

Monda's World

ONE evening in late June, as the sun set over the postcard-perfect island of Capri and seagulls glided high above, Annie Proulx sat on a director's chair in a small piazza. She was preparing to be interviewed as part of a boutique literary festival, *Le Conversazioni*, which in its second year is already attracting more boldface names than the gossip columns. Martin Amis, Campari in hand, slipped into the back row of the cozy audience, along with Ian McEwan. Ethan Coen, the film director and sometime short-story writer, sat nearby, wearing sunglasses. The rest of the festival lineup — the novelists Michael Cunningham, Colum McCann, Claire Messud and Chuck Palahniuk — were expected later in the week. This year's theme was literature and the cinema. There would be a public interview each evening and free time for the authors each day, including a boat ride to a private island.

Part Club Med, part "Charlie Rose," the festival is the work of an Italian impresario, New York University film professor and salonnier extraordinaire, Antonio Monda — who is arguably the most well-connected New York cultural figure you've never heard of. The Capri festival is the glamorous summer-vacation edition of an ongoing conversation Monda holds in his Upper West Side apartment, where major literary and film figures mingle with Monda's less-famous friends and random Italians. "First and foremost, I think of myself as a communicator," Monda said in a recent interview. That evening in Capri, he greeted guests in the piazza — well-heeled tourists with cashmere sweaters tossed across their tanned shoulders, Italian publishers, a few journalists — while answering constant calls on his cellphone.

Charming and slightly goofy, with dark-framed retro eyeglasses that make him look like an extra in "La Dolce Vita," Monda, 46, is a one-man Italian cultural institute. In America, he's a consummate party-giver, but in Italy he's an important champion of Anglophone writers and filmmakers, largely through his interviews for the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. The Capri festival, organized by Monda and the Naples-based documentary producer Davide Azzolini, may be an exclusive affair, but it gets lots of attention in the Italian press and is financed by the Italian government and several major corporations.

As a host, Monda has a rare ability to make everyone feel like the guest of honor. And in his world, almost everyone is. Last year's festival attendees were no less impressive: Nathan Englander, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace. At a press conference in New York earlier this summer to announce this year's authors, Elie Wiesel made an appearance. (Monda has known him since the '80s, when he interviewed him for a documentary on Jewish-American culture, a lingering preoccupation.) A video of last year's proceedings was shown, in which writers talked with candor and humor — Wallace on how it was his second trip to Europe, Smith on how she realized she'd never be a professional dancer, Eugenides on how films for him will never be as rich as novels. Other footage looked like a tourist board promo: writers sunning themselves on a boat and playing keep-away with a flip-flop in the pool of the five-star Hotel Punta Tragara.

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As an interviewer, Monda has a light touch and a penchant for asking direct existential questions in the European manner: "Do you think images are replacing the written word?" "Are you a pessimist or an optimist?" "Comment on Dostoyevsky's assertion that 'If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted.'" He's a vivid exemplar of Italy's baroque rhetorical culture, in which playfully meandering discussion is often prized over conclusions. (Monda's "Do You Believe? Conversations on God and Religion," a collection culled from his interviews with Jane Fonda, Spike Lee, Toni Morrison, Wiesel and others for *La Repubblica*, will appear in November from Vintage.)

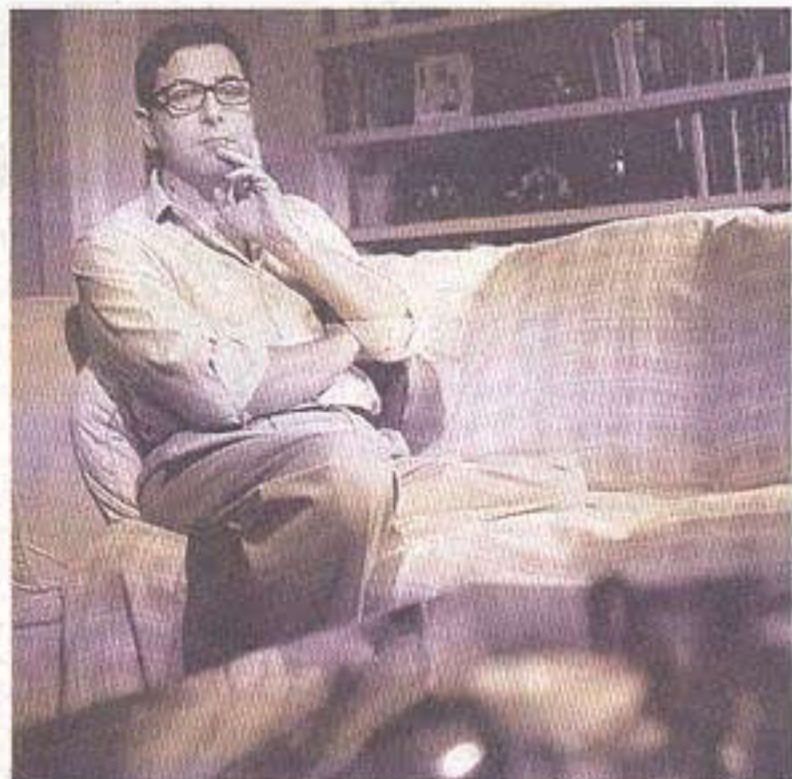
Monda's effusive style caught the attention of Wes Anderson, who cast Monda as himself in "The Life Aquatic," which opens with a press conference where Monda interviews the Bill Murray character. The special features on the film's DVD include a '70s-style faux interview program called "Mondo Monda," in which Monda interviews Anderson and his co-writer, Noah Baumbach. The parody, available on YouTube, comes within an inch of Monda's actual style. At one point, he asks the two to comment on G. K. Chesterton's assertion that "a fool is a man who has lost everything but his reason." "I've never even heard of Chesterton," Anderson says. "Sounds made up," Baumbach says. "Wait, who is Chesterton?" Anderson says. "Is that a real question?"

