

Valentina Caniglia. A Young Italian Director of Photography in America

Marina Melchionda (August 25, 2009)



Valentina came to the U.S. to pursue her dream of becoming a director of photography since there was little opportunity to make a name for herself in Italy. Now she is a successful professional in both film and television. The photo exhibit “Naples–Palestine” is among her most acclaimed projects.

As i-Italy is constantly looking for outstanding stories to share with its readers, we recently met with a Neapolitan director who came to the United States in search of recognition and the opportunity to express her artistic vision. Valentina caught our attention for two reasons: first, she is one of very few female cinematographers in the male-dominated world of cinematography. Coming from a disadvantaged city like Naples, in our eyes she is a living example of where passion and determination can lead. Second, her latest work highlights the similarities between people living in Mediterranean countries and embodies the possibility for peace in the area.

We met [Valentina](#) [2] at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and talked about her past as a Neapolitan dreamer, her present as a director, and her aspirations for the future.



Being a Neapolitan and a dreamer at the same time is not always easy, she explained. "After getting my diploma at the Istituto Tecnico 'Padre Pio' in Naples, I decided to pursue my dream of becoming a director of photography even though I didn't know much about that kind of job. I was passionate about film, especially American movies, and I soon started 'studying' them, paying more attention to the images on the screen than to the plot itself. The intensity of the lights, the position of the camera, the background setting of the story, that's what interested me the most. I wanted to become the 'creator' of all that, I wanted to be a director of photography. But very few people back in Naples knew what I was talking about..."

Valentina's parents, however, decided to support her. Her father went with her to visit the Centro Sperimentale del Cinema – back then the only place in Italy where she could be initiated into the world of film. But they soon realized that the path would be harder than they had anticipated. "Unless you have a family member, a friend, or any other personal contact in film production, you won't get far. You need 'help' to become someone," she was told.

Discouraged about her Italian prospects, but determined to go on, Valentina started to look for alternatives. "I can't hide it: I felt rejected, undervalued by my own country."

She then moved to London, where she was offered various opportunities to start working on dramas, comedies, music videos, commercials, television episodes, web segments, and documentaries. This gave her confidence in her talent and she started experimenting with new techniques in high speed photography, stop motion, and special effects. But she never did forget her roots. "I used to go back to Naples, my hometown, to visit my family and friends often. I rediscovered the city through the lens of my camera and I found a new passion in portraying the everyday life of Neapolitans. I also went to the 'most dangerous' neighborhoods, fascinated by what I had considered 'normal' and not particularly interesting years before."

Valentina's future would unfold far from Italy. She came to the US on a fellowship, and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Film Production at New York University. With her degree finally in her hands, Valentina took the first steps towards realizing her professional dream. From that moment on, in fact, opportunities came pouring in and she has been living and working in both New York and Los Angeles since then.

She started in both television and film, collaborating on projects that earned her prestigious awards. Her work as a director of photography has been recognized worldwide and many of her projects have been released in international movie theaters and broadcast on HBO, MTV, Channel Plus, Voyage TV, and ShowTime. Valentina was hired to shoot commercials for international companies such as Ford, British Airways, Nike, GBX shoes, and My Space, with the last two receiving Telly Awards. She also directed music videos for Italian and American singers including Articolo 31, The Roots, The Stein, and the Neapolitan artist Enzo Gragnaniello. Her video for Aesop Rock's "Fast Cars" took first place on MTV's top 10 chart in 2005.

Valentina's talent is not only recognized in the film industry, but it has also allowed her to travel and develop her skills in still photography while working with other well-known directors.

After many films that Valentina previously shot which influenced her career, *Pomegranates and Myrrh* (which was screened at the 2009 Sundance, Cannes, Berlin, and Dubai Film Festivals) marked an important experience in her life.

Directed by Najwa Najjar and starring Hiam Abbas, Ali Suliman (nominated for a 2005 Oscar for *Paradise Now*) and Yasmine Al Masri, *Pomegranates and Myrrh* was shot in the Palestinian territories and gave Valentina the opportunity to encounter a culture that was completely new to her. "That experience was amazing. I used to travel alone, visiting different towns in the area even though people told me it was too dangerous for a woman. I felt that it was the only way I could really experience the life of everyday people." Valentina also made an unexpected discovery: the Palestinian land, towns, and backstreets bore a striking resemblance to her hometown Naples. "The people I met were very similar to my fellow citizens: I found Arab scuginizzi, massaie, and nonni outside the doors to their houses. They had the same features, and, most of all, the same behavior and appearance. I took pictures of them and compared them to those I took in Naples. If I mixed



them up, I couldn't tell them apart! So I decided that I had to do something with them, and out came the idea of the [Naples-Palestine exhibit](#) [3]."

The Italian consulate in Jerusalem encouraged Valentina to organize a solo exhibit of her still photography, and in 2008 the pictures were on display at the Al Quds Center in Jerusalem and at the Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, Palestine. "I was very proud of this project so I decided to bring the exhibit to New York, a city full of people with Neapolitan and Arab ancestry. In February, 2009 the Contemporary Art Gallery in Chelsea hosted the exhibit."

Valentina plans to publish a photo book dedicated to her experience. In the meantime her curiosity about Palestine takes her on new adventures in the Middle East. We praise her courage for demonstrating the similarities between peoples from such disparate areas within the Mediterranean basin; a very valuable contribution to the fight for mutual acceptance among all peoples across ethnic and cultural barriers.

Related Links: <http://www.valentinacaniglia.net/PhotoSlide/index.html> [3]
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