



CONTENTS

- 4 **Cast and Crew**
- 7 **Paradise Lost (2016)**
by Roberto Curti
- 14 **About the Restoration**



CAST

Joe Dallesandro as Aldo
Stefania Casini as Luciana
Benito Artesi as Ciriaco
Ferdinando Murolo as Carlo
and with **Raymond Pellegrin** as Don Enrico

CREW

Story and Screenplay
Pasquale Squitieri
in collaboration with
Carlo Rivolta

Music
Franco Campanino

Film Editor
Mauro Bonanni

Director of Photography
Eugenio Bentivoglio

Directed by
Pasquale Squitieri





PARADISE LOST

by Roberto Curti

By the mid-Seventies, Pasquale Squitieri was one of Italy's most popular filmmakers. He was also one of the most controversial. Born in Naples in 1938, Squitieri had debuted behind the camera with the little-seen drama *Io e Dio* (1969), financed by Vittorio De Sica, followed by a pair of Westerns signed with the pseudonym 'William Redford'. He attained box-office success with two violent dramas set in his hometown, *Gang War in Naples (Camorra)*, 1972), starring Fabio Testi, and *Blood Brothers (I guappi)*, 1974), starring Testi, Franco Nero and Claudia Cardinale. Yet, he was, and would remain, an outsider, barely tolerated by some and treated adversely by many. Tabloids and critics alike looked suspiciously at such a hot-blooded filmmaker, whose personality seemed to mirror the excessive, individualistic nature of his movies, which touched contentious topics and were not afraid to go against the common mood. As a result, Squitieri's turbulent private life, his militant political views and his love affair with Cardinale often catalysed the journalists' attention instead of the inner qualities of his work.

For *The Climber*, his seventh feature film, Squitieri returned to a present day setting after the period drama *Blood Brothers* (a huge hit in Italy, with over 2.2 billion lire grossed at the box-office). The exemplary story of one man's rise and fall in the underworld was a means with which to attempt a socio-cultural study on the escalation of the small-time criminality in the big cities, with the tools of genre filmmaking: "The theme of the movie [...] is exactly the young suburban boys' ambition to have access to the city's wealth. In the suburbs, in the ever-growing suburban areas, what penetrates is not well-being, but its advertising. Wealth stays in Eden, that is the city," he explained to the press.¹

The Climber can be considered the third part of a trilogy comprising the similarly-plotted *Gang War in Naples* and *Blood Brothers*. Whereas with the latter film he had exposed the historical and political causes (and, in particular, the connivance of the State) that led to the spreading of the *Camorra* in Naples at the end of the 19th century, with *The Climber* Squitieri attempted a study that had more than passing resemblance to Pier Paolo Pasolini's discourse on the anthropological mutation of the underclass in contemporary society. "Those who stay in the suburbs are misfits," he pointed out. "City is still a myth, but a concrete one, as it represents wealth, money, power, both for the legal society

¹ - Costanzo Costantini, 'Squitieri affronta la 'mala' romana', *Il Messaggero*, August 1, 1975.

and the deviant one. It's a cultural issue. Advertising serves consumer society in such a pounding way that it creates a state of inferiority and frustration in the suburban bands of the population, which makes even more acute the need to reach Eden."²

This is what Aldo, Squitieri's climber, craves. He is a small-time smuggler who works for a Neapolitan kingpin. He tries to cut some profit for himself, but is exposed, beaten and chased away from the Garden of Eden by a vindictive God with the face of Raymond Pellegrin, Squitieri's choice for the *Camorra* boss in *Gang War in Naples* as well. And, like Lucifer on his fall from paradise lost, he vows revenge.

The mythical, symbolic angle of the story was not lost on Squitieri. His Lucifer had the awesome features of Joe Dallesandro, the fallen angel of American underground cinema. The Italian-American actor had become a well-known name in Italy even before audiences saw one single frame from one of his films. When distributor Alberto Grimaldi submitted Paul Morrissey's *Trash* (1970) to the board of censors, two years after its making, in a version supervised by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the movie was banned outright, causing a sensation and ample press coverage. Even though Pasolini himself had broken the taboo of male genitals on screen with *The Decameron* (*Il Decameron*, 1971), Dallesandro's many nude scenes were found as offensive as the foul language, drug use and Holly Woodlawn's simulated masturbation with a bottle, and when the movie was finally released in an abridged version, the actor's nudity was concealed by way of optical reframing.