In the same way a skillful chef might make a week's meals out of one roast, Monda often interviews writers or directors for *La Repubblica*, turns the interview into part of a book, asks the directors to speak to his class at N.Y.U., and invites the interviewees over for a meal. Englander recalls his first dinner invitation, billed as an evening "with some Italian film friends." Introductions were made: "Nathan, meet Bernardo." Bernardo turned out to be Bernardo Bertolucci. Arthur Miller was a regular guest before his death in 2005. Philip Roth has been known to stop by. "People who say no to everything" rearrange their schedules to make it to Monda's, Englander said. "People have their gifts. He's a gifted host."

This spring, Monda said he would have a lunch for Englander's new book, "The Ministry of Special Cases," on one condition: that Englander bring his mother. He did, and she met Monda's mother, who was visiting from Rome. Rare in a city of catering, all gatherings at Casa Monda feature the Italian home cooking of Monda's indefatigable wife, Jacqueline Greaves. Monda is a practicing Catholic who sends his three children to parochial school, but that doesn't get in the way of the good life. In a telephone interview, Eugenides said that on Capri, Monda "seemed to have an incredible balance that only an Italian could pull off."

Monda comes from a well-connected family of liberal Catholic politicians. His father, who died of a heart attack when Monda was 15, was a lawyer, a Christian Democrat and a onetime mayor of a small city outside Rome. He also helped finance film directors, including the Taviani brothers. Monda worked as an assistant for their 1982 film, "The Night of the Shooting Stars." Later, he worked on television documentaries and made a semi-autobiographical film, "Dicembre," which won several prizes at the 1990 Venice Film Festival. But then, in 1993, Monda's uncle, a high-ranking Christian Democrat and cabinet minister named Riccardo Misasi, was investi-

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gated for corruption and Mafia ties. Though he was never arrested and the charges were ultimately dropped, Misasi's career never recovered. His uncle's fall from grace was "the greatest *dolore* of my life, after my father's death," Monda said. It soured him on the Italian justice system and made it decidedly harder for him to build a career in Italy. "People looked at me funny," Monda said.

But his connections proved useful in New York, where he moved in 1994 with Jacque and their infant twin girls. In exchange for an apartment in a building on the Upper East Side owned by a family friend, Monda worked as the superintendent. "I was the worst super in the world," he said. When he needed help, he'd pay the super next door. Meanwhile, Monda began writing for *La Repubblica* and teaching film classes at the Tisch School of the Arts at N.Y.U. (Susan Sontag, whom he befriended when he interviewed her for a Naples newspaper, wrote a glowing letter when he was up for tenure in 2003.) Since 1999 he's worked for various Italian government entities promoting Italian film abroad.

Back on Capri, the pleasures of Mondo Monda didn't disappoint. There were dinners at seafood restaurants on the marina and casually elegant parties at the houses of local gentry. The writer Isabel Fonseca, who attended with her husband, Martin Amis, recalled one afternoon excursion. "A beautiful schooner took us to the Bay of Positano and to lunch on a private island belonging to a cheerful hotelier and his salami heiress wife," Fonseca wrote in an e-mail message. The boat had "a charming nymphet among its crew, and the captain was a dead ringer for the Franco-Hellenic singer Georges Moustaki."

In a way, the Capri festival is its own kind of private island. As such, it's not entirely aimed at the broad reading public. Still, Monda has big plans for the future. "My dream is to get Cormac McCarthy, Alice Munro and Philip Roth," he said. Those three rarely agree to public appearances, but Monda hasn't given up hope. After all, he said with a shrug, "I think they'd have fun."

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