



A Tribute: Recalling an Afternoon with Franco Zeffirelli

Steve Acunto (June 17, 2019)



As news of Franco Zeffirelli's death reached I-Italy, we looked back at our past issues and found a photo taken by Zeffirelli's adopted son, Giuseppe, of New Yorker Steve Acunto and his daughter, Claudia during a visit to the Maestro's home in Rome in 2013. We invited Mr Acunto to remember the Maestro, recalling that Spring afternoon.

Franco Zeffirelli was not afraid of color, of drama or of creating an old fashioned sense of romance on the screen and on the stages of the world's major theaters and opera houses. In 2013, our Foundation awarded him our Annual Bravo! Award at Carnegie Hall, only to learn a week before the event that illness prevented his travel - he was nearing 90 at the time. So I called and asked if I might stop by when next in Rome to present it in person, together with my daughter who lives there and who, as a designer, was among his most fervent admirers. "Of course" was the answer together with an invitation to review plans for the newly planned Zeffirelli International Center for the Performing Arts in Florence; naturally, much of the space would be devoted to his work on the operas of Verdi and Puccini. Surely, his landmark Romeo and Juliet would be recalled.

To Zeffirelli, his work was as immediate as the sound of the haunting final words of Violetta or the light flowing down upon the altar of Sant Andrea della Valle in Tosca's first act. It was his practiced grasp of the "present" that he housed on sets and with his director's eye that unfolded drama and



stamped indelibly the expansive feel of the masterpieces that he textured and toned visually.

Personally, amid the notoriety, the social pages and style fanfare, he remained unspoiled, an artist whose sensibility reflected a wounded youth, a career of contrasts – from his foray into politics to his box office record setting films to the few flops along the way. He was not reluctant to express conservative views – as a child born out of wedlock he was virulently anti abortion, for example – or to interpret the life of Jesus and of Saint Francis with unforgettable, reverential aura.

From the first, working with Luchino Visconti and with many of the greatest operatic performers and Hollywood stars in history, he was fated to bring a beauty that he found and understood to a world that would feed upon it, in all of its ornate statement-making - from Turandot's scarily large headdress to the rethinking of Romeo and Juliet, known today as Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet. His complexities were legendary, his living harmony of contrasts, a palette that gave new life even to Shakespeare. The vitality of his Romeo and Juliet moved millions of young viewers to the classic tale of woe with a sense of pathos not discoverable commonly. It was uncommon in the best sense of that word – a view held by my daughter who would accompany me that afternoon to visit Zeffirelli.

As the long driveway wound its way toward the front door, Claudia's eyes brightened and her expression seemed anxious in one way, yet suddenly free from the unrelenting traffic and its ever present, unforgiving pavement. We were arriving at a new world only ten miles from the center of Rome, but a universe of imagination away from its daily drumbeat.

Giuseppe, always caring and cordial, answered the bell; we walked into the grand salon and waited for the Maestro, as Claudia took in every evidence that served her admiration as monuments to his ideas and his taste, large and small. His living room, a set design in itself, with a lifetime of photographs on the centrally-placed piano, was a stage setting of columns, tall plants and soft colors.

At 90, but still envisioning, creating, drafting and imagining, he welcomed us with the reserve of one who had just emerged from deep concentration, awakened by a sound or by a sudden light and adjusted his outward focus quickly; he came into the moment with the usual embraces and then passed right into the drawings on the table. The plans were for the Zeffirelli Museum in Florence, but it could well have been the rethinking of an opera staging – as if he could improve upon his legendary settings. Imagine Zeffirelli rethinking Zeffirelli.

He guided us to an adjacent room, lined in deep red. Folios of plans were amassed on a large, dark wood table, though he referred to them as “drafts” evidencing an artist's casual humility, as if he were almost reluctant to accept that there would be a final version of his work “when so much needed to be stated and revisited and rethought and made perfect!”

Zeffirelli's art, so compelling that we are hard pressed to think of Romeo and Juliet apart from his realization, of Violetta, apart from her boudoir, Scarpia seducing Tosca or Otello taunted by Iago in any other context. Nothing has ever come close to his work on the inflated lovers: the youthful declamations on settings that never competed with the actors, but set their every move on a platform fit for an enduring classic. In my daughter's eyes, I imagined the wonderment of his



youthful Juliet at the dance, the wide eyed lyricism of her Romeo as he asks himself – and us: “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?” and answers, as Olivia Hussey appears, “It is the East and Juliet is the sun.” Zeffirelli’s setting conveyed the softness and light of the scene with amazing restraint and subtlety, yet with all of the power and impact available in the medium of film.

Wonderment, astonishment, freshness of approach, lightness - in the sense that Calvino urges upon us - these are enduring marks of the master’s work. Beyond pedestrian concepts of “brand” or “style” Zeffirelli’s works were stamped with grace - perhaps even Divine grace, a presence on his religious works and on his realization of the messages of other masters. Lightness, the qualities of quickness and of exactitude, find form in his work again and again, unselfconsciously and unpretentiously. Easy to grasp, irresistible once met.

Over coffee that day, Zeffirelli wondered at the young woman I brought with me and spoke to her with a curiosity about her life and her work in Rome that reflected the mind of a man long engaged in a hunt for subject matter, for perspective, for the coloration and architecture of beauty where and when it may be found. This was the Maestro’s discourse..

He will endure as among the greatest of geniuses in the history of theatre; by recollections is published, most critics will have outdone themselves with praise, upon learning of his death, but I hope to hear it from the next generation of filmgoers, opera goers, internet feeders or any young person capable of being touched by mastery in conceptualization and execution.

We finished our coffees, and were drawn together to the dramatic center of his living room - the piano. After seeing sketches for La Traviata, I took to the keyboard and labored over Violetta’s Addio del passato, improvised a fragment of Tosca and then endured everyone’s laughter at my failed virtuosity. We laughed deeply as we recalled a production of Tosca in which Tosca jumped from the roof of Castel Sant’Angelo to end the opera, but landed upon a trampoline rather than a mattresses or pads designed to break her fall; the trampoline sent the soprano bouncing back up into full view, to the amazement - and delight - of the audience.

And then we passed over to this opera and that one, hoping for even the least of insights from the Maestro - and were treated to the kinds of observations that strike at the core of a work and identify it for all time...as Zeffirelli alone could do.

The afternoon waned and we took to the road; on our way back to our house, we shared a sense of impending loss, but real joy at the accomplishment of this great genius and creator, an inspiration for a lifetime for a young designer.

Claudia was especially moved when the news of his death arrived and when his full, somewhat sad biography appeared; she said she was feeling as if the drafts on the table that day were now left to history, lifeless, yet monumental. And now, final, although the immortal genius of their maker will not cease to transport us through the power of vision, color, light, height, depth, and invention, to the discovery afresh of the masterpieces he made better.



Thank you, Franco Zeffirelli.

Requiescat in pace.

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