
lina sweeps in

by Günter Ott



Lina Wertmüller in Toronto

photo: Gunter Ott

“Learn from others” has become one of the calls, heard loud and clear, from those who would catapult Canadian cinema into the international marketplace. So, Günter Ott went to learn from Lina Wertmüller. And that wasn’t as easy as one might think...

*Lina Wertmüller swept into Toronto a few weeks ago to publicize her latest film, lengthily titled **The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain**. She also made a public appearance at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute that was jointly sponsored by Ryerson’s Photographic Arts Department, The Film Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts at York University and the Italian Cultural Institute. With her was her usual star Giancarlo Giannini who appeared glum and uncommunicative, possibly from the breakup of his own marriage which corresponds to many aspects of the new film.*

Günter Ott is a freelance writer and photographer living in Toronto. He is recently back from a long trip abroad.

Wertmuller, the director and phenomenon who at one time had no less than five of her films playing simultaneously in New York theatres, is in person engaging, witty and outgoing but possesses the annoying knack of retreating constantly behind empty words so that one is never quite certain what is really meant. **Cinema Canada** tried to find out a few details about the much admired (some say overly praised) filmmaker. Some of her remarks during an interview were in English; but mostly her comments were interpreted by several well-meaning amateur translators.

Cinema Canada: For a while there was considerable talk that you were going to make your most recent film in Canada. Could you tell us how this proposal for an Italian-Canadian co-production came about and what went wrong?

Lina Wertmuller: Oh, I don't know why it didn't work out. It wasn't my doing. We make everything to realize the picture and at the last minute the gentleman who worked for this on the Canadian side...

Who was that?

I don't remember the name... he left.

Would you still be interested in making a picture in this country under the terms of the Italo-Canadian Co-production agreement?

Why yes... We met a lot of people. In any case, it's good to make a film here. Canada is very full of Italians. I am interested in making a film here.

Is there any possibility of making a film here under your current four-film contract with Warner Brothers?

Well, you know about deals... do you believe really in the contract? I don't. If I like, I do. It's that simple.

The deal with Warners only refers to first refusal then?

Perhaps yes... and maybe it's not even that.

You have said that Fellini has made considerable impact on you. Are there any other filmmakers that you feel have influenced you?

I don't know... very many... I go all the time to the pictures since I was very, very young. I am a movie buff. I love especially Fellini. My first film, **The Lizards**, was made after Fellini. I worked with him three months in my whole life (on 8½). I admire very much; in fact, I offered my services to him as an assistant recently to do anything. I'd go anytime to him. He is a charming man. I would go anywhere with him.

We understand that as both writer and director, you have very little initial material written down before you begin a film. How do you go about creating your films? How deeply do Giancarlo and your husband Enrico Job get involved in the process?

We have many ideas and when we get an idea, we speak together. I write a short script many months before and refine it until about two months before the shooting. Sometimes we can make use of improvisation and refine on the spot. This happens when they take it out of my hands and slap my wrists forcibly. The amount of freedom I give to actors varies from tyranny to total freedom.

How do you arrange the financing of your films?

If you insist very much, you get the money. But really it is very difficult. In Italy there is an economic crisis but we still make many films. But here, Canada is a rich country, not like Italy. Your movies are not economic. Culture in every society must work with the necessity of money.

Your latest film has many elements that are common to all your films such as your exploration of socialism and feminism. How would you define your role as a filmmaker in the modern world?

The first important thing, otherwise I risk becoming a proselytizer, is for me to make the remark that one must do what one must do. A cineaste intellectual does things different from what I do. I do what I love and must do.

One becomes an antibody to one's own work. The intellectuals and philosophers are the antibodies of society; they fight against society's diseases and I consider myself one of those antibodies. It's not politics or politicians but something – a natural phenomenon – that society, in its structure, has to produce these antibodies with the critical outlook.

OK, let's discuss socialism. I am a socialist and so am interested in the peasant's struggle. I want my films to be understandable to the peasants. In North America, people say they don't understand my films. Good. I am only interested that I make my films for the peasants in Sicily and they understand me perfectly. Socialism is a new society that I think is going to happen. Socialism is more interested in liberty than communism is. Italy is a very socialist country... so is England... I want to show the plight of the working classes.

The society we have to work for is against the exploitation of women. In this society, you can be in touch with the antibodies. It's less worse now for women than those who came before. All the antibodies are the same. What is missing is the cure – the new society these antibodies offer. This message is alarming. The theory is stated in the title of the new film, "The end of the world..." In these last few years I've felt acutely the ecological, ideological, economic, humanistic alarms; the over-population, the violence of the times – all these causes and the social structure no longer functioning!

Family, marriage is no longer functioning. It's crap because until this time, the society lived off the skin of women. On the other hand society needs the family cell that works upon the structure. Maybe in our lives we'll see a change – the great dividing line – it can be the end of the world or the end of a certain kind of world. "And it comes to pass that the space is our usual bed" meaning the family, the marriage, this white space; it is also a ring where the battle between the males and females takes place. Here they confront each other rather than learning the terror that is life.

I wanted to create a bridge between Italy and America, the space of the bed indicates the nucleus of the family in this night full of rain that may indicate the great universal flood. Often water is also a symbol of renewal... a new cycle. My new film is born out of this whole problematical basis and it cannot offer solutions; it only records them and proposes... because there never was such equality between the sexes.

The structure of the family does not allow equality. Family is a cage for the woman because if a woman is married and has two kids, she hasn't the time or energy for a job or career. Love is a great mystery because, if it isn't, then you just have a description of anatomical terms.

I consider myself to be profoundly feminist, but not a certain level of feminism. There is no such thing as equal rights. You can't make laws about this; it's too mysterious.

I think I see. Could you tell me how much Giancarlo Gianni influences the success of your films?

Oh quite a lot. He has, I think beautiful eyes. I love them. If I had to kill him... well, what actor could I use? □