

Talking Literature and Films @ Le Conversazioni 2014

Natasha Lardera (May 13, 2014)



Le Conversazioni is an anglophone literary festival created by two Italian film personalities: professor and writer Antonio Monda and Davide Azzolini. The festival takes place in the beautiful island of Capri, in New York and, for the first time this year, in Rome. The new edition was introduced by Monda himself at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò and its topic is "Corruption & Purity." At the Morgan Library Isabella Rossellini and Salman Rushdie talked about The Films of Their Life, or rather the films that have influenced their lives and work.

That of 2014 is its ninth edition. [Le Conversazioni](#) [2] is a literary festival created by two Italian film personalities: professor and writer Antonio Monda and Davide Azzolini. The festival takes place in the beautiful island of Capri, in New York and, for the first time this year, in Rome.

The new edition was introduced by Monda himself at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, and, like every year, the festival's founder has presented the latest topic of discussion, "Corruption & Purity," and a documentary on "Winners and Losers" the topic of 2013.

That was just a special preview, the festival officially opened its doors on May 8th at the Morgan Library where Isabella Rossellini and Salman Rushdie talked about The Films of Their Life, or rather the films that have influenced their lives and work.

Previous guests were Renzo Piano, Mark di Suvero, Michael Cunningham, Gay Talese, Paul Schrader, Jonathan Franzen, Martin Amis, Ian Buruma, A.M. Homes, Daniel Mendelsohn, Marina Abramovic, Daniel Libeskind, Julie Taymor, and Jeffrey Eugenides.

There is always a special atmosphere at this event, in part due to the magic of literature that impregnates even the walls of the wonderful Morgan Library but mostly due to the intimacy that is established by Monda with his guests. As from the pov of the audience, I can say that although you are sitting in a rather large auditorium (and I was lucky enough to sit right by Italian singer Jovanotti and British novelist Patrick McGrath) you don't feel like a dot but an active member of this conversation, as it happened in the "salons."

Needless to say "the salon was an Italian invention of the 16th century which flourished in France throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. A salon is a gathering of people under the roof of an inspiring host, held partly to amuse one another and partly to refine the taste and increase the knowledge of the participants through conversation. These gatherings often consciously followed Horace's definition of the aims of poetry, "either to please or to educate." (Wikipedia)

The structure of the conversation is pretty simple, each guest introduces 4 films that he/she has been inspired by and then talks about it with the others. Surprisingly this year there were quite a few science fiction picks, including a classic "2001 Space Odyssey."

Just one Italian film, "Stromboli," introduced by Isabella Rossellini who grew up with films being edited in her home. In fact when asked "What's the first film you remember watching?" Rossellini replied, "I am not sure. My dad used to edit his films at home, so those images were always in the background. I don't remember going to movies to see something." Rushdie could not remember either as "growing up in Bombay, a major city for film production, films were playing or being shot on the streets all the time."

The scene of "Stromboli" that was picked is a famous one, the one of the "mattanza," the annual ritual of tuna fish fishing. "Those are the most impressive shots of the ritual ever taken," Rossellini said, "and it shows an abundance that now is long gone." Rushdie was familiar with the film and Neo-realism is his favorite Italian film movement... although, he joked, "there are some inconsistencies. De Sica's famous film in America is titled "The Bicycle Thief," but in England it's "The Bicycle Thieves." Are there more thieves in England? The film is the same, but why is the title different?" Jokes aside, Rushdie's favorite Italian director is Fellini "especially for his representation of childhood and his ability to transform something ordinary in extraordinary."

And all the films picked were pretty extraordinary, especially Chaplin's "The Circus" (1928), a silent film where the comedian is a clown who can only be funny unintentionally, not on purpose. In the scene picked he is walking on a rope and monkeys are all over him making it basically impossible to stand up. "I picked this scene because it is so funny, and comedy is an important aspect in life," Rossellini said, "Mostly I picked it for the monkeys, as I have a real interest in animals." After admitting that he prefers Buster Keaton to Chaplin, because his making comedy was more unexpected, Rushdie made the audience laugh again when, to Monda's question on "why aren't comedies taken seriously for big Awards?" he replied "People don't think it's serious, because it's not serious. Simple as that!" This was also the first time the two guests picked the same film, and it was the case of Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove," the British-American comedy that satirizes the nuclear scare starring Peter Sellers. "This was a case though of a serious topic treated with humor and it results in a unique, unforgettable film."

The next appointment with Le Conversazioni will be, for the first time ever, in Rome on June 17-19. The meetings, three in total, will be with important Italian personalities and will be held in the Salone degli Arazzi @ Rai. Next stop will be in beautiful and sunny Capri, for two weekends from June



27th to July 6th, in the breathtaking Piazzetta Tragara. Before each meeting each guest will read unpublished texts written just for the Conversazione on the given topic. The 2014 edition will then end on November 6th at the Morgan Library with another The Films of Their Life with aforementioned Patrick McGrath and British novelist Zadie Smith.

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