

# Part Six

## Recovering from Caligula



## Forty-One

### "GOOD SUSHI"



"Franco was different. He was not shy. Indeed, he was an extrovert. He loved to appear in the papers surrounded by celebrities, but he never spoke of his life. If he granted interviews, he would answer only questions about his work. He was skilled in conducting the interviews to the matter that interested him. There are no articles that speak of his life." — Anita Limongelli Rossellini<sup>1</sup>



**D**ESPITE THE IMPRESSION given in the above chapters, the life of Franco Rossellini consisted of much more than just court troubles. "I am a very poor person. I have no money. No money. But I live like a billionaire."<sup>2</sup> Despite all his setbacks, he had pride. Despite his current poverty, he was almost ceaselessly in the company of the high and mighty, from pop artists such as Andy Warhol to human-rights activists such as Bianca Jagger and Mariapia Fanfani and Oriana Fallaci to filmmakers such as John Schlesinger and Sidney Lumet to political leaders such as Imelda Marcos and the Queen of Thailand to billionaires such as Doris Duke and Donald Trump. His final two annual datebooks, the only ones in our possession, read like a Who's Who of the Rich and Famous. He rarely inflicted himself on others; on the contrary, others perpetually desired his company. Ben Brantley in his memorial piece in *Vanity Fair* made mention that many who knew of Rossellini in his final years thought of him as merely a "court jester" or even "gigolo" to celebrities.<sup>3</sup> That was hardly a valid criticism. He mixed with all levels of society, and though he lived in a modest apartment whose rent was unquestionably paid by others out of mercy, a large part of his social *milieu* was simply the society he had grown up with, which consisted largely of countesses and diplomats and activists and various other global celebrities, and they enjoyed his company. The entire Rossellini

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1. Quoted in Renzo Allegri, "Era amico delle più celebri 'Star' del cinema ed è stato stroncato dall'Aids," *Gente* 30 no. 26, 22 June 1992, p. 26.

2. Ben Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair* 56 no. 5, May 1993, p. 159.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

family, despite protestations of being commoners at heart, circulated within the upper echelons, and Franco's cousin, Robertino, even became royalty when he married Princess Caroline of Monaco.<sup>4</sup>

Rossellini also had political interests, though he was never intimately connected with political matters. The one donation I have been able to discover, mentioned above in chapter 32, is his \$1,000 contribution to the 1982 campaign of Millicent Fenwick, a representative from New Jersey who, contrary to her Republican affiliation, was a champion of civil rights and women's rights.<sup>5</sup> His contribution was simply a way of gaining her ear in regard to his conflicts with Penthouse. The contribution did no good. Further to the point, Rossellini had also had a longtime association with the Italian Red Cross. As so frequently happened with Rossellini in his later years, a simple and heartfelt devotion to a good cause led to the most unforeseen complications.

Among Rossellini's files is the following undated letter from someone named Zahid:

Dear Franco:

I cannot emphasize more strongly that the project is not dead.

Arafat is behind us 1000%. If we could take his money directly, we can have the whole budget today. But since we cannot do that for political reasons, hence the waiting period, to give him time to get in touch with the financiers.

Love,

Zahid<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible to extricate the meaning of that letter, but we do know that in June 1985 Rossellini found himself stranded in Beirut. Mariapia Fanfani wrote to the Beirut Red Cross instructing the office to give him a small loan, 3,000 Lebanese lire (US\$189.49), so that he could go back home.<sup>7</sup> The Beirut office got the money from the Italian Embassy in Beirut, and Franco repaid that debt the following month via bank transfer from the Hanover Trust to the Embassy.

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4. "Seen and Heard Today — The World," *The Lethbridge [Alberta] Herald*, Tuesday, 12 April 1983, p 1. Related to this is a letter from Edgar Malenton (the surname is uncertain) congratulating Rossellini on the fine dinner he hosted for Princess Caroline at the A Club on New Year's Eve 83/84. FRC.

5. "Franco Rossellini," *NewsMeat*, Friday, 19 November 1982, <http://www.newsmeat.com>.

