Costume Design Master Class Celebrates U.S.-Italy Bond

Collaboration with David di Donatello Awards brings event to CUNY

By NICK VIVARELLI @nickvivaret

THE BOND BETWEEN American and Italian costume designers has been a strong and long-lasting one that has contributed to some of the best-looking movies ever made, says acclaimed Italian costume designer Carlo Poggioli. “We are the country that has won the most Oscars, both for set design and costumes, after the Americans,” says Poggioli, head of Italy’s costume and production designers guild. “The Italian flag stands high.”

That bond will be celebrated with a master class series of panels set for Oct. 31, Nov. 13 and Dec. 5 at the City University of New York, in which Piera Detassis, president of Italy’s David di Donatello Awards — the country’s equivalent of the Oscars — will lead a discussion among Italian designers Poggioli and Milena Canonero (“The Grand Budapest Hotel”) and Americans Ann Roth (“The English Patient”) and Donna Zakowska (“The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”).

When she started prepping the HBO miniseries “John Adams,” Zakowska says she developed a strong rapport with Canonero, whose work on Stanley Kubrick’s “Barry Lyndon” set the standard for 18th-century costume re-creation. “She was a bit of a mentor to me,” Zakowska says.

Canonero introduced Zakowska to Italian clothes-making shops such as Tirelli Costumi and the hat maker Pieroni Workshop, which she continued to use when working on History’s 2015 “Sons of Liberty” miniseries. “I’ve always gone back to Italy as a place where I can build costume elements that I was unable to make in America,” says Zakowska.

The Italy-U.S. bond also incorporates common visions and artistic sensibilities. Significantly, in 2011, when Canonero was working on History’s 2015 “Sons of Liberty,” says Poggioli, “we were shooting at Terrence Malick’s ‘The Last Planet,’ a drama that will reportedly portray passages in the life of Jesus Christ. “Coming from a different culture, she had a whole different vision from what I was used to … and she absorbed a lot in Italy as well.”

Poggioli, who worked with Fellini on his final feature, “The Voice of the Moon,” says that these days what displeases him about some of the big American productions he works on is that the costume designer at times is forced to “interact primarily with the producers instead of the director.”

That has not been the case on RAI and HBO series “The Young Pope.” Its second season, titled “The New Pope,” launched recently at the Venice Film Festival, with Paolo Sorrentino directing all episodes. Poggioli calls Sorrentino “the big exception” to what he sees as an increasing tendency on the part of producers, especially U.S. ones, to overstep into what he considers the director’s role when it comes to envisioning costumes. “Paolo knows exactly what he wants. And when he directs, the project is entirely in his hands,” he says.

It’s likely that many of Poggioli’s U.S. colleagues would agree that deferring to the director is best. What’s sure is the creative success of the ongoing collaboration between Italian and American costumers. As Poggioli puts it: “The cultural exchange — that’s what makes you grow.”

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