORK WITH FRANCESCA SCANU ON ALL YOUR FUTURE PROJECTS. WHAT MAKES HER TALENT SUIT YOUR VISION AS A FILM DIRECTOR?

Francesca is a good screenwriter because she has a profound way of feeling the characters and understanding them. She empathises with them, she can even dream of them at night, but she also has the coolness to cut them out if she believes that it is right for the whole story. She and I are connected by a deep friendship. She knows me and knows how to interpret me. She knows my limitations and, more than anything else, we have a very similar way of experiencing a certain range of emotions, feelings and love for a certain type of story. Francesca can keep me on the path of writing when I lose sight of the story in favour of the film-making idea. I have a deep admiration for her and an immense trust, even when we have different visions. I listen to her and I know she does the same with me. I consider her an integral part of my personal life and my possible future career. She can write beautiful stories and I want to make films that have the strength to stimulate people and myself. She has the perfect soul and talent to give me this kind of possibility.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR STORY TO REVOLVE AROUND A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL DISRUPTING THE PEACE OF A QUIET TOWN? DOES RELIGION HOLD A SPECIAL MEANING FOR YOU?

There are several reasons why religion plays a role in “La Santa Piccola”. I am Italian, therefore of Catholic

tradition, but I have no particular connection with this religion. The role of religion in my film has a multi-fold function. First, it is descriptive of the more comic genre that I seek to mix with the more dramatic genre of the film. Religion is used lightly, almost in a self-mocking way. What’s more, the film is set in Naples, a town known for its deep connection with religion, so much so that many locals are superstitious. However, the main function of religion is to symbolise how people need to believe that something or someone will save them. People seek hope, relief, and to nourish this hope, they are also able to believe that a ten-year-old girl can work miracles and that she will save them from the impending monotony of their everyday reality. Through religion, we can show how human and fragile we are, constantly needing to feel alive and not destined to disappear into thin air.

YOU WROTE HOW THIS IS A MOVIE THAT WANTS TO SHOW THE COMPLEX SOUL OF NEAPOLITAN PEOPLE, THAT IS “SACRED AND PROFANE AT THE SAME TIME”. CAN YOU DETAIL WHAT YOU MEAN?

In recent years, we have had films and television series that have used Naples for its crime dimension and nothing more. If you go to Naples you find yourself in a chaotic, busy, historical, musical, religious, colourful, complicated city – wounded by degradation and crime, but full of life, all of this based on an old tradition of humanistic and scientific knowledge. Naples is a city that lives on contradictions and that teaches diversity. For example, during the location scouting, I was concerned about leaving some props, such as the statue of the Madonna, in an external location for the duration of the shooting. Yet I was told: “It is easier for a car to be stolen here, but no one would ever dare touch a religious artifact.” The locals have sacredness in their blood, not only from a religious point of view but also more symbolically. There is also a component of superstition in their tradition; after all, they live under the constant threat that the volcano Vesuvius may erupt. They fear it and admire it as if it were a divinity. I just want to show their depth and complexity, through the eyes and the fears of two young men. It is not fundamental for me to talk about my being Italian, but I think that my way of feeling is tied to my origins. It is a matter of stories that we have been told since childhood and of the experience we are living every day. We live in a country full of art and culture but also of many other things that often make it a step behind other countries.

There are so many contradictions and human material to be observed which change from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from city to city and from region to region. Certainly, the atmospheres that inspire me are typically Italian: poetic, imaginative and warm.

YOU WERE READY TO START SHOOTING “LA SANTA PICCOLA” IN APRIL 2020, BUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC STOPPED THE SHOOTING. HOW HAVE YOU LIVED YOUR TIME IN LOCKDOWN?

The pandemic is certainly affecting the Italian film industry. At the moment we are reflecting on the protocols to be applied to maintain health security during the preparation and shooting phase, but it is a complicated operation. The pandemic has certainly revealed some problems related to the Italian cinema sector and to the complicated position that professionals in the industry are faced with. Ours is a world of unstable, precarious and insecure jobs. Perhaps it would help us to have some additional protection. The pandemic has highlighted even more the need to take steps in this direction. We were in the preparation stage for the film when we entered lockdown. The first government measure was taken on 10 March and we should have started filming three weeks later. I must say that being so close to filming and not being able to start makes it difficult to keep the whole emotional world tied to the film. But luckily I spent the time of lockdown working with the actors via Skype, so we stayed fairly focused on the story. Now we are rewriting the script in its sixth version. In fact, we have to adapt it because the production needs to have this new particular situation.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR STYLE AND GOALS AS A FILMMAKER?

My goal is to tell pulsating stories that live through the characters and that resonate with the audience. I want my stories to capture people’s hearts, hoping my directorial style leads to an immersive experience. I have a soft spot for films that do not have a defined genre, that hide an unexpected aftertaste and conflict with the central theme of the film. I love bitter comedies and I hope to continue improving on this genre. Furthermore, from a purely stylistic point of view, I would like to be able to create images that are sensory and descriptive at the same time. I don’t have the desire to make many films; I would prefer to be able to shoot a few beautiful movies, full of meaning. The problem is that I can’t stay too far from the set and my imagination.

YOU ARE CURRENTLY WRITING YOUR SECOND MOVIE. CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THIS NEXT PROJECT?

We are developing the subject and treatment. It is a very delicate, tender, funny and sad story. We want to explore an Italian spring through old age, which teaches us that as long as you are not dead you are still alive!

“The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund.”