6. Zahid: letter to Rossellini, undated. FRC.

7. Mariapia Fanfani of the Croce Rossa Italiana Comitato Nazionale Femminile: letter to Comitato Internazionale della Croce Rossa, Beirut, 27 June 1985. FRC.

Half a year later, in December 1985, Italian ambassador Lorenzo Attolico attempted to arrange a meeting in Paris between Rossellini and a Red Cross official referred to only as Claude:

Dear Claude,

I am sending you some lines to tell you that my friend, the cineaste Franco Rossellini whom you met, will be in Paris soon and I would like for the two of you to meet.

I believe that he has the intention of discussing with you the possibility to relaunch certain beneficent initiatives that interest you.

Franco Rossellini is among other things the producer of the film *Medea* with Maria Callas, which was shown in Paris, world première in 1970, under your patronage, in favor of medical research....<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Mariapia Fanfani, vice president of the International Federation of the Red Cross, now commissioned Franco Rossellini to direct a film entitled *La nave della pace* (The Peace Ship), a documentary about a trip around Africa to help people there survive the drought.

With filming completed, Rossellini was back in New York at the end of 1985 to begin the editing. That is when he heard from an aspiring young filmmaker, Giorgio Serafini, who had but a single short film to his credit. Serafini was dating Attolico's step-daughter, whose mother, Mrs. Patrignani, approached him to say, "You're interested in movies? Well, I just met Franco Rossellini. You should give him a call."<sup>9</sup> Serafini did so, and Rossellini was happy to provide counsel. Stay away from film schools, he advised; since nothing compares to experience in the field. Rossellini promised that he would be more than happy to introduce Serafini to some important contacts in the movie world. Serafini soon arrived in New York City and Rossellini welcomed him with open arms. For three weeks, they were inseparable. Rossellini made good on his promise and set about introducing the youngster to the leading lights of the Italian film industry, such as Mauro Bolognini. Serafini could not help but notice that every contact was obviously homosexual. He was also amused at Rossellini's style of dress, wearing a coat over his shoulders as though it were a cape. Rossellini immediately put the youth to work assisting him with the editing of *La nave della pace*.

Strangely, the *Caligula* problems now indirectly ended Rossellini's relationship with the Red Cross. We have learned how Rossellini was frequently

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8. Lorenzo Attolico: letter to Claude, 6 December 1985. FRC.

9. Serafini: letter to Rossellini, 5 January 1986. FRC. Also personal conversation, Monday, 5 March 2012.



unable to pay the rent on the apartments that he had at 145 West 58th Street in Manhattan. His landlord, William A. Moses, had sometimes erupted in fury and sued to have Rossellini and his mother evicted. Fortunately, some of Rossellini's friends periodically came to the rescue, and Rossellini occasionally was able to scrape together some earnings as well to cover these expenses. But in December 1985 the problems got more dramatic. Rossellini's November 1985 rent check for Apartment 10J was inexplicably returned.<sup>10</sup> He demanded an explanation, which came in the form of a messenger with an eviction notice — at nine o'clock at night, while Rossellini was hosting dignitaries from the International Federation of the Red Cross.<sup>11</sup> Rossellini was embarrassed, insulted, and enraged. The eviction notice destroyed Rossellini's credibility in the eyes of Red Cross officials.

Rossellini had had an opportunity to assemble only a few shots of *La nave della pace* but now the Red Cross suddenly seized the film from him. Rossellini hid whatever emotions he was feeling and told Serafini, simply, "Well, my boy, it looks as though that film will never be finished."

Precisely what had happened? Why would a single ring of a doorbell result in the dismissal of an important donor who had demonstrated his value over the course of many years? There is a hint in Rossellini's files, for it turns out that a rumor had begun and had evolved and had grown to grotesque proportions, a rumor of which Rossellini had been entirely unaware.

