

Working on A Special Day: The Theatrical Retelling of an Italian Masterpiece

Natasha Lardera (February 21, 2013)



Inspired by Ettore Scola's Oscar-nominated story from stage and screen, two Mexican actors explore the life-changing encounter between an overworked housewife and a mysterious bachelor on May 8, 1938 - the day Rome celebrates Hitler's visit to Mussolini's Italy.

"A for effort." It is a saying, right? A way to acknowledge someone for having tried to do something, even if it was not successful. It is used quite often to give a positive spin to something that was a bit iffy, as is the case with this story.

"The story revolves around two characters, Antonietta and Gabriele, neighbors in the same apartment complex, but strangers until they meet accidentally on May 8, 1938, the day when Hitler visited Rome to meet premier Mussolini. She is an overworked housewife, mother of six children, and married to a dedicated fascist party official who takes her for granted. Although she has a devotion to Mussolini, Antonietta elects to stay home in order to catch up on her chores. Gabriele is a former



radio broadcaster who was fired by the regime when it was discovered he was a homosexual. They are worlds apart but get to know each other during the course of the day when the rest of the building's residents are at the rally. She doesn't know about his sexuality and assumes that he is pursuing her. He, on the other hand, is simply waiting for the inevitable; a knock on the door from the Italian police who will take him to the confino or internal exile—the fate of those opposed to the regime or an embarrassment to it. Despite some incomprehension a close friendship and an understanding develops between them.

The story is a private drama played out against the backdrop of a great public event that marked a high point of fascist propaganda. It was a day in which Rome was adorned with swastikas and fasces and thousands of Romans turned out to witness the parade of military and party organizations. For one day at least, it appeared as if all of Rome was united behind its Duce in greeting the visitor from Germany." (Dr. Paul Baxa)

The film is [Una Giornata Particolare, A Special Day](#) [2], by Italian director [Ettore Scola](#) [3]. It starred [Sophia Loren](#) [4] in the role of Antonietta and [Marcello Mastroianni](#) [5] in that of Gabriele. The film, released in 1977, won a Golden Globe as Best Foreign Language Film, was nominated to two Academy Awards (Best Actor in a Leading Role and Best Foreign Language Film), in Italy it won 3 Nastro D'Argento for Best Actress, Music and Script and 2 Davide di Donatello for Best Actress and Best Director and in France it was nominated for the Golden Palm at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival. Is this enough recognition to prove that the film was a masterpiece?

So as it often happens to masterpieces they are revisited, reworked, told in a different key, and A Special Day is no exception. A Mexican theater company [Por Piedad Teatro](#) [6], in collaboration with the American [The Play Company](#) [7] presented [Working on A Special Day](#) [8], a theatrical adaptation of the film that has had a pretty successful run at [59E59 Theaters](#) [9]. The adaptation was completed by Gigliola Fantoni.

Working on A Special Day was first developed and adapted for the stage in Spanish by two of Mexico's most prominent theater artists, Laura Almela and Daniel Giménez Cacho, then The Play Company/Por Piedad Teatro developed the actual English language production, directed and performed by [Ana Graham](#) [10] and Antonio Vega.

"If you haven't seen the movie," the play's stars said in a public statement "we suggest you add it to your Netflix queue. We think you'll like it. We did, to the point of wanting to do an English-language version here in New York. A Mexican/American collaboration on an Italian story might seem a bit odd if not for the fact that theater is all about imagination. Let's pretend we are Italians and that we're speaking Italian. Let's pretend 59E59 Theaters is an apartment building in Rome. Let's pretend it's May 8, 1938; Mussolini is in power and Hitler is visiting Rome today. Let's pretend we are happy about it. And then let us put some questions into your mind: is fascism over? Is it a political regime or a state of mind?"

With the house lights still on, the two actors, a man and a woman begin to undress and trade their regular clothes for costumes. They are surrounded by black walls and barely any furniture. So they go about creating a world for themselves. They pull props from a shopping cart and start to draw on the walls with chalk: they create windows, a bird cage, a portrait, a hanging lamp. The empty space becomes a Roman apartment in 1938. Yes, you have to use your imagination which is a rule of theater but sometimes the process becomes a bit too cartoonish (Gabriele smokes by the window so the actor draws smoke on the blackboard) which seems a bit out of tune with the tone of Antonietta and Gabriele's story.

"Watching the play, with its fast pace, crack timing and almost whimsical inventiveness, you're more likely to think of farce than of fascism. I'd love to see what Mr. Vega and Ms. Graham could do with a comedy," Rachel Salts writes in her [review for the New York Times](#) [11]. Not just the drawing alone, but other elements as well tend to translate the dramatic story of Antonietta and Gabriele into a comedy. The forced Italian accent, already stained by a thick Mexican one, is at times painful as is the expected presence of the usual Italian stereotypes. These might have worked in a different type of story, while they tend to ridicule this one. This is a story set during the heyday of the fascist regime, and while Mussolini attempted to create a totalitarian society, alternative private worlds



continued to exist and were effected by the regime.

"It is always great to see that international theater groups are interested in Italian theatrical texts. And this specific one is simply amazing," Laura Caparrotti, founder and artistic director of [KIT](#) [12], Kairos Italy Theater said. "The only thing that perplexes me every single time is that the English translation always seems a bit too superficial. It should not be hard in this moment of globalization. Falling into stereotypes is something worth trying to avoid. Our company, and others just like us, always try to escape that but by watching things out there unfortunately we see that stereotypes abound and they even are pretty popular."

This explains the "A for effort;" great story, good acting and an admirable attempt to tell an Italian story that may have gotten a bit lost in translation.

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