An interview with Marcellino de Baggis, writer and director of Quintosole

Marc Wells
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In September the WSWS posted a review of Quintosole *(*"An honest look at the lives of Italian inmates"*), a documentary by Italian filmmaker Marcellino de Baggis, on the social and psychological implications of the founding of a soccer team established behind bars at the Milano-Opera maximum security prison.*

While soccer provides the narrative thread, the central issues are introduced by the inmates themselves. The film permits them a rare opportunity to expose the real conditions of prison life and discuss the issue of confinement.

This self-financed effort is being offered as a free Creative Commons License download from http://www.quintosole.com/english.htm.

Marc Wells of the WSWS spoke recently to the writer and director of Quintosole, *Marcellino de Baggis.*

Marc Wells: What inspired you to make a movie about a prison?

Marcellino de Baggis: I'm not particularly fond of television shows that often deal with difficult social issues such as prison, drug addiction, etc., in a way that's too direct and tactless. Television often sensationalizes everything, trivializing real life drama with the sole purpose of attracting audiences. In FreeOpera, the Milano-Opera inmates' soccer team, I found the nearly unrepeatable opportunity to address a subject like prison from the inmates' standpoint of hope and a will to live, not that of desperation that a sequestered life can represent.

MW: To make a film relying on personal financial means is a courageous task that shows dedication to the art: how did you manage to accomplish it?

MDB: *Quintosole* took a year to realize, between six months of filming and six months of editing and post-production. It was a monumental commitment that required financial, physical and psychological sacrifices. You rightfully speak of an act of courage and dedication to the art, especially when considering that in Italy documentaries have virtually no commercial outlet. However, as I truly believed in the project, self-financing became the only viable way to realize my idea. The upside in cases like this is the complete independence and opportunity to express freely one's ideas without commercial or political boundaries. I keep hoping that my movie may reach as many people as possible.I also hope that my effort will pay off financially, creating future opportunities.

MW: What has the response to the film been?

MDB: In April 2005 I began a tour of Italian penitentiaries on which I showed my film. The response was overwhelming. The inmates felt that the movie truly represented their condition, helping them to speak out and express their thoughts, while avoiding any false rhetoric. Later I started distributing the movie on my site—www.quintosole.com—through a free Creative Commons License. It was downloaded by more than 800 people around the world and won several prizes and received special reviews in various festivals.

MW: How was your daily experience with inmates as well as prison personnel?

MDB: In jail a new person sticks out in the crowd, it's impossible not to be noticed and observed. After only a few days everyone knew why I was there and what I was doing. I spoke to many people, both inmates and guards, and I realized that for them I represented an "exhaust valve," as if I were their link to the outside world. For them it was crucial that I understood what life in jail truly meant.

I met diverse people and discovered that prejudices about both inmates and guards are often a distortion of reality. Not all inmates feel innocent or abused, like not all guards regard inmates as social waste, worthy of punishment without the right to rehabilitation or to human dignity. All and all, I shot only a few hours of footage, considering I spent six months inside. The reason is that I spent far more time talking than filming, so I could thoroughly understand what was either a burning issue worthy of being documented or what was instead superfluous or, even worse, what tended to be prejudicial.

MW: Was there an inmate or a guard in particular who had an indelible impact on you?

MDB: I must say that everyone gave me some kind of insight. I know it sounds rather commonplace, but it's the truth. Someone who's lived in prison, even for a short time, has absorbed something from that environment that renders him different from "normal" people, and I'm referring to both guards and inmates. I will never forget the feeling of "captive rage" that many of the people manifest.

However, if I had to single out one person, I'd talk about Mario. He was able to explain in a sober, simple and direct way

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such difficult concepts as freedom, deprivation, solitude and sadness in a prison, ideas that I wouldn't have been able to grasp on my own before.

MW: What's the relevance of the movie in today's situation, especially in light of the current government and policies such as the Bossi-Fini immigration law? [Named after right-wing politicians Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini, this reactionary law allows for the quick expulsion, arrest and imprisonment of immigrants.]

MDB: After the *Quintosole* project, I started working on a series of FOX Italia documentaries about state police in a Rome police station. In jail I met many non-European Union inmates and I understood, on the basis of their high percentage, how legally vulnerable they were.

Lately, following police work during my current project I've started to grasp how serious the issue of immigration has become. I've understood how the Bossi-Fini law is an extreme attempt of a purely political nature to resolve a problem that the country has long ignored and poorly handled. Large sections of the population view a non-EU immigrant as a criminal, a despicable individual, solely on the basis of an appearance that is typical of someone who's economically disadvantaged.

Civil duty and open-mindedness mean not only opening the borders and allowing anyone to enter the country freely. It also entails implementing a policy that can guarantee that these people will receive help once they arrive in Italy. One of the problems with the law is that it enforces the expulsion of illegal immigrants, while the state theoretically lacks police personnel to implement such a measure. However, the state sometimes will deport masses of immigrants for the sole purpose of political gain.

MW: What's the role of cinema in social life?

MDB: A difficult question ... I'm convinced that the nature of cinema was initially shaped by the desire to entertain, almost like a game between the public and the filmmaker who wanted to amuse the audiences with a new, magical media. With time, it represented an opportunity for expression, becoming an art form.

However, it has grown to be mainly a huge commercial industry. It's quite arduous to reconcile serious subjects like the jail system with the need of amusing the audiences. I believe there are vast sections of the population that may enjoy mere entertainment, but they also rely on cinema to better understand the world that surrounds them.

I'd like to quote one of Mario's lines: "If I were to choose a position on the soccer team I'd be the goalie, because he has a complete vision of the field ... it's true, he has great responsibility and is always on guard, but what would life be if you didn't ask yourself many questions?"

To have fun, to be entertained is a healthy activity, however, cinema and TV ought to offer programs that deeply inquire into reality. The authors' responsibility is to handle subjects seriously and thoroughly, not superficially, and to offer the viewer the chance to be able to judge for himself without any attempt to taint reality for political or propagandistic purposes and without exploiting drama and pain for the sole end of attracting larger audiences.

MW: Who would you consider to be your main artistic influences?

MDB: Mainly, [former convict and writer] Edward Bunker, but also [novelist and screenwriter Giancarlo] De Cataldo and documentarist Joris Ivens. Bunker has taught me about prison with realism, without any exaggeration; De Cataldo allowed me to better understand a criminal's life choices; Ivens taught me that a director can use the camera to tell about reality, even if the theme is fictional.

MW: Italian cinema has had a glorious past. What do you think of Italian cinema today?

MDB: I think that political decisions, television and cronyism are ruining Italian cinema. I believe that if financial means were more available, we could still be the front lines. We are very talented with little money; however, it's often humiliating having to work in compromising conditions dictated by the market.

MW: Why do you think cinema has, with few exceptions, been avoiding burning social and political issues?

MDB: It doesn't always avoid them, however they are often handled with banality and with contempt for pain and suffering. Politics are influencing our cinema and our television.

MW: Are you planning to make more movies in the style of *Quintosole*?

MDB: At the moment I don't have any plans for a new documentary. I do have various ideas, but to me making a documentary is like falling in love. Only when I feel real passion for a subject do I throw myself into a project. Then I don't permit any obstacles to keep me from accomplishing what I have in mind.

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