It was not until over a year later, in February 1987, when Rossellini first got wind of what was being said behind his back. He was shocked to receive a letter from Minister Solari Bozzi of the office of the Italian ambassador to Beirut, Ambassador Mancini, who said that Mancini was demanding that Rossellini repay the loan not of 3,000 Lebanese lire but rather 3,800 US dollars!<sup>12</sup> Bozzi sent a copy of that letter to Fanfani.

Rossellini was horrified, and immediately explained the true situation to Mancini. He also dashed off an angry rebuttal to Bozzi, demanding an apology.<sup>13</sup> Bozzi confessed to Rossellini that the story of the \$3,800 derived from nothing other than a casual conversation at the Chess Club about a certain "Roberto Rossellini" not returning a loan given at Fanfani's request. Rossellini followed this by sending a tortured lament to Fanfani:

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10. Rossellini: letter to Mr Lavorski, 5 December 1985. FRC.

11. Rossellini: letter to William A. Moses, 6 December 1985. FRC.

12. Rossellini: letter to Ambasciatore Mancini, Ambasciate d'Italia, Beirut, 2 February 1987. We do not have the letter from Bozzi that had instigated this matter. FRC.

13. Rossellini: letter to Ministro Solari Bozzi, 4 February 1987. FRC.

Dear Mariapia,

My dearest and most affectionate wishes for the New Year.

I very much wish to send you a copy of a letter I wrote to the Minister Solari Bozzi to clarify an abject and disjointed story that I'm sure will hurt you too.

I am outraged that the kind presentation that you made to me at the Italian Embassy in Beirut has degenerated into a science-fiction-like gossip! It leaves me flabbergasted that an unfounded "report" without accurate documentation, could be done at your work table!

Such bureaucratic zealousness should, indeed, at least be accompanied by accurate documentation!

And you, how are you? I'm so homesick for our hardworking trips!

An affectionate hug

F.R.<sup>14</sup>

Fanfani was unmoved. When Mrs. Patrignani saw Mariapia Fanfani sometime later, she proudly mentioned that she had sent Giorgio Serafini to meet with Rossellini. Fanfani merely grumbled, "Oh, that scumbag," before walking away.

**D**ESPITE THE BREAK WITH THE RED CROSS, Rossellini continued to offer his services to war-torn Beirut, though we know nothing of the nature of those services. All we know is that there was some sort of adventure there in or just before January 1987. The famous human-rights activist Oriana Fallaci wrote Rossellini a letter in January 1987. It is the most startling letter in the entire Rossellini file.

Dear Franco,

I want to thank you as I ought — that is with written words — for a delightful evening. Good sushi, and what a relief it is to eat with a person who is intelligent and witty. I love good food and I love to digest it well. To digest it well I need good company. And evil destiny almost always gives me good food without good company. This almost applies to you. I should see you more often. You're good for my brain. (Even if you did not understand that Jackson is a fascist of the worst kind, the most dangerous man to whom America has given birth in the last twenty years. A little blackshirt, a scoundrel who certainly has a mother in Predappio and an uncle in Avellino. A blackmailer and a coward who takes advantage of his black skin. It's your only blemish, that of Jackson. But nobody is perfect and, since you have a good brain, you'll soon realize that I'm right and you'll be perfect).

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14. Rossellini: letter to Mariapia Fanfani, 4 February 1987. FRC.

But, above all, I want to express admiration and condemnation of the story about Beirut. I'm still in shock and I assure you, it is not easy for me to be shocked. I have seen too much; sometimes I feel I have seen everything. But you left me stunned, confused, disbelieving, and for about an hour and a half I was not even able to go to the bedroom. I did not know whether to send a wreath or get slapped. Even Paolo was in shock and did the same. Rather than go to sleep, he was sitting in the living room and there he remained for a very long time: to meditate in silence according to his boring style. Finally, he looked up and said hoarsely: "But he has courage." And I said: "Yes. A lot of courage." Since that judgment comes from an ex-officer of the Special Forces in Beirut who understands as few others do, and since that judgment comes from a war correspondent who understands just as much about Beirut, it is not a case of underestimating. But do people know you're so brave?

