

Lucia Grillo. I am an Actress First and Foremost

Letizia Airos Soria (August 11, 2009)



“Acting is the most difficult thing I have ever done, and the most beautiful.” We met with Lucia Grillo, screenwriter, actress, director, and host.

I see [Lucia Grillo](#) [2] almost every day at the [J.D. Calandra](#) [3] [Italian American](#) [3] [Institute](#) [3] where [i-Italy's](#) [4] editorial offices are located. Busy as we are with our different projects, too often we are only able to get sidelong looks. Sometimes, though, we stop for a moment, perhaps to discuss our work or for some “girl talk.”

Long, unruly hair that she tries to control, but like her direct and spontaneous character, it is difficult to tame. Slender, expressive eyes, features that speak of the southern Italian sun and the passion to live intensely and emotionally.

This time, I pause to talk to her directly about her work and her many projects. A few questions on my part, but very long and intense answers on hers.



Lucia, you are a screenwriter, actress, director, and host as well.

Yes!

Let's start with acting. When did you begin? What does acting mean to you?

Funny, the first play I ever did was in Italian! I was going to Italian language class on Saturdays when I was about 5 or 6 and we did a play, "Little Red Riding Hood." And though I was a very shy, bookworm of a child, I always enjoyed being on stage, whether in piano competitions or dance recitals.

I began seriously studying at age 15, at the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute's Young People's Program. I was taken by the sensitivity of Marilyn Monroe – beyond the "dumb blonde" character she had created – and began extensive research on her from age 12. When I read she had studied at the Strasberg Institute, I knew that was where I had to go. I continued acting in theater from that age, in high school plays and in plays at Strasberg, then throughout my studies at New York University, during which time I began to act in short films.

As Lee Strasberg said, "The human being who acts is the human being who lives." For me, acting means bringing a full, three-dimensional life to the stage or screen, with all the layers – emotional, behavioral, etc. – that a human being inhabits at any given moment. In Italian, I always avoid the word "recitare" because for me, it invokes some kind of gesticulating and exaggerated, over-the-top performance. I prefer "interpretare," as with any art form, it is an interpretation of life, of what a specific person (the character) does under particular circumstances.

And when did you think of becoming a director? What did crossing over and being on the other side of the camera mean to you?

I really didn't think about it. Actually, I thought I'd have a long career as an actress and someday – maybe around age 50 – I would direct some grand, epic trilogy about my family in Calabria, their immigration to the U.S., and finally the first generation. I began to interview my mother and my aunts about their experiences and when I was transcribing the interviews, one story my mother told me, I just began to type in screenplay format. When I realized what I was doing, I decided I would produce a short film based on this story, as a birthday present to myself.

It seemed natural to go from in front of the camera to behind it. After all, I grew up watching movies and took many cinema studies courses at NYU. I thought that with the actor's language, I would at least be able to communicate what I wanted. But I must say, it is almost "easier" to be a director, in the sense that an actor's instrument is her own "soul," which you have to bare, and share your most intimate thoughts and emotions. This in itself is a challenge. The director is like an orchestra conductor. Though you feel it, you are not playing every string to produce a note. The actor's process can be infinite, given that human life has layers upon layers that one can keep adding.

What does writing for films mean to you? When did you start? What are the stories that you want to tell the most?

Writing for cinema is a language I can understand. It is visual and musical. Musical as far as composition. Sound is very important, the nuances and the silences, as in music. Also, cinema is a very convenient way to communicate; it is a format that is accessible to people around the world, and it doesn't necessarily need to be translated or explained for human beings to feel it. Even if the dialogue is in a language one doesn't speak, human emotion is universal.

I have so many feature-length screenplays written in my head! I stopped listing them on paper when *Germinal* and *Artemisia* were made! You can actually see a photo of me in the New York Times Magazine researching Gentilischì at the New York Public Library!

