



Family Ties

By Maria Garcia

Photos courtesy of THINKFilm Company

Young Accio (Elio Germano) studies while older brother Manrico (Riccardo Scarmaccio) greets girlfriend Francesca (Diane Fleri).

“My Brother Is an Only Child” explores family, faith and Italian culture during the 1960s.

Italians of a certain age, forged in the crucible of *la famiglia*, may harbor doubts about the foundation of contemporary Italian society. “Mio Fratello è Figlio Unico” (“My Brother is an Only Child”) will dispel them. Daniele Luchetti’s timeless celebration of the Italian family, adapted from the novel “Il Fasciocomunista” by Antonio Pennacchi, is set in the tumultuous 1960s. It is the story of Accio, the younger of two sons in the Benassi family. When the film opens, Accio (Elio Germano), who has a gift for Latin, is studying for the priesthood.

Accio’s brother, Manrico (Riccardo Scarmaccio), a Communist activist, visits him in the seminary with the aim of convincing him to give up his religious

studies. Manrico gives Accio a photo of a scantily dressed woman and, afterward, Accio commits a mortal sin. When he asks his confessor for forgiveness, the priest immediately grants absolution, but Accio argues that he will continue to commit this sin, and that he deserves punishment for it. The priest explains that his urges are natural and no occasion for harsh judgment. Accio, a purist at heart, declares the Church corrupt and his education for the priesthood a sham.

Accio leaves the seminary and returns home to Latina, a village on the outskirts of Rome, to find that little has changed there. His mother (Angela Finocchiaro), dour in the best of times, is especially ill-tempered over their dilapidated house, which the government has long promised to replace. His sister Violetta (Alba Rohrwacher) has usurped his room, and his father (Massimo Popolizio) admits that he’s disappointed in Accio’s decision to leave the seminary. Manrico, secretly pleased that his brother has changed course, nevertheless continues to act like an elder brother, keeping alive their sibling rivalry.

Luchetti, who co-wrote the script, will have his American theatrical premier with “Mio Fratello,” which opened in April. In a telephone conversation from Rome in February, the 47-year-old writer-director discussed both this film and his childhood fascination with movies. “In the late 1960s, my grandparents lived in a popular neighborhood in Rome with a cinema that showed a different movie each day.” ➤



When Accio realizes Manrico may abandon Francesca, his long suppressed desire for her erupts in a brief, passionate kiss.



Luchetti says. “I would go to the first screening of the day with my grandparents, and I would stay for the second screening with my aunt and uncle. The third screening I would watch with my parents. This was my first step toward realizing my great passion.” Luchetti, who still lives in Rome with his wife and 10-year-old son, has directed and written eight feature films and directed two feature-length documentaries.

The filmmaker used a documentary-like approach for the shoot, which took place entirely on location in Puglia. “My instructions to the cameraman were that every set had to be lit so that it could be shot from any angle,” Luchetti explains. “The guiding principle was that there not be any kind of technical limitation on the actors. In fact, I would not allow the camera operator to observe the scene before he started shooting it. So, the first time the actors performed the scene for the camera with the camera operator, it was fresh.” The movie’s performances tested the technique and the result is uniformly excellent. The lack of restriction on the actors, combined with cinematographer Claudio Collepicolino’s preference for a hand-held camera, results in a cinematic style that perfectly matches the plot’s whimsical spirit.

“Mio Fratello” is a comedy in the classic Italian sense of that word. “These are comedies that are about tragic events,” Luchetti explains. “Whereas in most cultures comedy is about funny things and tragedy is about tragic, dramatic events, in Italy,



Accio and Francesca attend a student rally led by Manrico.

comedies are about tragedies.” The jocosity in “Mio Fratello” derives mostly from Accio’s determination to distinguish himself in a family where he is the baby, trounced on by his siblings, and misunderstood by his working-class parents. After leaving the seminary, Accio befriends Mario Natri (Luca Zingaretti), a Fascist, and under his affectionate and often hilarious tutelage, the boy joins the Fascist Party. While Manrico heroically organizes the town’s factory workers, and Violetta distinguishes herself as a cellist, Accio, prevented from continuing his Latin studies by his parents, goes about creating havoc in the family and in town.

Despite their separate paths, Manrico and Accio remain close, and the family weathers all the challenges which threaten its stability, including Accio’s activities for the *Fascisti*. When Manrico disappears for fear of being arrested, and tragedy strikes, it’s Accio who upholds *la famiglia* and who ensures its future. Luchetti explains that in adapting the screenplay, which he wrote with Sandro Petraglia and Stefano Rulli (“Best of Youth”), it was necessary to create a narrative structure, which the novel lacked, but at the same time to retain Pennacchi’s emotional authenticity. “His story wasn’t told from the point of view of some particular ideology,” Luchetti says, “but from the experience of a single individual.” Luchetti skillfully maintains Accio’s point of view throughout so that the era and its politics simply provide a backdrop for the real drama, which is the emotional life of the family.

During the course of the film, Mario’s wife Bella—Anna Bonaiuto in an especially notable performance—seduces Accio, and in the affair that follows, the boy becomes a man. The man, who all the while has been carrying a torch for Francesca (Diane Fleri), Manrico’s girlfriend, finally confronts the limitations placed on him by geography, personality, and by his own parents who refused him the classical education he was meant to have by virtue of his intellect. In the end, Accio realizes his heroic potential when he rights a long-standing wrong and confronts the corruption in his home town. “I have a great deal of affection for these characters,” Luchetti admits. “That’s the tone of that film, too. You love them even when they do something really stupid.” ▲