

A Young Italian Director Comes of Age: Paola Bernardini and City of Dreams

Michael Moore (February 23, 2016)



We sat down for a long conversation via Skype with Paola Bernardini about her "City of Dreams Sogni", an eighteen-minute short about two runaways boys who are convinced that life must have more to offer than their own unloving mother. So with their knapsacks on their backs, they wander through the magical region of Puglia, armed only with a map, a flier about a place called "City of Dreams," and the memory of an aunt they haven't seen in years.

Straight out of the gate -- "alle prime armi" as they would say in Italian -- Paola Bernardini has already made quite an impression. She swept the 2015 Dusty Film Awards of New York's School for the Visual Arts, taking home the prizes for Outstanding Film, Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography, and Outstanding Achievement in Editing. Her winning entry, *City of Dreams Sogni*, is an eighteen-minute short about two runaways boys who are convinced that life must have more to offer than their own unloving mother. So with their knapsacks on their backs, they wander through the magical region of Puglia, armed only with a map, a flier about a place called "City of Dreams," and the memory of an aunt they haven't seen in years.

The film is now making the circuit of international film festivals. On the eve of its screening

at the New Jersey Film Festival (at 7 p.m. on February 27, 2016), we sat down for a long conversation via Skype about how, at such a young age, she pulled off the trick of making such an accomplished film on a shoestring budget.

You were born in Switzerland and have lived in Italy, Japan, and the United States. How is it that you chose to shoot your first film in Puglia?



The choice was actually pretty easy. My family is from there, and sadly we have lost a lot of our people over the past five years. Today I live in New York, and I am no longer following my parents from place to place (note: her father is a career diplomat). I've come to realize that the main constant in my life is Puglia. It's my true home, the place I can always go back to.

So when the time came to make the film for my senior project, where I had a great creative team and the equipment I needed, I thought to myself, "Why not make it in Italy?" It seemed like a golden opportunity, since once I was done with school it would be a lot harder to shoot there.

Speaking of the creative team, I noticed that your screenwriter is American but the movie is in Italian. Since I'm a translator I was curious how this worked.

PB: The screenwriter, Dylan Gantz, is actually my boyfriend! For my research I spoke with my mother and father about their childhood memories. My father and my uncle remembered the time that they were Boy Scouts in Puglia, which reminded Dylan of his own childhood in Westchester! Two of his favorite movies are *Stand by Me* and *Goonies*. I'm more a fan of *Bicycle Thieves*!

Anyway, we were interested in telling a coming-of-age story, about characters who have lost all the stable points in their life and are obsessed with a fantasy. Coming up against the fact that this fantasy will not come true, and that they will have to deal with it, is the moment when they grow up.

I described Puglia to Dylan, showed him pictures of it, but at first he imagined a kind of Spaghetti Western. I had to keep correcting him, telling him Puglia wasn't like that. We had to write "blind," and ended up going to Puglia with a bare-bones script prepared only one month before, not knowing whether it would work out. But once we got there, everything became clearer. We could see where the characters would be walking, see what they would be seeing. It completely blew his mind! He wrote a lot more, and I translated it into Italian, with a lot of help from my friends (I studied in French schools) – the kids in the cast got a kick out of correcting my spelling!

It was while we were exploring Puglia that we came upon an abandoned house, an element that was not in the original script. When he saw it, he said, "The boys have to come here": the place was isolated, abandoned, broken – just like the boys – but it was also full of hope.

Your two young actors are terrific. How did you go about casting them?

For that I was luckily able to count on the help of Daniele Cascella, my casting director, who is from that area (Barletta!), and well-known in the film world. The trick was to find two boys who would be similar enough and have enough "chemistry" to play brothers. It's easier said than done! They also needed to get along personally (not always easy with children) and have same accent.

We did three casting calls, and at the first one, the first person to come in was Mattia Guarini (who plays Ernesto). After that the trick was to find the brother. Although the boy we picked, Luigi Chirenti, was already there that day, we needed to keep trying out different actors and different pairs of actors to find two that matched, that had the perfect harmony.

Then, once we had cast Mattia and Luigi, we had to match up their accents, since they weren't from the same part of Puglia (Mattia is from Monopoli, while Luigi is from Molfetta).

I was very impressed by the whole look of the film, so professional, much more polished than I would have expected to see in a student film.

PB: From the very start I did NOT want the film to look like a "student film," and I was so lucky to have Yana Karin as our cinematographer. She's of Russian background and is passionate about Russian film. She immediately volunteered to come over to Italy at her own expense when I told her about the project.

In Puglia, everywhere we looked was beautiful, and everyplace we stopped Yana and Dylan wanted to stay for three hours. Seeing my home through their eyes made me appreciate it in a new way – I had underestimated how gorgeous these places were! We put the camera everywhere, constantly picking out the most beautiful places. Our plans for the look of the film changed: we slowed down



the pace, went for more still shots, in tune with the landscape.

It was important for us to have a background that was comforting, to make up for the harshness of the characters' situation. There are no adults in the film, except as mean, authoritative off-screen presences. The surroundings had to make up for that.

The "glow" that you see in the film was achieved in post-production, with our colorist, Wayland Bell. I used the word "motherly" to describe the feeling I wanted the images to convey. He then transformed the images to create this romantic, nostalgic look. It was a fantastic collaboration. He will be the cinematographer on my next shoot in Puglia!

Could you tell us something about your future plans?

PB: I am currently working on two shorts, one of which I want to develop into a feature film. One of them is about Puglia in the 1970s. The other is, again, a coming-of-age story. A woman is suffering from panic attacks. One day she looks in the mirror, and to her shock, all she sees is a dark silhouette. In her quest to figure out how to go back to being normal, the only person she can confide in is a child, since she's afraid other adults will doubt her sanity.

More information about the film and the scheduled screenings is available at the website:

<http://www.cittadeisogni.com/> [2]

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