But you're also irresponsible and disgraceful. And I am very, very, very offended because you didn't tell me. I was here in New York, with my knowledge of Beirut, and Paolo was also here in New York with his wisdom about Beirut. You should have called us. I would have laughed in your face, yes, I would have called you a half-wit, I would have done everything not to let you leave. I would have called the doctor and I would have had you admitted to the mental ward. But if you had insisted, my liberality would have been vanquished. And hating you to death I would have escorted to the airport saying to you: You do so and so, it is so and so, this is not done, don't go to this place or to that place. I regret the telephone call that never was because it shows that you did not understand that there is a certain wavelength in common between us, inasmuch as it makes it seem that you consider me as a person-you-know and not a friend in whom you can confide that you are preparing to do some heroic pummeling. But there it is. The pummeling was done and cannot be undone: a beautiful page of your life all to be told. A test, I repeat, of courage.

(I ask myself why you did it. And it distracts me because it breaks my concentration, it distracts me from rewriting a chapter that needs some reworking. Well, I think... I think you did it for yourself. To prove something — and I think I know what — to yourself. Maybe one day we'll talk. Every time I went to Vietnam, even in combat, I tried what I think you tried on this occasion. I was so afraid, so afraid, although no one suspected it. Yet there I was. And the same in Beirut. Three times I returned to Beirut, when the Italians were there. The last time, since no one could go to Beirut by land or by air, we went by sea, on a battleship. Off-shore they lowered a landing barge. With the landing barge I went ashore and the two sailors hated me so much and were so afraid that they abandoned me after a few meters. I had to jump into the water



with the travel bag on my back and reach the city waterfront like that. The Fascists were standing on the beach with rifles aimed and ready to fire on anyone who would shoot me. The bullets whistled, for real, and I was out of breath. But I was so happy. I was just standing and I was giving them a lesson. And I was a woman, not a macho with a stiff cock).

The next time you must tell me. That way we can go there together. And then, if we survive, we'll do a nice musical about it and become rich. OK?

I embrace you, seriously. And I thank you again. And, even though I'm offended, I bow to a man who is a man.

Oriana

P.S. What in the devil did you say to that imitation Japanese man who runs or owns the restaurant? Which of the compliments that he gave me were ones that you suggested? He didn't even know that I was born. Yet it seemed that he knew by heart even the postcards that I sent to my aunt in Viareggio. You wretch.<sup>15</sup>

What exactly had Rossellini done in Beirut? We shall probably never know.

Rossellini underwent a change. He expanded his normal circle of friends, and now included among them the homeless people in his neighborhood, to whom he was generous, despite his total lack of money. A friend explained, "He was incredibly generous with his money. He was also very generous with other people's money."<sup>16</sup>

**T**HOUGH ROSSELLINI HAD NECESSARILY been inactive as a film producer for many years, he would nonetheless try to keep some interest going. He proposed that the Chamber of Deputies (Camera dei Deputati) screen *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo* (Joan of Arc at the Stake) in honor of his father Renzo and his uncle Roberto. President Nilde Iotti responded in a warm and gracious letter that the current political crisis would not allow the Deputies even a moment of relaxation, and besides, the Chamber's screening room had just burned and efforts were underway to rebuild it. She did beg Rossellini, though, to make his offer anew in the coming autumn.<sup>17</sup> It appears that he never did so, since so many other opportunities arose.

Since the June 1987 Cartagena FestaCine was unable to present *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City) or *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo*, Rossellini, who had served on the jury, offered to bring them along to the following year's event, along with

15. Oriana Fallaci: letter to Rossellini, January 1987. FRC.

16. Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair*, May 1993, p. 185.

17. Nilde Iotti of the Camera dei Deputati: letter to Rossellini, 22 April 1987. FRC.

some members of the Rossellini family. Festival director Victor Nieto was definitely interested,<sup>18</sup> but nothing ever came of this offer.