Right now, I want to tell Calabrian stories. I have made two short films in Calabria (one of which, *A Pena Do Pana* [The Cost of Bread] made me an ambassador of Calabria!) and I am now seeking



financing for my first feature film, which took years of research and which takes place in Calabria.

I do have “American” stories I want to tell, but I need to start with this film – to tell a story about a place and a people I love so much; a story that no one has yet told, which needs to be told.

What does being Italian American mean to you, as an actress first and foremost. Is it difficult to find roles that appeal to you?

Being Italian American means both enjoying and grappling with being two things and neither. But I am finally able to merge the two into one identity, after much identity seeking, through living and working in Italy, and to tell you the truth, coming back home and working at the Calandra Institute with such fine representatives of Italian Americans as Anthony Tamburri, Fred Gardaphé, and Joe Sciorra on the “academic” side, and all my coworkers there, and what we represent collectively as the only Italian American research institute.

As an actress, I was always told to not mask what I am. Actors are encouraged in this way, regardless of ethnicity, because each individual is different and will never play the same role identically to any other actor. That said, there have been times when I thought, “Ugh, I need to chemically straighten my hair,” so I can get more roles. But when Spike Lee cast me in *Summer of Sam* to play a Sicilian, my southern Italian curls were straightened for the role! And in Lee’s subsequent Finlandia Vodka commercial, my curls were exaggerated! So that was the end of that!

All the roles I’ve been fortunate to play so far, I have fully enjoyed. Many of them were due to my Italian roots. And in some films, additional dialogue or details were added because the director so enjoyed my being Italian, like in *Duplicity*; I was called in to do additional ADR because Tony Gilroy wanted me to have more lines.

And now, in rehearsals for the play *Terranova*, I look around me at the phenomenal cast, and think that we wouldn’t be able to fully interpret these biographical, Italian immigrant characters if we didn’t each have some personal connection to the material. Of course, being actors, that is our job, regardless of our heritage connection; but I might not have gone to the lengths I did to be seen for an audition, unless I felt so strongly about a piece – be it theater, TV, or film – and this time it was due to my heritage.

And as a writer-director, does being Italian American present a greater responsibility in the United States? Do you think that you must communicate something more, and if so, what?

I don’t know if I would say communicate something “more.” But I do feel a responsibility to kind of dispel this dreamlike nostalgia people have for the “old country.” It is beautiful beyond belief. But every country has its beauty – and its problems and ugliness. I think it’s dangerous for anyone to be so mystified by superficial or cultural beauty as to be blinded to reality. With the love for their country of origin that Italian Americans have, I feel responsible to call their attention – through cinema – to the current reality so that they can choose in a conscious way what they want to do with that knowledge.

And all the time I was in Italy, I did feel fortunate that I came with the eyes of a foreigner. Not a foreigner in my heart, of course – and friends would tease that I am “more Calabrian than the Calabrese!” – but foreign in my eyes, constantly seeking truth and trying not to be influenced by nostalgia. Like Beethoven, who instructs that some of his most profound oeuvres be played without sentiment, the result is that your heart breaks even more. Not that I would ever compare my work to that of Beethoven; only that he has been my greatest teacher.

You have been working for a few years on the television program *Italics*. What does working for the Calandra Institute mean for you, as it is an important, well-established center of Italian American cultural life in the U.S.



I've been Associate Producer and Correspondent for Italics (CUNY-TV Channel 75 www.cuny.tv) since October 2007. This experience has led me to finally identify with my being Italian American in that, growing up, I didn't know how to merge my personal life as the child of immigrants with the academic part of myself.

Producing, shooting, editing, and acting as correspondent for Italics has allowed me to get to know more closely people within the Italian American community with whom I feel I can identify. It has also afforded me the opportunity to produce and direct segments of the show that tap into my creative side, while exposing the community – and those outside the community interested in Italian culture – to prominent Italian artists such as Vincio Capossela and Jovanotti, interviews and concert footage that will be included in a special hour-long fall episode of Italics (the latter in conjunction with i-italy.org), along with Carmen Consoli.

