

THE HAUNTED WORLD OF DOMIZIANO ARCANGELI

As Told To Alan Doshna

It has been lamented that the golden era of Italian cinema—represented by such acknowledged artists as Federico Fellini and Liliana Cavani as well as such critically underappreciated but-equally beloved genre directors as Umberto Lenzi and Lucio Fulci—has given way to more generic fare in recent decades. One actor who has worked with many of these old masters has made it his mission to recapture some of their spirit by launching a new wave of films created with the same style and soul; the difference is that these new films are being done in the United States, utilizing both Italian and American talent in front of and behind the camera. In a chat conducted on the set of *Brides of Sodom*, actor-producer Domiziano Arcangeli, 43, shares with us his passion for Italian cinema.

AL DOSHNA You began your career as a child actor in Italy on stage and TV. Was this something you wanted to do or were you encouraged by your parents?

DOMIZIANO ARCANGELI No. I was not encouraged by my parents at all. At the time it was actually sort of a fight, because I was underage and needed permission. But it was a little bit of a complicated situation. My parents split. I was living with my grandmother and aunt in Rome when I started, after Helmut Newton, the famous photographer, saw me by chance, took some pictures of me and showed them around. There was a little bit of controversy because they were great, artistic pictures showing just my back or some of my legs but, you know, I was undressed, under age at 12. So he made a little bit of a *controversia* here. I was hired by Italian National Television for a children's program where I was reading compositions by children all over Italy. It took away a little bit from that image of a child being photographed, exploited by Helmut Newton. By age 14 I was basically independent, making my own money and having my own place. Of course, I had a supervisor and my grandmother and my aunt were always very involved with my life.

AD Fellini took an interest in you early on. Could you tell us about your relationship?

DA I'm so fortunate and so grateful to just have had the opportunity to meet someone of real genius. I don't really know what he thought about me. Some days I thought he just despised me or just thought I was the son of this 1960s generation and he looked at me like a phenomenon or an exotic animal in a cage. Some other days it was really sweet. He directed one of my first screen tests for a

movie that was being directed by one of his protégés and he was helping him out with the casting and later on he called me for a small role in one of his last movies, *Intervista*, with Marcello Mastroianni.

AD What was your experience like working on *Intervista*, which also included Anita Ekberg?

DA Well, I didn't have scenes with Anita Ekberg, although I met her separately out of that set and she was nothing but sweet. Marcello Mastroianni I met on set and he was, in my mind still, one of the most incredible gentlemen I've ever met in my whole life. He had something very uncommon, which is style, pure style, the way he walked, the way he looked at you with interest, always engaged, never feeling superior, just a generous person and very easy. Unfortunately, Italian cinema is not like that anymore. We had all these great genius directors still active in the '80s. And then all these great directors like Liliana Cavani, Tinto Brass...I can't believe that within ten-fifteen years it's been so corrupted and declined. They disappeared. It's very sad.

AD You worked with Sean Connery when you were very young. What was that like?

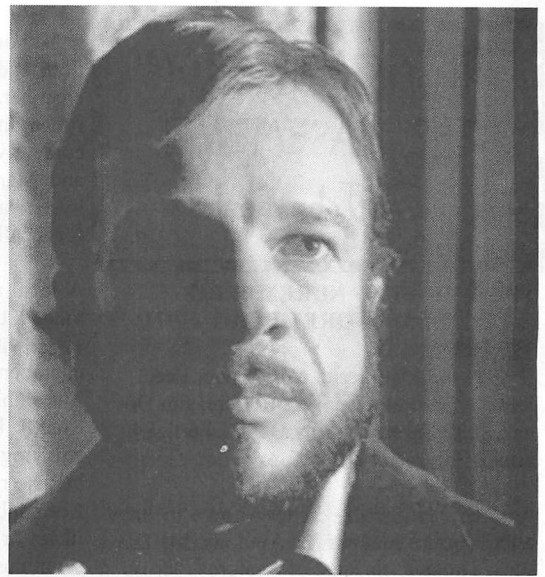
DA Yeah, very briefly with Sean Connery in *The Name of the Rose*. I was a really young priest that falls out of the tower at the beginning of the movie, and one scene with him that was cut, unfortunately, from the final version. But, yeah, another great man.

AD Mickey Rourke was someone else you had worked with.

