

BiBi Film
Isaria Productions
Rai Cinema

present

THE SALT OF LIFE

(Gianni e le Donne)

a film by

Gianni di Gregorio

Running Time: 90 minutes

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Cast

Gianni	Gianni Di Gregorio
Mother	Valeria di Franciscis Bendonì
Alfonso	Alfonso Santagata
Gianni's Wife	Elisabetta Piccolomini
Valeria	Valeria Cavalli
Alyn	Alyn Prandi
Cristina	Kristina Cepraga
Michelangelo	Michelangelo Ciminale
Teresa	Teresa Di Gregorio
Lilia	Lilia Silvi
Gabriella	Gabriella Sborgi
Twins	Laura Squizzato and Silvia Squizzato

Crew

Director	Gianni Di Gregorio
Screenplay	Gianni Di Gregorio, Valerio Attanasio
Producer	Angelo Barbagallo
Executive Producer	Gaetano Daniele
Director of Photography	Gogò Bianchi
Editor	Marco Spoletini
Composers	Ratchev e Carratello
Production Designer	Susanna Cascella
Costume Designer	Silvia Polidori
Sound	Gianluca Costamagna
1st Assistant Director	Guido Colla
Casting Directors	Fabiola Banzi, Francesca Borromeo
Production company	BiBi Film – Isaria Productions In collaboration with Rai Cinema

Synopsis

Logline

Gianni has many things to worry about but romance is not one of them until his friend Alfonso decides to reacquaint him with some of life's pleasures.

Short synopsis

House husband Gianni has many things to worry about while his retirement slips by doing boring chores for his wife, mother, daughter and pretty neighbour. But romance is not one of them. One day his old friend Alfonso, inspired by his own surprising sexual escapades, decides it's time for Gianni to get a girlfriend and reacquaint himself with some of life's pleasures.

Long synopsis

Gianni, a recently retired house husband has many things to worry about but romance is not one of them.

He lives with his wife and daughter in a small apartment in Rome. His days slip by walking his and his gorgeous neighbour's dogs, picking up cleaning and groceries, paying the bills under his wife's strict instructions, and being taken for granted by his daughter and her lazy, unemployed boyfriend, who seems to have moved in. His ancient mother, the aristocratically coiffed Valeria, a relic from a more glamorous era, lives with her pretty careworker Cristina in a huge villa. From her crumbling HQ, Valeria is swiftly draining Gianni's resources on poker, repairs and expensive champagne, and thinks nothing of making him cross town to fix the reception on her television.

One morning, his good friend Alfonso tells an astonished Gianni about his most recent sexual escapades. Somehow Gianni has completely failed to notice that his contemporaries are all taking a second bite of the cherry! Even old Maurizio who always wears a tracksuit has a younger lover.

Alfonso decides Gianni should take action, reinvigorate his life and get himself a girlfriend. But, despite his best efforts with some old female acquaintances interrupted by an endless stream of calls from his demanding mother and a dose of Viagra, poor old Gianni is like a rusty old motor. The spark is ignited but it is going to take a long time to get back him on the road to romance!

(Note: *The Salt of Life* in Italy is titled *Gianni e le Donne*)

The view from Trastevere: a lunch with Gianni Di Gregorio

What's the central focus or theme of the film? It seems to me that women play a significant role in the film, especially the mother who seems to be the most important and certainly the most intrusive female character? The Italian title (*Gianni e le Donne*) could almost be changed to *Gianni, His Mother and Other Women*.

In the film, I try to describe the confusion of a middle-aged man who realizes that women do not look at him like they used to. In this female universe the character of the mother emerges as being very powerful, once again. She's very much alive and present to my character, the only son of a widowed mother. She is much loved and often discussed, and I think many Mediterranean men feel their fates are directed, through life's ups and downs, by their mothers.

The cast here, as in *Mid-August Lunch*, is full of acutely rendered, original and eccentric characters, especially female characters. And all of them, including you, are addressed by their real-life names, as if to not separate the characters from the actors' actual selves. Can you explain the reasons for this?

