



GABRIELLA MARTINELLI'S Little Black Book

BY MICOL MAROTTI



Gabriella Martinelli with William S. Burroughs

AT THIS YEAR'S 30th edition of the Toronto International Film Festival, Martinelli and her U.K.-based partner Jeremy Thomas (*Sexy Beast*, *The Last Emperor*) are the producers of *Tideland*, one of the most highly anticipated films of the festival. It stars Jeff Bridges (*The Big Lebowski*, *The Fabulous Baker Boys*) and newcomer Jodelle Ferland and is directed by the irrepressible and sometimes controversial Gilliam (*12 Monkeys*, *Brothers Grimm*).

Based on Mitch Cullin's cult novel of the same name, *Tideland* thrusts audiences into the fantastical world of young Jeliza-Rose (Ferland), who escapes the culture shock and loneliness of moving to rural Texas from Los Angeles by inventing a world where bog men awaken at dusk, monster sharks swim down railroad tracks and disembodied Barbie heads share in her adventures.

A one-woman cheerleader for the Canadian film industry, Martinelli convinced Thomas and Gilliam to substitute the

wilds of Texas for the sweeping prairie landscape of Saskatchewan. "Gabriella is a real force," says Gilliam. "She has incredible enthusiasm for her work, and that, combined with great organizational skills, makes her unstoppable. At our first meeting she convinced me to abandon my idea of shooting in South Africa and instead she booked a flight for Canada. It was a great joy to have so much freedom on the set and not to have studio execs looking over my shoulder all of the time. Gabriella and Jeremy gave me the opportunity to make the film I wanted."

"When Jeremy sent me the *Tideland* script, I was really excited because I really wanted to work with Terry Gilliam," Martinelli says. "And I love working with Jeremy. He is simply the best independent producer there is. But most of all, I fell in love with the story, and after I read the script I thought why not shoot in Saskatchewan? For one thing, the tax credits are between 35 and 40 per cent, and with a short, 45-day shoot, we had to find a location that could accommodate all of our needs."

And accommodate it they did. "The province's locations, facilities, incentives and people made it the perfect fit for this project," says Martinelli. One day of shooting saw the production crew recreating a full-fledged train wreck on an abandoned stretch of tracks outside of Regina that caused locals to drive over and see if they could lend a hand. "The train sequence was especially challenging. We weren't having a lot of luck setting it up. Then Gabriella stepped in, and we had ourselves a full six-car pileup replete with mangled metal. It was just beautiful," jokes Gilliam. The train sequence is also featured in the behind-the-scenes moments captured by Vincenzo Natali (*Cube*), who Martinelli assigned to shoot a documentary chronicling the making of the film. Apart from being a video diary, it serves two other purposes: to bring awareness to the film and as a mentorship program between Gilliam and Natali.

Gabriella Martinelli's little black book rivals that of Hollywood Madame Heidi Fleiss. Infamous, quirky and always interesting men such as directors David Cronenberg, Baz Luhrman, Clive Barker, Jerry Ciccoritti and Edoardo Ponti; actors such as Jeremy Irons, Leonardo DiCaprio, Richard Gere and Jeff Bridges; dignitaries such as the Dalai Lama; authors such as Nino Ricci; and her most recent addition, Terry Gilliam, are only a speed dial away. Martinelli's most enviable position is a result of her talent for finding unique material and combining that with the right team of established and emerging talent to translate into box-office revenues.

Martinelli, one discovers very quickly, is big on mentoring. She credits *The Grey Fox* producer Peter O'Brian for giving her opportunities in the early years, but one senses that her eventual success was a result of unrelenting self-motivation. "I was studying art history at Carleton University in Ottawa, but moved to B.C. when I realized that there the tulips came out in February. At the University of Victoria, I took one film course as an elective to be with my friend. I discovered how much I loved it and changed my entire career path. I started working on commercial productions and small features such as *Walls* and Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* [which won six Genies]. My last production in B.C. was a large-format film for Expo '86. However, I realized that if I was going to advance in the industry, I had to move to Toronto because that seemed to be where the action was."

Martinelli's next few years were extremely productive. She worked at O'Brian's Independent Pictures in Toronto where she was the associate producer on *John and the Missus*, directed by Gordon Pinsent, which garnered Pinsent a Best Actor Genie in 1987. She also co-produced the 1989 Genie-winning *Milk and Honey*. But it was her experiences on the set of David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (where she served as production manager and post-production supervisor) that would intertwine her career with that of one of Canada's most noted directors and one of the U.K.'s most respected producers.

Cronenberg had been discussing turning the William S. Burroughs novel *Naked Lunch* into a film with Thomas for almost a decade before it went to camera. Martinelli had just produced Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*, in which Cronenberg had a significant part as an actor. When Cronenberg's and Thomas's hopes of shooting the film in Tangiers evaporated because of the first Gulf War, they turned their attention to shooting in Toronto and their



... With Edoardo Ponti

focus on a young enthusiastic producer who was given, among other things, the unenviable task of helping to create an entire desert (consisting of 700 tons of sand) in a former munitions factory. The film garnered eight Genie Awards in 1992, including Best Director for Cronenberg and Best Picture for Thomas and Martinelli.

Cronenberg and Martinelli teamed up again in 1992 on *M. Butterfly*, based on the David Henry Hwang play about a French diplomat (Jeremy Irons) in 1960 who falls in love with Liling, a beautiful opera singer (John Lone) whom he later discovers is a man. The film was an ambitious project to be shot in China, Budapest (substituting for Paris) and Toronto. Arranging a shoot in the strict communist country had only been attempted once before by a non-Chinese producer—the same Jeremy Thomas, who had successfully negotiated his way into the Forbidden City for Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. "Jeremy and Mario [Cotone, the line producer on *The Last Emperor*]



Terry Gilliam



Jodelle Ferland and Jeff Bridges in *Tideland*

were instrumental in helping to set up our relationships with the Chinese officials. We wanted to shoot inside the Summer Palace, on the Great Wall and on the streets of Beijing, so logistically it was challenging,” recalls Martinelli.