I don't know that I would have necessarily gone in this direction had I not been offered the position at Calandra. But with the openness and encouragement of Anthony Tamburri and producer Bill Schempp, I am fortunate that they trust me when I have an idea and they "greenlight" it, saying, "Sure, go ahead!" It makes me feel as if my contributions mean something at this important insitute – which I'm proud to be a part of; history in the making!

What does this new experience as a host on the Dolce Channel mean to you? Do you think that you will continue on this path?

As an actress, I never imagined I'd become the host of my own show. Partially because of my shyness and that old cliché that the actor hides behind the character! But when William Medici approached me, I appreciated his faith in my abilities, and as a self-proclaimed "nerd," I can never pass up the occasion to challenge myself. I welcomed the opportunity to test my knowledge on the subjects I was officially trained in: cinema, theater, television, and as a social animal I always love meeting new people. I hope to continue along this path, as I think it's important for people to recognize the accomplishments of Italian Americans Behind the Scenes (as my show is called), to help dispel the stereotypes and offer people interested in cinema, television, and theater – and those who would not necessarily seek it – a window into the craft involved in creating artistic work.

In the next few days you will also be acting in Terranova. How did this come about?

I took a rare lunch break – I usually eat lunch at my desk, as an admitted workaholic – and ran to an audition. But when I got there, all the slots had been filled. I frantically searched the web and found out the contact information for the playwright, Pamela Monk (who wrote the play with her cousin, Dennis Loiacono), and emailed her, telling her why it was so important that I audition. A few hours later, I received a phone call with an appointment time. When I came to read for Dennis and director Theresa Gambacorta, it just felt right. When Theresa exclaimed, "I'm so happy!" at the end of my read, all I could do was hope. Then I received a phone call the next day; I was over the moon!

What are you inside, more actress, director, writer, host...?

I am an actress first and foremost. Perhaps because it's the process I know best. But no, it's the only process I have patience for! My mother had my canvas paintings on her walls: fine. I tried sculpture and put my first one in the kiln: done. I played piano for years and hated doing my scales. I wanted to be a prodigy and still cannot stand doing my finger exercises; I go right to playing Beethoven. Acting is the most difficult thing I have ever done, and the most beautiful, as far as the process. I love directing, putting all the elements together from inception to final cut. Writing allows me a type of freedom, like child's play, where no one bothers me and I am alone with my imagination, yet there is a structure that must be adhered to, carried on from ancient Greek theater. If as a host I can continue to meet intelligent, creative people, discuss their journeys, learn from them, and share it with the public, it is something I welcome wholeheartedly. "The human being who acts is the human being who lives." I am an actress. But do I have to choose, really?

Last question: You are a pure Calabrian and very connected to your land of origin. What else can you tell me about your family? Have you ever thought of going back?

I like this. I want a tattoo that says 100% Calabrian! But who is "pure" anything? We are all related, as history proves. It's true, though; I feel a very strong connection to Calabria. My first languages



were simultaneously Calabrian dialect and English.

Both my great-grandfathers had been to the U.S. off and on for work. My grandfather and father came to the U.S. when my dad was 16. Then some years later, my mother and he were married – in the same town where they were born, Francavilla Angitola (VV) – and the 15-year-old bride sailed with her husband to a country whose language she had never heard before. And that's where it all started!

My mother has a very strong nostalgia for her native land, so she brought me to Calabria when I was six years old to meet my grandmother, and from then, I carry Calabria in my heart every moment. I moved to Italy in 2002 with the excuse of finishing my first short film, *The Cost of Bread*, the film I had written as the closest way of experiencing what my parents had lived as children. But I knew it would be impossible to find work in Calabria, so I lived in Rome so that I could continue working in film and television while developing more “Calabrian” projects. The best thing that happened in those four years was my friendship with my grandmother; discovering who I take after. We still giggle like schoolgirls on the phone and share secrets! I dream of someday living in Calabria. And as we know, dreams are the beginning!

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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