Since my movies describe day to day life, I always try to work with actors that are as "genuine" as possible and that have exuberant personalities and a natural generosity which shows in their performance.

This is why the characters in the film continue to be called by their real names. There is a continuity between real life and fiction, and, as you suggest in your question, I don't want the actor's roles to detach them from their real-life personas. When this technique works, it allows you to capture some extraordinary moments.

In your films, there are recurring elements that, although apparently superficial, can almost be called co-stars: the food, the cooking, the lunches and dinners at the table, and the many glasses of white wine you consume! Are these touches narrative necessities? Do they simply reflect your personal passions or are they there to add to a 'home-made flavor'?

As a boy, I learned to cook out of necessity because my mother was a terrible cook. When I was older I started cooking seriously and I still cook for my family. Of course, I accompany the work with a good glass of wine! It's become a part of my life, which is why it's so important in my films.

The film is set in Trastevere, an unusual part of Rome which isn't seen on screen very often, even though it's in the very heart of the city. Why did you choose to set the film in this particular urban microcosm, where you were actually born and raised?

Being born and raised in Trastevere means I am very attached to the area. The people change over time, but the atmosphere is always magical.

My starting point is that I love my films to be close to reality, so it was an instinctive choice to set the movie in my world. It was my only choice really - probably because I don't move around much!

As a film director, you debuted late, although with immediate success. But over the years you have worked widely in the theater as an actor, and in film as an assistant director and scriptwriter. In what ways does all this experience influence your filmmaking?

I started out in theater. Then I jumped into film, doing many things, including extensive work as an assistant director. Then, yielding to the more shy and introverted side of my nature, I started writing, because it's a way of being involved in making films in which you don't have to expose yourself too much. Then, circumstances made me jump back out of the trench. But I'd say that all my previous experiences come together in my films.

As an actor, you always play the lead in your films. Would you act for other directors or are there writers you would love to work with?

As a teenager I studied directing and also acting, in a very serious school. I was completely committed to the passionate study of certain plays I saw as sacred. But when I went to class to give my interpretation of Macbeth or of Hamlet, everyone laughed. The teacher, Alessandro Fersen, would turn off the spotlight and send me back to my place. I was depressed for months. Finally, at the end of the year, Fersen said: "I am not disappointed in you, but you just cannot do these plays. You are a natural comedian. But do not despair, a comedian can do many things ..."

For years I didn't act, because I was shy and not as in love with myself as an actor should be, but now I'm taking advantage of Fersen's lesson. Like the actors I choose for my films, I play myself in my work. But I believe that if a director really wanted me for a project, I could commit to a role with all my strength. But it would always have to be something that made people laugh!

Gianni di Gregorio

Gianni Di Gregorio was born in Trastevere in Rome, where he still lives and works. His passion for cinema started when he was a child. He spent his mornings at school and afternoons at the neighborhood cinemas, watching up to three films a day.

Originally enrolling at university to study modern literature, Gianni left before graduation to attend the Academy of Performing Arts in Rome to study with Alessandro Fersen. He subsequently graduated in theatre directing and acting.

For three years he worked in Fersen's experimental theatre company (also on seminars and workshops with the Bob Wilson, Grotowski, Kantor and Chaikin companies) the result of which was "Leviathan", which participated in the Spoleto Festival '76.

After three years of theatre, working as an assistant director and actor, he saw Scorsese's *Mean Streets* which had a huge impact on him. He decided to leave the theatre and begin working in film as an assistant director, before moving into screenwriting.

He wrote the screenplays for several successful movies, including *Sembra morto ma è solo svenuto* by Felice Farina (FRIPRESCI Settimana della Critica award, Venice Film Festival '87) and *Giovani senza pensieri* by Marco Colli. In 2000 he met Matteo Garrone after seeing his first film *Terra di Mezzo*. Gianni went on to work as his assistant director on *Estate Romana (Roman Summer)*, *L'imbalsamatore (The Embalmer)* and *Primo Amore (First Love)*.