In the autumn of 1987, though, Rossellini made a different offer.<sup>19</sup> The newspapers did not report on the Festival Internacional de Cine in Cartagena, Colombia, until October. When the clippings were sent to New York City, Rossellini took note of the published speech that famed author Gabriel García Márquez gave on the occasion of the opening of the headquarters of the New Latin American Cinema in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba. García praised the young Latin American screenwriters and compared them favorably with the Italian Neorealists of the 1940s. Rossellini was so touched by the speech that he immediately wrote a letter to García. He explained that the Italian Independent Authority for Cinema Management (Ente Autonomo di Gestione per il Cinema) had recently assembled a "Rossellini Exhibition," and he offered to have this exhibition be put on display for the upcoming Havana Film Festival (Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de la Habana). It appears that there was never a response to this offer.

Because we are so bereft of information, we are unable to discern if these are the sorts of offers Franco Rossellini would have made in any case, or if he now made such offers simply because these were the only opportunities left to him.

The "Rossellini Exhibition" then toured Manhattan where it was included as part of the New York Film Festival on 6 October. Franco Rossellini took the opportunity to invite New York Governor and Mrs Mario M. Cuomo, who declined because of prior commitments.<sup>20</sup> The exhibition was then sent to the Italian General Consulate in Houston, Texas.<sup>21</sup>

One attendee of the exhibition while it was in Manhattan was Vlada Petrić, professor of cinema and curator of the Harvard Film Archive.<sup>22</sup> He found two of the films, *La voce umana* (The Human Voice) and *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo*, undiminished by time. Since they had seldom if ever been shown in the US

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18. Victor Nieto of the Festival Internacional de Cine: letter to Rossellini, 13 October 1987. FRC.

19. Rossellini: letter to Gabriel García Márquez, 26 August 1987. FRC.

20. Laurence S. Belinsky, Special Assistant to the Governor: letter to Franco Rossellini, 1 October 1987. Related to this event, there was a "Cinema Italia — Roberto Rossellini" series that opened at the Carnegie Hall Cinema on 15 October with the US première screening of Ermanno Olmi's new film, *Lunga vita alla signora!* (Long Live the Lady!), by invitation only. FRC.

21. Rossellini: telegram to H.E. Il Console Generale Italia, Houston, 26 October 1987 (FRC); Ivo Grippio of the Ente Autonomo di Gestione per il Cinema: letter to Rossellini, 25 November 1987 (FRC).

22. Vlada Petrić for the Harvard Film Archive: letter to Rossellini, 27 October 1987 (FRC); Ivo Grippio of the Ente Autonomo di Gestione per il Cinema: letter to Rossellini, 25 November 1987 (FRC).

before, Petrić sought out Franco Rossellini to get those two films presented at Harvard as well. Screenings would begin on 4 December 1987 and would be repeated twice. Franco would be there to introduce them.

Shortly before the Supreme Court of Cassation found in favor of Felix and fined Penthouse for contempt of court, Rossellini was already trying to activate the long-delayed Lina Wertmüller adaptation of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. The idea was shoot it in Morocco, and so Rossellini paid a visit to Mohamed Benaïssa, the Moroccan Minister of Culture.<sup>23</sup> Benaïssa wrote a thank-you note:

Dear Mr. Rossellini,

It was a real pleasure to have met you and hope to have you as my personal guest for the "Grand Prix" ceremony (28 Feb/5 March) as well as a compaignon [sic]/guest during our "March Venture" to the South with [document is here damaged; name missing] Dana and other friends. Please do come.

And please give a thought to our Avilah project of organising a "Rossellini Week" in August.

All the best.

Sincerely  
Mohamed Benaïssa

3.01.88

P.S. Today is my birthday!<sup>24</sup>

That was an unusually friendly little note, and yet when Rossellini was asked about the relationship, he responded, "I can't call him a friend. I've only been to the palace twice."<sup>25</sup>

Franco Rossellini was also invited to participate in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "Cinecittà: Fifty Years"<sup>26</sup> and to submit a guest list for a by-invitation-only screening of Fellini's new film, *Intervista*. He instantly set about doing so, and one of the people he invited was Jacqueline Onassis, Gore Vidal's estranged step-sister. She declined due to a longstanding commitment.<sup>27</sup> Michael

