

Montalbano at the CUNY Graduate Center. "Salve, Salvo"

George De Stefano (October 12, 2008)



Sicilian sleuth Montalbano comes to New York (finalmente!)

For the past ten years, American fans of the Inspector Montalbano novels by Sicilian author Andrea Camilleri have been deprived of the pleasures of the films made from the best-selling books for the RAI television network.

The films – fourteen to date – are enormously popular in Italy, each attracting some six million



viewers, according to RAI. Directed by Alberto Sironi, they star Roman actor Luca Zingaretti as the Sicilian police detective Salvo Montalbano and are filmed in Sicily, mainly in the province of Ragusa.

But our long wait for a glimpse of the series that Italian viewers have enjoyed since 1998 ended this week (October 10) with the New York premiere of the latest installment, *La Luna di Carta* (The Paper Moon). The film, shown at the CUNY Graduate Center as part of a week-long RAI Italian Fiction series, is so new it hasn't even been broadcast in Italy yet.

Adapted from the 2005 novel of the same name, *La Luna di Carta* has detective Montalbano investigating the murder of Angelo Pardo, a pharmaceutical sales representative found shot to death. The unusual state of Pardo's corpse – seated, with his penis exposed – seems to indicate a crime of passion. Or perhaps he was about to "pleasure" himself when he was killed. Or maybe his killer, or killers, just wanted to make the cops think sex somehow was involved.

Just as Salvo Montalbano begins to investigate the homicide, two drug-related deaths occur in the town of Vigata. One of the deceased is a conservative legislator, and this particular onorevole is well-known as an outspoken guardian of public morality. (Camilleri, a former Communist who remains a man of the Left, often insinuates his political views into the Montalbano novels, with the detective himself usually voicing them.) Montalbano uncovers the connections between Pardo's murder and the deaths from tainted cocaine. But to do so, he must, as so many movie gumshoes before him, *cherchez la femme*.

There actually are two women in question: Pardo's sister Michela and his lover Elena Sciafani. The witchy and dramatic Michela and the seductive Elena, both having embarrassing secrets to hide, try to mislead Montalbano. But the detective, relying on his formidable deductive powers and the computer code-cracking skills of his otherwise dizzy underling Catarella, solves the case.

The screenplay, by Andrea Camilleri and several collaborators, captures the novel's essence, hitting all the major plot points. It does leave out some things, particularly the aging Montalbano's increasingly dark musings about his own mortality. That's just as well, since Luca Zingaretti's Salvo is too vigorous and virile a presence for death-haunted brooding.

The actor, surrounded by a bevy of RAI eminences, attended the New York screening and spoke afterwards. The voluble and charming Zingaretti, when asked by an audience member whether he identified with the character he plays, replied that the only thing he has in common with Montalbano is the detective's appetite for good food. (Montalbano's passion for *cucina siciliana* provides some of the novels' most entertaining, and appetizing moments.) He praised the literary qualities of Camilleri's books, adding that he was certain such great postwar Italian auteurs as Elio Petri and Francesco Rosi would have adapted them for the screen.

Another spectator observed that the actors fully incarnated Camilleri's memorable characters. Zingaretti was pleased to agree, noting that over the years that the cast has worked together they have become a close-knit ensemble. Zingaretti expertly conveys Montalbano's intelligence and irony, his irascibility and his unwavering moral sense. He also gives the character considerable sex appeal, as a RAI spokeswoman remarked while introducing the film. But the other cast members also



are quite good. Angelo Russo, as the idiot savant Catarella, is perfection.

Zingaretti said that his relationship with Andrea Camilleri preceded the Montalbano movies. The actor, who made his film debut in 1987, studied theatre under the author in Rome. He said that after he auditioned for and won the part of Salvo Montalbano, he was wracked by self-doubt. It didn't help that a friend who loves the novels told Zingaretti that he would kill him if he "ruined" the character. Before shooting began for the first film (*Il Ladro di Merendine*), Zingaretti called the author to confide his fears that he would not be up to the job. Despite Camilleri's reassurances, the actor's worries only worsened. Finally, exasperated by Zingaretti's increasingly anxious phone calls, Camilleri exploded, "Stop breaking my balls!"

Let me say the same to RAI. Giving Camilleri's New York fans only a taste of the Montalbano series will not suffice. Now that some of us have seen *La Luna di Carta* (one of four new installments), our appetite has been whetted. It will not be sated until we see them all, whether on the big screen (which really shows off the magnificent Sicilian locations) or on DVD. Madunnuzza biniditta, how long must we wait?

[For more information about the Commissario Montalbano series on RAI TV](#) [2]

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