

## With Turturro, Italy Knows No Bounds

By FRANZ LIDZ



From left, Richard Easton, Max Casella, John Turturro, Aida Turturro and Diego Turturro, in "Fiabe Italiane" ("Italian Folk Tales"), on tour last month in Turin, Naples and Milan.

Photo by Gianni Fiorito



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Aida Turturro and John Turturro, who adapted "Fiabe Italiane" from various fables. "I find the economy and beauty of these stories quite irresistible," he said.

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FROM a stony redoubt on a stage in the Piccolo Teatro Strehler, John Turturro smiles faintly and presses the palms of his hands together between his knees. Mr. Turturro - born in Queens, living in Brooklyn - is playing an unscrupulous innkeeper in "Fiabe italiane" ("Italian Folk Tales"), a powerfully imagined parable he also directs and has freely adapted from fables collected by Italo Calvino, Giambattista Basile and Giuseppe Pitre. Mr. Turturro studies a fool (Max Casella) who has just arrived at the inn with a magical donkey. The fool asks him to give the beast food and fresh water and cautions him not to say "ass dump" in its presence. Though the innkeeper instructs his wife not to utter the phrase, she blurts it out anyway, causing the donkey to bray, raise its tail and shower the ground with jewels. While upbraiding her for repeating the incantation, the innkeeper repeats it himself. Which prompts a second cascade. "O.K., everyone!" says the fool, at which point *he* invokes the magical words. Presto: Another shimmering load.

The donkey dung scene derives from Basile's "Racconto dell'Orco" and "Ari-ari, Ciuco Mio, Butta Danari!," No. 127 of the 200 yarns in Calvino's popular folklore anthology, published in 1956. In the book's introduction, Calvino quotes a Tuscan proverb: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it." Mr. Turturro, a veteran of dozens of Off Broadway plays and scores of Hollywood movies, added elements that would not be out of place in commedia dell'arte, the ancient Italian improv theater. His production, which last month concluded a sold-out tour of Turin, Naples and Milan, featured minstrels, two overlapping stories, layers of language (English, Italian, Western Lombardian, Sicilian, Neapolitan, Piedmontese, Abruzzese) and characters blissfully free of self-consciousness. Bathed in a palette of unlikely yet sumptuous color combinations, ogresses posed as lovely maidens, ghouls vanished into enchanted sacks, and princes sprang from giant talking crabs. As

often happens in tales of transformation, power is eventually tempered with responsibility, and the cruel realities of existence cede to purity, virtue and rectitude.

"Calvino said that folk tales are a general representation of life," Mr. Turturro, 53, said over plates of osso bucco and risotto Milanese at a trattoria near the Duomo. "I find the economy and beauty of these stories quite irresistible. They're full of grace and humility and reflect an Italy without borders, an Italy more of a continent."

Like one of Mr. Turturro's favorite films, Vittorio De Sica's neo-Realist fairy tale "Miracle in Milan" (1951), the stories wed fantasy to the everyday. "They're the naïve tales of peasants trying to make sense of their lives," he said. "They attempt to give hope to those who have none." And despite their age, the fables remain remarkably fresh. "Bernie Madoff - greedy, irresponsible, only out for himself - is an echo of some of the tricksters and deceivers," he said.

Mr. Turturro grows lyrical discussing the "continuous quiver of love" that runs through the stories. He loves Italy with a passion that perhaps only the children of immigrants are capable of. "Many great Italian authors have never even been translated into English," he lamented. "In the United States being of Italian descent is not a broadening experience. It's narrowing, in that you're rarely exposed to the depth and diversity of Italian culture. American culture is so flattened. I'm not so interested in being made into a pancake anymore."

He is interested in having his production of "Italian Folk Tales" restaged in a New York theater, however. "It would be nice to present this aspect of Italy that isn't seen very often in the states," he said.