The challenges included a request by Chinese officials that only exteriors and portions of scenes that contained no physical engagement between the two male leads would be shot in China, which presented some interesting challenges for the art department as they tried to match interior and exterior locations for partial scenes shot in China. Martinelli kept the production running and even managed to coordinate 100 Chinese labourers into helping her crew trek equipment to a lookout point on the Great Wall. Martinelli produced two more films in Asia in 1995, a documentary shot in Tibet entitled *Journey to Enlightenment*, which traced the life of the Dalai Lama’s primary teacher and featured both His Holiness and narrator Richard Gere, and *The Amazing Panda Adventure*, a sweeping family film shot in China’s highlands.

Then, in 1996, another interesting man came into Martinelli’s life. An emerging Australian director named Baz Luhrman set out to re-imagine Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Twentieth Century Fox greenlit the project with two of Hollywood’s hottest new talents, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. In Luhrman, Martinelli experienced a vast new talent and his unorthodox approach to story. “For me, it’s always the story that has to be unique. Although people were familiar with the saga of Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers, Baz wanted to modernize it by swapping Verona, Italy, for Verona Beach, swords for guns, and he set it in a time period that younger

audiences could relate to, while at the same time preserving the original language,” says Martinelli.

Shot completely in Mexico, Fox’s big gamble paid off at the box office and established Luhrman as the next big thing, and Martinelli once again the woman to watch. After the film’s release, she set up a residence in Rome, Italy, in part to return to her roots, but also to explore co-production possibilities. In 2000, she launched her own production company, Capri Films. Based in Toronto, the new venture began attracting early attention when Martinelli announced the company’s first co-production, the feature *Between Strangers*. What made the film noteworthy was its young director, Edoardo Ponti. Ponti is the son of Italian screen legend Sophia Loren, and he would direct his mother along with an all-star cast that included Mira Sorvino, Deborah Kara Unger and Gérard Depardieu, among others.

“Edoardo knew of me through mutual friends in Italy. One night he called Canada information and started calling around until he found me,” Martinelli chuckles, recalling the famous phone call. “It is a little surprising to receive a call from Edoardo Ponti requesting a meeting with him and Sophia Loren,” she adds. “Edoardo is extremely talented. I think that any director would have come unglued by the attention. I know that he will have quite a career ahead of him.”

Her close ties with Sophia Loren secured the megastar’s participation in Martinelli’s next project, a Canada/Italy co-production based on award-winning author Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints*. “I first read the book in the early

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... with Jacques Villeneuve



...and Pete Postlethwaite.

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1980s and I loved it so much I wanted to option the rights to it. When I met with Nino he told me of his plans to write a trilogy, so I thought I’d wait and option all three.” Little did Martinelli know that it would take almost nine years for Ricci to complete his epic saga of Vittorio Innocente who immigrates to Canada from Italy and soon discovers that family secrets, betrayals and century-old superstitions threaten his new life. Once again for Martinelli, it was the story that captured and maintained her interest.

“Nino’s narrative reached far beyond the family relationships. The story weaves in issues of immigration and the immigrant experience. I identified with the characters because the underlying issues were representative of what a lot of immigrants, including myself, experienced,” she explains. First she thought about shooting it as a feature, then Martinelli decided on producing a miniseries instead. She recruited Jerry Ciccoritti, the multiple Gemini award-winning director of *Trudeau*. “Jerry was a natural choice because of his talent. Here was a young director who dared tackle a movie of the week about arguably the most popular and charismatic Canadian prime minister and pulled it off. The fact that Jerry was also of Italian heritage and had an understanding of the characters and their struggles, was an added bonus that he brought to the project,” she says.

Ciccoritti remembers his involvement in the project somewhat differently. “Gabriella made me sweat it out right from the beginning,” he jokes. “I loved the book and wanted to option it and then I discovered that she had beaten me to it. Then I heard she was making it into a feature film and was

thinking of someone like Anthony Minghella, so I thought I didn’t have a chance. Finally, I heard it was going to be a television movie, and I thought, ‘Wait a minute, I’m the guy that did *Trudeau*, surely I have a chance.’” What ensued was months of cajoling on his part and unabashed attempts to gain Martinelli’s attention with flowers and Italian pastries. After months of waiting and a few intense meetings, Ciccoritti finally convinced her that he was the man. “She’s a brilliant producer,” he says. “She understands her director. Once you are on the film, it is your film and she will back you 100 per cent.”

Lives of the Saints premiered on Italy’s RTI network in 2004 and was the highest-rated Italian miniseries ever. Its Canadian debut on CTV received a 44 per cent audience share, or 1.5-million viewers, an incredible achievement considering the fractious viewer habits that have dominated Canadian television since the advent of the digital channels.

Not content to sit on her laurels for too long, Martinelli has already jumped in full throttle on another epic family tale, *Villeneuve*, the story of legendary Quebec Formula One driver Gilles Villeneuve, whose stellar career driving for Ferrari was tragically cut short by a fatal crash in 1985. “It’s such an incredible story, not just Gilles’s meteoric rise in perhaps one of the most dangerous sports, but also of his charismatic, and equally talented son, Jacques,” she says. And judging by the early media buzz on the film, it looks like Martinelli will have another hit on her hands and a Formula One star to add to her little black book.

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