

ON THE 'QUIXOTIC' TRAIL of the Salina Doc Festival (SDF)

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HOW A FESTIVAL IS BORN (ON AN ISLAND)

If anything, the Salinadocfest is a mirage, a sentiment. The idea came to me ten years ago, while I was traveling by boat. I was leaving the island where, as a child, I would spend vacations and part of the winter, when the burden of living in the capital hits the peak of oppressiveness. And, as usually happens when watching the coast recede, I felt a pang of sorrow. It was like leaving a person I loved.

I was rereading Don Quixote, whose title character, like me, only feels free when he's travelling. For Don Quixote, there are only more roads, never one final destination.

A friend had come to see me off at the docks. "When the ship goes past the tip of Milazzo," he told me with a sad expression on his face, "you'll stop thinking about us, and we will return to being invisible in our island solitude." I was reminded of a scene in a film my "two fathers" shot in Sardinia, Padre Padrone. Gavino Ledda, the Sardinian shepherd who, against his father's will, earns a degree in glottology, addresses the audience while the camera pans out to show the desolate interior of Sardinia.

"Now you see our Sardinia," he says, "beautiful and sunny. But come back in winter, when the squares are empty, and loneliness kills our youth."

I thought of the fate of my fellow documentary filmmakers. Like islanders, we're destined to become invisible in our country, condemned to a life of isolation.



Days before, I had dined with the island's hoteliers and restaurateurs—all childhood friends who took up the only kind of career possible on an island. A little high on the sweet Malvasia wine produced on the Aeolian Islands, we dreamed up possible scenarios for the future of the island, which is so beautiful at the start of fall, the harvest month, yet only remains famous for the chaotic month of August. "Let's do something that prolongs the tourist season through September," they told me. And I, in a Don Quixote moment, responded: "Of course! Let's the bring the work I love to the island I love!"

So we decided to combine my two passions (movies and islands) and organize a festival dedicated to narrative documentaries on the island of Salina, to flash a light on a forgotten genre in an archipelago that was once a destination of great directors and a site of pilgrimage for many travelling writers. Goethe called Sicily "a desert of fecundity," an oxymoron that encapsulates the contradictory qualities of our beautiful and terrible islands. In *Impressions of Travel in Sicily*, Alexandre Dumas is even more on point: "We tacked to windward for part of the day; the wind was always against us. Then we passed Salina, Lipari and Vulcano again. Every time we passed by Lipari and Salina, we caught a glimpse of Stromboli, its fiery plumes trembling on the horizon." More recently, Lidia Rivera writes in *In Stromboli*, "Key to this blunt happiness is distance. I am, finally, far away. From what exactly I don't know, but that doesn't seem important to me. From terra firma. From the city. From reality. I don't know. I feel far away. That's all."

Islanders yes, isolatos no! was our motto from the get-go, and in two years' time the Minister of Culture and Sicily's Department of Tourism added us to their calendar of major events. They heard our call for cultural, off-season tourism, which by means of culture brought the world to the island and opened a new window for the younger generations living in the archipelago.

It wasn't easy at first. The islanders were diffident, as is usually the case when a foreigner arrives with "crazy" and reckless ideas, and as is always the case when something new and revolutionary takes place. (I'm reminded of another film, *Allonsanfan*, and the failed expedition of the main characters, who are betrayed by the same farmers they had come to rescue.) But like Quixote, we never lost heart, no matter how many battles we lost. Till one day, arriving at Salina's dock, I ran into the same friend who had made his melancholy farewell at the port years earlier. He had a few DVDs in his hand, which he was guarding jealously; they were documentaries that he'd picked up in Messina that winter because, he said, "I now spend the winter watching documentaries."

That was when I knew we had broken ground and our marvelous adventure had begun. Now in its eighth year, the festival focuses on a different theme every year, which we choose after carefully considering current events. In 2007 the theme was "My Country" (the possessive adjective "my" stressed the personal and subjective quality of the documentaries being screened, as opposed to television journalism). Best documentary went to *Spring in Kurdistan* by Stefano Savona (a beautiful group of films including Pippo Delbono's *Scream*, *The Passing of the Line* by Pietro Marcello and *The Ghost of Corleone* by Marco Amenta). In 2008, *Flights and Landings* treated the early years of Mediterranean immigration. Best documentary went to *Like a Man on Land* by A. Segre, *The Invisibles* by D. Imer and *Our Father* by Carlo Lo Giudice. In celebration of the country's 150th birthday, the next year the theme was *Identity*. *Corde* by Marcello Sannino won best documentary. During the Arab Spring, the theme was *Borders and Horizons: United by the Mediterranean*. Best documentary went to *Taharir* by Stefano Savona. Then came *Exercises in Resistance: What Future?* Best documentary went to *Beautiful Things* by A. Ferrente and G. Piperno. The most recent theme was *The Common Good*, for which Silvia Staderoli's *The Wall and the Child* was awarded best documentary.

Thanks to the SDF and the power of documentary filmmaking, which we like to think of as a "social defibrillator," we revisited the recent history of our country: the loss of culture as a common good; the political changes that betrayed the very foundations of civilization (the right to marriage); the wailing—and internment—wall that the Mediterranean, no longer the crossways of cultural and intellectual exchange, has become; and the removal of "invisible" populations. This 'quixotic' ship,



which won't quit tilting at windmills, has anchors fore and aft, safe in the knowledge that you can—and must—document the present by telling a story, with a point of view, a plot, music and characters.

Now we're ready for the next season, which will examine one of the major themes of this century, WOMEN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN. We're seeking to understand what it means to be a woman in the socio-cultural and political scenes of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

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