DA Mickey Rourke was really nice at the time. I worked with him a lot—we had several scenes in *Francesco*, which was shot over a long, long period, over six months, I think, between winter and summer in 1988. Helena Bonham Carter was also in the movie. It was made by Liliana Cavani, an extremely subversive director from *The Night Porter*, so it was sort of a very controversial movie. It had Mickey Rourke, just out of *9½ Weeks* and *Angel Heart*, playing St. Francis of Assisi, and shows him sort of in a strong way, not this little thing that everybody imagines him. It did very well internationally. We were shooting in the mountains for a week, and he had a scene where St. Francis of Assisi took consciousness of the world around himself and just goes naked into the snow. He rolls over and he did it over and over and over without complaint, probably from his strong Actor's Studio method background. Everybody—a crew of up to 200, including extras—we were just stunned.

AD You are able to act in four different languages. Can you tell us what that's like?

DA Well, it's a challenge. I do well with Italian,



Domiziano Arcangeli: *House of Flesh Mannequins*.

of course, because it's my first language since I was brought up there and then at this point I would say secondly English, because I'm staying here. I do well with French and Spanish as well. I'd been doing French really well back as a teenager when I was living in Europe. Now that I live here, I've lost a little bit. If I were going back to a French film, I would have to work on it.

AD Your credits are almost like a who's who of noted genre directors. What was your experience with Jesus Franco like?

DA Oh, he's a poet in his own way. I always liked him a lot. I did one, *Flowers of Perversion*, in 2005, filmed in Mexico. He's a great character. He's a true prolific genre director who has a soul. He's a very nice man also.

AD What made you decide to come to the U.S. from Italy?

DA Well, the crisis in Italy was just devastating. There's a lot of really bad miniseries or TV series. Also, there's a little bit of corruption in the system. I mean, it's very political. You work if you are sort of part of a political party. And if you work for them they will kind of find you a role or a contract. That's why those movies are in a little crisis. They say, "Oh well, the American blockbusters, they destroyed us." No, it's not only that. American films were there before this. It's just the lack of interest for real talent. I was actually very depressed and I had a crisis for a while; I even doubted I wanted to go on. And just when I was really doing bad, this Russian director, Lev Dodin, hired me for an international tour for a play, which was a beautiful show. We played for seven months in St. Petersburg, then toured the whole world from China to Broadway for 2½ years. After that I decided, no, I can't go back to Rome now and try to do whatever it is there, so let me go and see how it is in Los Angeles. I have an American passport, after all, by birth. So I might as well try. And I felt at home.

AD When did you first envision that you would like to be a producer?

DA Well, when I came here, I must be very grateful to Zalman King because he cast me in a Showtime series called **Chromium Blue**. It did okay. Now actually it's being rediscovered by some. It wasn't like the smash we were hoping, but we shot for two years in Spain, Luxembourg and L.A. It was my first real American job for Showtime, then I started doing a few independents. One especially was really good, **Sin's Kitchen**, with Jeffrey Wright, who I admired very much. I found myself a little bit in jeopardy—I'm aging, I'm not young anymore, but I cannot play an adult. I'm always wondering what a casting director will tell me and you have to take on everything pretty much that comes. This is sort of a fragile position to be in. What can I do to establish myself since I'm not in movies so much? It seems natural to me that I should put a project together. So I found this guy in Rome, actually, and his producer was the son of Joe D'Amato, one of the producers I had worked with in the past. They had this script that they wanted me to act in and I said, "No, I want to produce it." It was **House of Flesh Mannequins**. It's been voted #3 horror of the year in Italy after **Let the Right One In**. I also really believe in **Brides of Sodom**. And **Orgy of Blood**, the first one I did with [filmmaker] Creep Creepersin. Then I've done another movie that I'm really proud of, **Virus X**; I executive-produced and play a role as a humanoid. It's a virus outbreak type of film. Sybil Danning is in the movie, another great actress from those fabulous years, who was enthusiastic to become part of this project. I'm her creation in the movie. She has not a lot of screen time but she has a villain role. I haven't enough words to describe her, she's still a beautiful lady. We had so many friends in common from the days, you know. We keep talking for hours, even when we call each other at home because, so many memories.

AD You have recently worked on a number of films with Creep Creepersin, including **Brides of Sodom**. How did you come to work with him?

DA We met on the L.A. independent underground horror scene and became good friends and I said, "We need to make a movie together because I love your work." He told me, "Well, I'm very interested in your projects, although I want to make them a little bigger." He normally shoots with three or four people. So we discussed it and came up with this idea of a vampire movie, **Brides of Sodom**.

AD Besides being executive producer, **Orgy of Blood** is your first credited work as a writer. Had you always wanted to write?

