



The Film Ode to Hipponion. A New Calabrian Common Thread in the Cinema

Franco Vallone (December 10, 2010)



An interview with Lucia Grillo, Calabro-American actress, director, and producer

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USA, Europe, Italy, New York, Calabria... Lucia Grillo's path grows ever longer, larger and indefinite in their symbolic definition, but they lead, ever more frequently, to the narrow roads of home, to a symbolic house of collective memory for Italians in America.

Why this choice?

The roads of home... I've traveled these roads for years, in search of my true cultural and identifying home, because I never felt fully American or Italian, nor Italian American. I wanted to discover how



much I was Italian with, as a measuring stick, the experience of living in the place where my parents were born: Calabria. Besides this, I've lived in all these places – New York, Wales, Los Angeles, and Italy (between Rome and Calabria), for work; as an actress and occasionally as a model, then as a director and university instructor in acting and cinema.

Then you chose to return to New York...

I chose to return to New York for two reasons: I had attained my objective in Italy, which was to research and write my first feature script; and because I very much missed the New York theatre, missed being on stage.

Yours is a theme confronted in a manner that is not rhetoric, never folkloristic, always

more globalized from an international and successful culture, even when you get into truly macroscopic details or when you confront linguistic difficulties of the local dialect, which is the case in your penultimate filmic work. Ode to Hipponion begins with "In the ancient ode I sing your light, o land of my fathers, o graceful Hipponion..." a quote from the poem "Ad Ipponion" by Pasquale Enrico Murmura, unknown to many even in Vibo Valentia itself.. Another challenging choice.

I was looking for a poem for a scene in the film in which the girlfriend of Vincenzo, the protagonist, has to read a poem in class. An internet search led me to discover Murmura amongst the archives of the Community Library of Vibo Valentia (Biblioteca Comunale di Vibo Valentia), the city where the poet was born, and I used the poem as a bittersweet, ironic ode throughout the film.

Among your future projects is your first feature-length, which takes place between New York and Calabria. What can you tell us about this challenging project? When will it be a tangible reality, a film?

It's my first feature-length as a screenwriter. I compiled years of research for the story and we are currently in the early development phase.

You began as an actress but have burst into the international cultural scene as a director, even directing yourself, as a film and television producer, and even as "manager" of... Lucia Grillo. Is it perhaps a method of looking at oneself symbolically from the outside and from the inside, exploring introspective spaces?

Everything you mentioned was born of necessity. In the same way that Frida Khalo painted self-portraits for the lack of access to models, not that I compare myself to the great Khalo, only to say that yes, I have my degree in acting from New York University and it's absolutely true that my biggest passion is working as an actress, but up to this point only my role as the mother of the young protagonist in "A pena do pana (The Cost of Bread)" can be considered introspective, and then only in a genealogical and genetic sense, because that role is based on my maternal grandmother. Then, an accountant doesn't often go to another accountant to prepare her taxes. At least she doesn't have to, simply because she knows how to do it herself.

Some of Lucia Grillo's most beautiful works were shot on location in Calabria, and even when the locations are in America, Calabria is a recurring element, unbridled and central. They are the places of memory and of the past, of the story and of the fable told and heard; they are places and times remembered and never forgotten. Grandparents, immigrant parents, their experiences and their stories are central elements of other stories to re-plow, to invent and interpret, to renew and materialize in a film, rendering the remnants of memory elements to duplicate through the light of cinema in order to not forget. The journey and the going away for work, as an unforgettable story, the new life of everything and of everyone, the journey to Calabria as a return, recuperating, to re-plow the received story, an actual cultural and anthropological dig into one's inner self and into one's identity.. And it is for this reason that the rhythm, filmic, narrative and uncommon, without any rhetoric, with a linguistic cleanliness always original and rich with lost sounds, enters into the cultured language of cinema with subtitles in English.

The ability to carry out your projects means that beyond the artistic aspect, Lucia Grillo must be her



own manager and manage production budgets. Is art always conciliated by economy in your professional experience?

Absolutely not! (laughs) If only... Well, it depends on which aspect of my professional experience.

In working as an actress on big productions with directors like Spike Lee and Tony Gilroy, yes, always. As a matter of fact, I only made "Ode to Hipponion" because part of the award won for "The Cost of Bread" at the Roma Independent Film Festival was a week's free equipment rental from Panalight Roma. Massimo Proietti was very kind in trusting me, allowing me to bring everything down to Calabria – maybe because I promised him another winning short ("Ode to Hipponion," amongst others, was at the Short Film Corner of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival this year). Now two of four shorts that I've made so far, "A pena do pana (The Cost of Bread)" and "Ad Ipponion (Ode to Hipponion)" are available together on one DVD, but I had the DVDs made only because there was a great request on the part of the public. It's not for financial motives that one makes short films.

Italian culture and American managerial skills. Do the two realities merge well in cinematic tradition?

I'm not sure about attributing "culture" and "managerial skills" to one nationality or another. Every country has good and bad management. My "culture" is not Italian nor American, nor Italian American. I consider myself a human being in this world and I've sought Italian culture to better understand where I come from, as a departure point for better understanding the world.

"Management skills" for necessity: if a person wants to achieve a goal and is not born with the resources, she must work to obtain it. That said, I could not have done anything without the moral support and the enormous and generous hands-on help of my extended family and friends, in America and in Italy. This, perhaps, is part of the magical aspect of the cinematic tradition, of which many people would like to be a part; or perhaps part of human empathy that leads people to try and help someone who has a great need to make a dream come true.

Actress, director, producer. America and Italy. Do they cohabit well within Lucia Grillo?

Yes! If I may say so, they cohabit very well precisely because they allow me to utilize every corner of my brain: the creative part, the passionate part, the nerd, the mathematic and organizational, that which must be ready to improvise...

Your shorts always have a different meaning, they refer to the historical, anthropological, and ethnological sense of Italy and of the United States and the rapport: geographic distance, closeness in heart and passion. Do you feel an active and useful participant in the conservation of the traditions of the dialectal language of the South of Italy, of Calabria, and of Calabria in America?

I feel an active part when I'm in production, post production, and when I look around me, at a screening, and observe the reactions of the audience, dialoguing with them and listening to what they have to say. I try to be as accurate as possible in my research and in the representation of the details, but I can only hope to be useful in the conservation of history, traditions, and language.

Do you intend to deepen the understanding of the lives of immigrants through their cultures still in practice both in Calabria and in multiethnic places like New York?

Through the exploration of the lives of emigrants in my last work, the documentary short "Earth dream earth," that which they've overcome and that which they still experience today, I would like that all the children, grandchildren relatives, and friends of immigrants in the world – which we all are, in one way or another – remember that the conditions that lead immigrants to leave their homes and their loved ones are those conditions that force them to do so in order to survive, and are direct results of a world system that goes against human rights. That which the interviewees gave me – us – is not only a part of their innermost being, but precisely a firsthand testimony, and further, an entreaty of these people that live a visceral relationship with the earth, to appreciate the Earth.

Even a filmic work can serve to overcome obstacles that may present themselves in faraway places, in new countries with different languages, manners, and customs. For



her filmic works, Lucia Grillo is, and must be, even an anthropologist. In her work, a deepened research is always used, which precedes the filming process becoming as accurate as possible in historical and socioeconomic detail of the era, confronted by the writing and the script. The works of Lucia Grillo want to continue to explore the practice of the customs and the traditions - historical and current - in Calabria and New York, where there are more and more renewed interests towards the practices of immigrants, the eternal search of ties to an ethnic identity, and a subtle common thread in the hands of every group of immigrants and their generational successors.

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