The controversy surrounding *Trash* had a key part in convincing Carlo Ponti in putting money in the two grotesque horror films Paul Morrissey shot in Italy starring Dallesandro, 1973's *Flesh for Frankenstein* (in turn temporarily banned in Italy) and 1974's *Blood for Dracula*. Saluted like a true movie star, Dallesandro wisely chose to relocate to Rome. He would become a recurrent presence in Italian and European cinema of the mid-to-late Seventies, from grim crime films like *Seasons for Assassins* (*Il tempo degli assassini*, 1975), directed by Marcello Andrei; *The Savage Three* (*Fango bollente*, 1975), directed by Vittorio Salerno and produced by Squitieri; and *Madness* (*Vacanze per un massacro*, 1980) directed by Fernando di Leo; to arthouse fare such as Louis Malle's *Black Moon* (1975), Serge Gainsbourg's *Je t'aime moi non plus* (1976) and Walerian Borowczyk's *La Marge* (1976).

The former Factory superstar was not Squitieri's first choice for the role of Aldo. The director had originally considered Fabio Testi, but was not convinced: "It was difficult for me to picture Testi playing the son of an American sailor and a Neapolitan prostitute. [...] Physically, someone like Lou Castel would have been good for *The Climber*. My main character was not a leader, but a miserable petty thief who lived day by day. [...] In that

2 - Costanzo Costantini, 'Squitieri affronta la "mala" romana', *Il Messaggero*, August 1, 1975.

period, I used to watch Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's films at the Filmstudio in Rome. To me Joe Dallesandro was an icon, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to have him in one of my films, because to me he was unreachable. [...] But eventually I got in touch with Joe through a journalist friend, and he was happy to be part of the project."³

Indeed, Dallesandro has the *physique du rôle* – charismatic, utterly believable as a lowlife who has sworn revenge against the world, and with a sinister side that continually turns up under his striking looks. Unlike *Gang War in Naples*, which revolved around a sympathetic hero, *The Climber* centres on a squalid and unpleasant protagonist, an angel of death who brings destruction and ruin and meets a series of seedy, ambiguous, repellent characters along the way, such as the sleazy homosexual fence who makes a pass at the young man while asking him to carry out a hit. Similarly, the gang Aldo recruits is a projection of the man's will of revenge: a bunch of misfits and losers whom he gives the chance to move to the other side, that of those who have the power.⁴ Together they form an unholy group of apostles surrounding their dark messiah, and Squitieri even throws in a visual reference to the last supper, just before his antihero's inevitable comeuppance.

The Climber does not pull any punches when it comes to delivering the goods, and the script lines up a succession of over-the-top set pieces: brawls, fistfights, shootouts, explosions. Action-wise, it is on a par with any Italian crime movie of the period, although Squitieri purportedly went for a rough look, with plenty of zooms and long shots, as to capture the immediacy and realism of the story, and portray "a ragged reality that mirrors the protagonist's insecurity and violence".⁵ The opening sequence is emblematic and it shows Squitieri's keen eye in depicting the mechanisms of the Neapolitan underworld. Aldo picks up crates of cigarettes from the ships at large of the Naples dock and carries them on a speedboat to an isolated harbour where they are distributed to a net of retailers: a human chain of smugglers pass along the crates from the speedboat to their cars that leave one by one at full speed before the police arrive. It will be the blueprint for a number of similar scenes in Italian crime films set in Naples – from Alfonso Brescia's *The New Godfathers* (*I contrabbandieri di Santa Lucia*, 1979) to Lucio Fulci's *Contraband* (*Luca il contrabbandiere*, 1980).

Violence is brutal and uncompromising. Squitieri often resorts to slow-motion in a nod to Sam Peckinpah, and portrays the many violent scenes with an ambiguous fascination that is typical of many Italian films of the period: most memorable are a wild brawl in a disco, filmed with a striking wide-angle backward tracking shot, complete with a disco song in

3 - Domenico Monetti, *Pasquale Squitieri. Un autore di cinema... e non solo* (Naples: Guida, 2009), p. 55.

4 - Viewers will recognise many unknown soldiers of Italian cinema, such as Ferdinando Murolo, Giovanni Cianfriglia, Piero Torrisi, Bruno Di Luia, Enrico Maisto, Claudio Ruffini and Lorenzo Piani.

5 - Francesco Savio, *Il Mondo*, April 3, 1975.



the background, and the outstanding scene of the rival bikers' ill-fated ambush against Aldo's gang. The latter scene and Aldo's savage stabbing of the fence were trimmed in order for the movie to obtain a visa, with a V.M.18 (forbidden to minors) rating, which partly harmed the film's box-office potential. The story's utter bleakness did the rest: with only 638 million lire, *The Climber* was a commercial disappointment. It took two years until Squitieri returned behind the camera, with one of his best efforts, *I Am the Law (Il prefetto di ferro, 1977)*, a period Mafia drama starring Giuliano Gemma.