DA No, I don't trust myself enough. I had this idea for **Orgy of Blood**. I told Creep and Creep wrote the screenplay. They're just from my ideas. I was a huge fan of the '60s, '70s extremely stylized vampire films, Antonio Margheriti's **Seven Deaths in the Cat's Eye**, **The Legend of Blood Castle** with Lucia Bosc and Ewa Aulin from **Candy**. They had the great gothic atmosphere with these beautiful people. I'm inspired by that and some comics like **Vampirella**, which was a huge erotic comic strip back when I was growing up. It's more of the decadence and the romance and this impossibility of love that vampires supposedly have, and it comes up to perversion because when you can't really love you are a perv, because you can't love. And I also want to try to go a little deeper with characterization. Genre films with a heart.

AD You have talked about doing "genre films with a heart" and that some of the directors that you have worked with such as Umberto Lenzi and Lucio Fulci "gave a soul" to genre films. Could you explain that a little bit more?

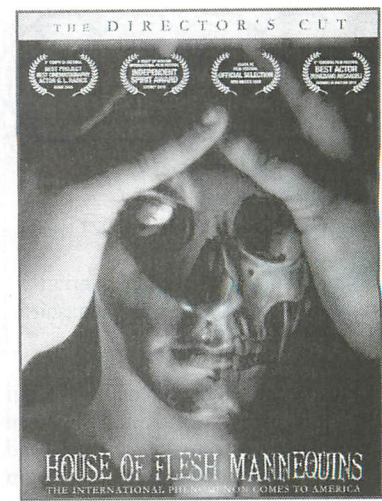
DA Every one was extremely talented. Lenzi was difficult to talk to and Lucio was screaming all the time but when they were on set they were wizards, considering what they had. Even if they weren't so initially friendly or approachable, they were certainly great artists. You know, they were considered like B, C filmmakers at the time. Only now they've finally been rediscovered and reevaluated. But initially they weren't. People didn't think much of them. They were exploitation films, but they would make money for international markets, they would sell well, and that's why we were making them. In Italy the critics were against them and everybody was almost feeling guilty, a "guilty pleasure," when you see one of those at the cinemas.

AD In what way do you see yourself adding these elements to your films?

DA We're trying to make genre films that have great style, that have strong impact, and present subject matters that are not touched on very often. And that would be a great way of making it through the market. They want some romantic film or some huge action film or some tearjerker, they have plenty made by the studios with big stars. We must work with some shocking new groundbreaking material to make it through.

AD Quentin Tarantino has brought about a greater awareness of Italian genre films, both in his work, such as **Inglorious Basterds**, and in his interviews. Any thoughts about that?

DA When I saw **Reservoir Dogs** and then **Pulp Fiction**, I loved the style because it reminded me of the style used by some of the directors I had worked with the decade before. Then I found out that he was doing a lot of work to bring them back. I know he loves one of the actors I worked with as my costar in **House of Flesh Mannequins**, the Italian actor Giovanni Lombardo



Radice, also named John Morghen in **Cannibal Apocalypse**, **City of the Living Dead** by Lucio Fulci, and **Cannibal Ferox**.

AD **Flesh Mannequins** has a number of homages to **Peeping Tom**, which, as a side note, is said to be Martin Scorsese's favorite film.

DA Yeah, it was also my director's [Dbmiziano Cristopharo]. He's a huge admirer of Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell and that was a major inspiration for the film.

AD In the upcoming **Box of Shadows**, you are working with Ford Austin, who directed and starred as Jeffrey Dahmer in **Dahmer vs. Gacy**.

DA Ford Austin plays a detective in **Box of Shadows**. It turned out to be a real surreal movie, I would say a step maybe beyond genre movies; it deals with crystal meth addiction and losing yourself in that world and becoming sort of a zombie, sort of a metaphor for it.

AD Is there a film of yours that is a favorite?

DA That I worked on? I love a movie I did a long time ago which was not a genre movie, just a drama about a young boy being hooked on drugs. It was called **The Boy from Ebalus** and was directed by Guiseppe Schito in 1984. It did very well at the Venice Film Festival and I costarred with a cult actress who became a close friend at the time, Teresa Savoy, who was the star of the movies **Salon Kitty** and **Caligula**. We became so close we ended up actually sharing an apartment for a while. That was my first real role, breakthrough. It was an art-house film, but it was widely appreciated in Europe at the time.

AD Do you have a dream project that you hope to work on?

DA Well, there are a few directors that I would love to work with: John Cameron Mitchell, Paul Thomas Anderson, and also the director of **The Cell** with Jennifer Lopez and **The Foreigner**, Tarsem Singh. His work reminds me of Fellini. I met him and we talked about making something together. So who knows? We'll see! ☺