In 2007, with Maurizio Braucci, Ugo Chiti, Massimo Gaudioso, Roberto Saviano and Matteo Garrone, he wrote the screenplay for the award winning film *Gomorra* by Matteo Garrone.

In 2008 he wrote, directed and starred in *Pranzo di Ferragosto (Mid-August Lunch)*, which was presented at the International Critics' Week at the Venice Film Festival 2008 and went on to win many awards including: Leone del Futuro-Premio Venezia Opera Prima "Luigi De Laurentiis"; "Francesco Pasinetti" Award for the Best Italian Film; Satyajit Ray Award for Best First Feature at the London Film Festival; the Grand Prix International Bratislava Film Festival; David Di Donatello Award for Best New Director; and Nastro d'Argento SNGCI Best New Director.

An interview with Valeria di Franciscis Bendoni

Valeria, can you tell me about the meeting between you and Gianni di Gregorio for your first film *Mid-August Lunch*?

Matteo Garrone (the producer of *Mid-August Lunch (Pranzo di Ferragosto)*) set up the meeting. You know, when he was a child, Matteo lived on the floor below mine, and he was very cute...I always gave him sweets. This is how it happened... suddenly he suggested that I act in his movie. When he called me about *Mid-August Lunch* he said: "Be calm, say what you want", and that's it! I immediately accepted, because of Matteo's friendship. So the film, which was shot in Matteo's mother's home in Piazza Vittorio, was an experience I lived... well... in tranquillity. I was totally at ease. Everyone told me I was good, even though I thought *That's a lot of nonsense!* I thought *Will I be able to do that?* But then I said *Why not!*

Could you have imagined that *Mid-August Lunch* would have been so successful?

I could have never guessed. You know, film plots are more or less the same: "they met... they fell in love... they were married". Who could ever guess that a film with all these old ladies, that eat roast chicken and potatoes, could be so successful?

What about your relationship with Gianni? Can you tell me something about the preparation and your experience on *The Salt Of Life*?

The difference between *Mid-August Lunch* and *The Salt Of Life* was that I never read the script of *Mid-August Lunch*. Everything was improvised. I had dinner with the other ladies, and Gianni told me what to do day by day. For *The Salt Of Life* I read the script, even though I often improvised, still following the thread of the plot. To tell you the truth, I don't follow the script word by word: I knew the scenes but the words I used were mine. Many situations with Gianni come naturally, even if he is always leading me. Once again in this film I am Gianni's mother, but this time he is a "mama's boy" and he often asks for money. Sometimes I give it to him, sometimes I don't. Moreover, in this movie he always meets beautiful women, but he fails to score! Well, Gianni is quite a son...I never think I am acting, I always think I am living the situations: if Gianni, during a scene, is sad and annoyed, it comes natural to me to cheer him up. Between you and me, at the end of a scene I always ask: "Did I do well?" Everybody told me I was ok, so I carried on...

It is true that for *The Salt Of Life* you did your own make-up? And that you used your own dresses?

All the costumes in the film are mine. The costume designer came to my house, saw my dresses, and chose them from my wardrobe. They knew I had lots of dresses. Even my make up I did by myself, and they just added some finishing touches.

How does it feel to become an actress at your wonderful age?

I could have never imagined it. I remember when I was eighteen, Fox Film called me for a screen test. When my father, who was a lawyer, found out, he was shocked. He could not understand how they could ask his daughter – the daughter of an important lawyer – to be

an actress... From his point of view it was like asking me to become a prostitute. I became an actress by coincidence, because of friendship, but now I am happy. I could have never imagined it. I never expected to be so popular, which is amazing. This makes me a bit cocky. I have given out more kisses in the last couple of year than I've given in my whole life. But the most astonishing thing is that the young people recognize me, and this is a very special thing for a lady of my age. Making a film was not hard for me after having so many experiences in my life. The least I could do was to live this experience without over thinking anything.

And, between you and me, I never worked in my life. My first job came when I was 93 years old!