Largely overlooked by the critics at the time of its release, *The Climber* has stood the test of time better than other Squitieri films. For one thing, it accurately depicts the changing face of Naples' *Camorra*, from smuggling to drug trafficking; and it also shows Rome's suburbs as a no man's land which will soon become the terrain for the rise to power of ruthless gangs, most notably the so-called "*Banda della Magliana*" (the subject of Giancarlo De Cataldo's 2002 novel *Romanzo criminale*, adapted for the screen in 2005 by Michele Placido and later the inspiration for a popular TV series of the same name by Stefano Sollima). This was likely the result of Squitieri's collaboration with journalist Carlo Rivolta, well-known for his articles on drug trafficking and on the advent of heroin in the Italian market.

Aldo's rise to the top, first by putting together his 'army' in Rome and then moving back to Naples to take control of the nightclub racket and confront his 'unholy father' Don Enrico, allows Squitieri to examine the changing balance of power in the Italian underworld, through an utterly pessimistic vision. There is no room for honour, respect and loyalty, and the police is utterly absent from the scene. Such a wild Eden, apparently so easy to conquer and rule, is even easier to lose, and the difference between Aldo and the Don is that the latter knows all too well that he is no god at all, and that his power is merely apparent. "You'll get rid of me but there are hundreds just like me [...] my death is insignificant. Do you really think when I'm dead that you have proved that you are stronger?" Don Enrico asks Aldo during their final confrontation, adding: "No, because I'm nobody, and you would have gained nothing my boy, let me assure you, *niente!*" before being mercilessly dispatched. Squitieri does away with the boss' demise with an ellipsis, showing only the blood splattered on the wall: a moment that is neither epic nor cathartic, and which, as predicted, leads to an illusive turnover.

Aldo's stay on top of the world lasts the blink of an eye, and his end comes in the form of the enigmatic hitman whom we first see at the border between Italy and Yugoslavia, and who drives to his destination carrying a caravan behind his car. First, though, Squitieri underlines the futility of the climber's idea of success, consisting of elegant clothes, costly wines, and big and shiny vehicles. The sight of Aldo driving his Rolls Royce through Naples' narrow alleys, sniffing coke and handing bills to street urchins in a vivid display of wealth, is one of

Squitieri's many striking visual stabs at his protagonist. Once he has savoured big time, we often see him sitting, sipping champagne, bored to death and not admitting it to himself, oblivious even to the one person who really loves him.

As Aldo's unfortunate lover, Luciana, Squitieri cast Stefania Casini, with whom Dallesandro was having a passionate romance. The character of Luciana emphasises the director's reliance on melodrama, a constant of his work and a prominent element in *Gang War in Naples* and *Blood Brothers* as well: seduced, exhibited like a trophy, then put aside, drowning her unhappiness in alcohol, Luciana's descent from supermarket cashier to unwilling woman-object is heart-wrenching. She is used, abused and betrayed, and ultimately driven to a miserable end that solicits the director's pity. The bitter irony of *The Climber* is that in fact Aldo had already found his true Eden, that first night when Luciana picked him up and offered him shelter, comprehension and love. He had found it, and never even realised it.

Roberto Curti is the author of Italian Crime Filmography 1968-1980, Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1959-1969 as well as other books and essays on Italian cinema. He lives in Cortona, Italy.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Climber (L'Ambizioso) was restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound.

All restoration work was carried out at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan and was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master.

Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved.

The original Italian mono and English language soundtracks were transferred from the original optical sound negatives using the Sondor OMA/E with COSP Xi2K technology to minimise optical noise and produce the highest quality results possible. There are times in which audio synchronisation will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the soundtracks were recorded entirely in post-production. This is correct and as per the film's original theatrical release.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Restoration Services L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna

The original film and audio elements were made available for these restorations by Intramovies.

Special thanks to Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Diego Mercuriali, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Caterina Palpaceli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro, Giandomenico Zappa / L'Immagine Ritrovata, Paola Montavani / Intramovies

l'immagine
ritrovata
film restoration
& conservation



14

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni
Production Assistant Liane Cunje
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering David Mackenzie
Subtitling Engine House Media Services
Artist Chris Malbon
Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Brooke, Federico Caddeo, Paolo Corvino, Robert Curti,
Joe Dallesandro, Elijah Drenner, Steve Fenton, Stephen Jones,
Sigrid Larsen, Peter Svensson

15