The play is just the latest expedition in Mr. Turturro's midlife exploration of his ancestral land. The journey began in 1986 during the filming of "The Sicilian," Michael Cimino's murky meditation on the life of the notorious outlaw Salvatore Giuliano. "I had studied Italian for three months," Mr. Turturro recalled, "and when I got to Sicily, I was completely lost."

A half century ago Mr. Giuliano was the subject of a groundbreaking piece of political filmmaking by Francesco Rosi, the acclaimed Neapolitan director. Mr. Rosi was so taken by Mr. Turturro's turn as a throttled playwright in the Coen brothers' "Barton Fink" (1991) that he asked him to play the lead in "La Tregua" ("The Truce").

"The film is ironic and grotesque," Mr. Rosi told him, "and I feel you have both." Six years in the making, "La Tregua" was based on Primo Levi's account of his postwar odyssey back to Turin from Auschwitz.

Mr. Rosi, in turn, gave Mr. Turturro a translation of Eduardo De Filippo's sentimental comedy "Questi Fantasmi." In 2005 Mr. Turturro brought the play - retitled "Souls of Naples" and directed by Roman Paska - to New York and Naples. He has since written a screenplay and is on track to direct and act in an English-language feature, which is being produced by Domenico Procacci, who also produced "Gomorra."

Mr. Turturro is in the midst of editing "Passione," a documentary on Neapolitan song that's reminiscent of "Buena Vista Social Club." He calls the movie an endless jukebox of past and present-day musicians.

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Last September another documentary he appears in and helped produce, "Rehearsal for a Sicilian Tragedy," had its premiere at the Venice Film Festival. "Rehearsal," also directed by Mr. Paska, is a Pirandello-esque film within a film that examines the island's rich history of puppetry, ponders the Sicilian preoccupation with death and follows Mr. Turturro to the home of his maternal grandmother in Aragona. At the convent across the street he launches into an impromptu duet with a nun, who like his father, who died in 1988, is from the Apulia region of southeastern Italy.

He remembers his parents, Katherine and Nicholas, as splendid raconteurs with a fund of stories that seemed bottomless and memories that seemed infinite. "My mother was dry and precise and could hold your attention for hours with details that were sometimes shocking, sometimes funny," he said. "My father liked to exaggerate and embellish and push an anecdote to its limits. He never told jokes. He didn't like jokes. I don't, either. I prefer revealing stories that make me laugh."

"Italian Folk Tales" has amused him since 1981, when he was given a copy by his future wife, Katherine Borowitz. They had met at Yale Drama School, and the book was her first gift to him. The inscription: "For John. To adapt or just to read. Kathie."

In 2007 Mr. Turturro, trolling for a play to mount in Naples, was encouraged by Ms. Borowitz to rework the classic tales. They collaborated on the script with Mr. Casella and Carl Capotorto, the author of the recent memoir "Twisted Head." (Mr. Turturro later learned that in the early 1980s, Mr. Calvino and fellow fabulist Federico Fellini had talked about distilling the fables into a film about prophetic dreams. Alas, Mr. Calvino died in 1985 and the project never got off the ground.)

To stage "Italian Folk Tales," Mr. Turturro enlisted the aid of the Teatro Stabile di Torino and obtained the permission of Mr. Calvino's widow, Chiquita. As it turned out, Ms. Calvino, a genial and youthful octogenarian, had loved his comic turn as a pedophile bowler in "The Big Lebowski." Casting was a family affair: among the American actors in the troupe, Ms. Borowitz, the couple's 9-year-old son Diego and Mr. Turturro's cousin Aida Turturro all juggled multiple roles.

One of Mr. Turturro's biggest technical questions involved the magical donkey. Dare he trust a mechanical one? Fortunately a crew member from Sicily who had grown up with mules volunteered to wear a donkey suit. And rather than raining actual jewels on the set, Mr. Turturro opted for a beam of green flickering light. "It's cool," told young Diego. "But you have to use your imagination."