

Falling in Love with NYC's Italian American Culture

Francine Segan (January 21, 2015)



Pulitzer Prize- and Oscar-winning John Patrick Shanley is best known for his riveting Broadway play *Doubt*, which he has since rewritten as a screen-play and a movie, as well as his Hollywood hit *Moonstruck*, which won three Academy Awards. He is also a theater and film director. And above all, he loves Italy and Italian America.

Despite being an Irish-American, your passion for Italy and Italian American culture emerges in several works of yours. Where does this Italian connection come from in your life?

Well, I'm from the Bronx originally and I lived there until I was nineteen. My father was a meatpacker and my original connection to Italy was through meat. My father would come home with white butcher paper with blood running through it. It was the meat he brought home from the slaughterhouse for us to have for dinner.



I only had certain kinds of meat before I went to an Italian-American household for the first time. They had a garden in the back and a bocce court and they marinated steaks in olive oil with oregano and garlic. They cooked them on an outdoor fire made with old grapevines. When I tasted that, I realized there was another world – that world, for me, was called Italy.

So this love, which was first kindled by food, is that what led you to make Moonstruck?

""[Moonstruck](#) [2]" is my love letter to Italian- American culture in New York. I grew up with it. One of the houses I went to was my friend Alfonso Antonio Striano's. I stayed at his mother Theresa's one night. When we got ready to go out to the club, Al was combing his hair very elaborately at his mother's vanity table and sprayed his hair with a product called "Hidden Magic," which was, as far as I knew, a product for women. I spent the night, and in the morning his mother served me for breakfast this falling-apart meat in marinara sauce. "

For breakfast?

"For breakfast! With a can of Coke. I thought I was in outer space! In my house, it would be toast and eggs or cereal or something. I was like, "Where am I?" But I realized I really liked it. They would talk very openly about sex while you were having your breakfast. It was everything that my house was not; it was the other half of my life that I walked through the door and found. That's why, later on when I became a writer, I wrote that love letter to Italian Americans in New York and called it "Moonstruck". "

Why did you make Ronnie, the Nicholas Cage character, love opera?

"One of the questions I ask when I'm making a movie is: What am I going to photograph? What do I find beautiful? I find the opera very beautiful, both the physical production and, obviously, the production of exquisite sound, music and the human voice—it's a celebration of all that is possible with the human voice.

To put that together with the exoticism that I experienced in these Italian-American households—in their clothing, in their food, and in their attitude toward life—it all came together for me as an opera. It was very important for me to make the culminating experience, this connection these two people have, be the opera, because, in a way, that was Italian-American culture for me. "

I had the wonderful opportunity to see your play, Cellini, in Italy. What motivated you to write about Cellini?

"As soon as I read his autobiography I was on fire to do it! It is an incredible document that [Cellini](#) [3] dictated to a fourteen year-old boy while under house arrest for sodomy in Florence. It was in the vernacular, and the vernacular that Cellini spoke in the sixteenth century was so close to the vernacular of the Italian-American New Yorker... It was no leap at all for me to adapt this and feel like I knew these people. And then at that same time I had run into a Sardinian who worked in New York named Antonio Sardù. He had come to see a play of mine that I was staging at Vassar College. He said to me, "I have a dream of raising money and getting together a group of artists to go to Italy and work there and put on a play." And I said, "You're going to do it one year from today! I've just read this book. I am going to write a play about "Benvenuto Cellini". You raise the money and we will go."

Your play places Cellini in Rome and in Florence. What springs to mind when you think of Florence and Rome?

"When I think of Rome, I think of the [Pantheon](#) [4] and seafood. In Florence, I think of the steak and I think of the [statue of] [Perseus](#) [5]. It's nice to have art and dinner as your left-and-right memories of a city.



I grew up in an Italian-American culture and I really liked it. One of the houses I went to was my friend Alfonso Antonio Striano's. It was everything that my house was not; it was the other half of my life that I walked through the door and found. That's why, later on when I became a writer, I wrote that love letter to Italian Americans in New York and called it "Moonstruck". "

Let's conclude with Italian American Reconciliation and your special relationship with Italian-American actor John Turturro...

"["Italian American Reconciliation](#) [6]" was the first play I ever directed and indeed I wrote it for [John Turturro](#) [7], with whom I had recently collaborated on Danny and the "Deep Blue Sea". I subsequently was going to do my first film with him, which was called Five Corners. This was in the late 1980s. John has grown a lot since. A few years ago, he did a beautiful film about the music of Naples ("[Passione](#) [8]"), which I strongly recommend. We've always had a very strong reciprocal energy that came from the fact that I had this love of Italian-American culture. We just spoke the same language. "

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- [2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moonstruck>
- [3] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cellini_\(play\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cellini_(play))
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantheon,_Rome
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