

Marta Mondelli and Italian Theater in New York

Natasha Lardera (September 10, 2015)



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It's 1954. Eva is a young woman living in New York. After her wedding is unexpectedly called off, she spends the time set aside for her honeymoon walling up alone in her apartment, taste-testing for a new dietary soft drink.

Her only distraction is living vicariously through the neighbors outside her window, and her only visitor is Aunt Nora, a not-so-ladylike Park Avenue lady who will do anything to escape her perfect uptown life. This is a recap of *The Window*, the 2014 play by Italian playwright, actress and director Marta Mondelli, a prominent representative of Italian Theater in the City. Produced with the help of Teatro Italiano Network and a successful crowd funding campaign with Kickstarter, the play, starring Mondelli herself and Cristina Lippolis, was presented at The Cherry Lane Theatre for ten sold-out runs in January 2014.

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Tell us about your latest project. Where is *Toscana* coming from?

Toscana, my latest play, takes place at a deserted hotel's pool off-season in Tuscany where two American couples meet. After an initial comedic introduction to these four characters, unexpected tragedy ensues and, through that, we discover what these people really are. Like in my previous play, *The Window*, a thriller set in 1954 New York City, I will be performing, but not directing. I prefer to leave the direction to another person: it is a fresh look at my writing and I have more fun as an actress. We are now in the process of gathering cast and crew, including the director of the play. Pre-production is a very exciting time and I'm looking forward to all the challenges and rewards! The play will be performed for 3 weeks starting on March 21st 2016 at the Paradise Factory theater in Manhattan.

Of all Italian regions, how did you pick Tuscany?

Both my latest projects, a short film currently in post production and my second play, *Toscana*, are set in Tuscany. My inspiration for both locations comes from the "summer job" I have since 2011 in Capalbio, Tuscany. Every summer I host the literary festival Capalbio Libri and I meet very interesting authors and guests. Since I go there every summer, I'm influenced by what I see there, the Italian books I get a chance to read, and the wonderful locations. That's why, when it came time to find a location for my short film or the setting for my play, my mind instantly went to those hills and those beautiful surroundings.

Did you always write? Did you ever imagine becoming a playwright in the city of Broadway and theater?

I always loved writing but it is after moving to New York in 2002 that I found more inspiration and energy than ever! I don't know if this is truly the land of opportunity for everybody but it definitely gave me a lot. On top of that, I believe that homesickness gives you a chance to be more introspective. So these two forces propelled me to write: the amazing energy this city has on one side, and the chance to reflect about my life in Italy from afar on the other.

In New York I wrote my first novel, published in Italy by Cairo Editore with the title *Occhi di cane cuore di cervo*, and in New York I started writing initially as a journalist and a blogger for the Huffington Post and then I found that I loved writing dialogue and that I was good at it so I moved away from novels (not for good, but for now!) and I wrote a feature film, *The Contenders*, that I have also directed. Now I'm doing both: movies and theater. I had no idea that I would become a playwright but I think that this city rewards bold choices and talent. It's not easy, but I feel that it is easier than in Italy.

Does being Italian make any difference?

I think my writing reflects my culture in a subtle way: my stories are never set in Italy but in Sweden, Greece, the New York of the 50s, my characters are never Italian. I need to write from a distance, I guess. With the play *Toscana* I return to Italy for the first time. It is not easy to be a foreigner in this city. Obviously New York welcomes and accepts everybody, but as an Italian actress and writer in New York, it is easy to fall into stereotypes and to be labeled in a way that doesn't really reflect my



nature. But apart from that, I never felt undermined by the cultural scene in New York, I feel inspired and engaged by its diversity and opportunities.

There is a new wave of Italian kids moving to the US, how is it different now from when you moved here years ago?

I've heard that there are more and more young kids moving to New York and I welcome this new, fresh blood. Now, next to the historic tradition of Italian American culture, there is also the presence of us, new Italians, who bring contemporary Italy to this country and thanks to which even the culinary landscape of New York is changing (better pizza, better ice cream, more and more espresso bars)!

Who inspires you? Italian and not?

The authors who inspire me are many. For Toscana, I think that it was definitely a combination of Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard, but it depends on what I read at the moment. Right now I'm reading a lot of plays, which is a very interesting read, since a written play is actually meant to be a tool for theater, not necessarily reading material, but I enjoy reading Christopher Durang and Eugene Ionesco: they remaster classes in dialogue. The Italian authors that I get inspiration from are definitely Italo Calvino (his "Lezioni Americane" is a great manual for writers) and Pirandello, but I'm also reading contemporary authors such as Marco Calvani, who is in the US at the moment.

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