23. David Lida, "Keeping Up with Franco Rossellini," *W Magazine*, 18–25 April 1988, pp 18–19.

24. Mohamed Benaïssa of Ministre de la Culture, Maroc: letter to Franco Rossellini, 3 January 1988. FRC.

25. Lida, "Keeping Up with Franco Rossellini," *W Magazine*, 18–25 April 1988, pp. 18–19.

26. The Museum of Modern Art Press Conference — "Cinecittà: Fifty Years": invitation, nd; Museum of Modern Art: press release, "Press conference to inaugurate The Museum of Modern Art's film exhibition CINECITTÀ: FIFTY YEARS (February 5–8, 1988)... PLACE: Carnegie Screening Room — host of "Cinema Italia — Roberto Rossellini," nd; Museum of Modern Art: press release, "Cinecittà: Fifty Years, February 5–March 8, 1988," January 1988 (FRC) ([http://www.moma.org/docs/press\\_archives/6506/releases/MOMA\\_1988\\_0009\\_9.pdf?2010](http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/6506/releases/MOMA_1988_0009_9.pdf?2010)).

27. Jacqueline Onassis: letter to Rossellini, 2 February 1988. FRC.



Douglas and Raquel Welch did not respond, much to Rossellini's indignation. Al Pacino also failed to respond, though his legitimate excuse would have been that he was performing in a play. Martha Graham begged to decline.<sup>28</sup> Bianca Jagger attended together with a Catholic Monsigneur friend. Countess Donina Cicogna, Paul Morrissey, Mirella Freni, Pia Lindström, Isabella Rossellini, Martin Scorsese, Monique Van Vooren, Paloma Picasso, Claus Von Bulow, and numerous others accepted.<sup>29</sup> Whatever legal conflicts Franco Rossellini and Federico Fellini may have had seven years earlier were wiped away, as Rossellini entertained the crowd with "witty and irreverent remarks" as a prelude to the screening of the film.<sup>30</sup> He apologized to the audience for Fellini's failure to appear. "Perhaps he's afraid he'd get lost, or maybe he's just afraid of flying."<sup>31</sup> Actually, Rossellini continued, Fellini was even hesitant to send a copy of the film for fear it would get lost in transit. "But he did send a drawing," upon which Rossellini presented a Cinecittà lithograph of a marionette and two dummies, the interpretation of which remained inscrutable.<sup>32</sup> Rossellini wrongly took credit for having produced Fellini's *La città delle donne* as well as a series of documentaries for the Red Cross. Someone asked him about *Caligula*. Rossellini had nothing to hide and joked that the film was his "claim to shame." He insisted that at first "I had no idea what *Penthouse* was." Incomprehensibly, Rossellini defended the film's sexual explicitness: "I wanted the film to be the death to pornography, which it was." Someone in the hall challenged that statement, and Rossellini bizarrely insisted that *Caligula* had forever ended Americans' fascination with pornography.<sup>33</sup>

Over 600 people attended the private screening, "a marvelous treat for the Museum's most important members and donors." MoMA membership director Edward P. Gallagher was thrilled and expressed his wishes for further collaborations with Franco Rossellini.<sup>34</sup>

28. Lida, "Keeping Up with Franco Rossellini," *W Magazine*, 18–25 April 1988, pp. 18–19.

29. Lawrence Cohn, "Cinecittà Retro Finally Underway at MoMA, Blasetti Films Shown," *Variety* (weekly) 330 no. 3, Wednesday, 10 February 1988, pp. 4, 7; "Film Fans," AP laserphoto, 11 March 1988, with photograph by Felice Quinto; "Celebrating Fifty Years of Cinecittà," AP laserphoto, 11 March 1988, with photograph by Felice Quinto. FRC.

30. "Celeb-Filled 'Intervista' Showings Conclude MoMA's Cinecittà Retro," *Variety* (weekly) 330 no. 8, Wednesday, 16 March 1988, p. 18.

31. "Fellini at the MoMA," unidentified clipping in Rossellini's files, 17 March 1988. FRC.

32. Unidentified fragment, 15 March 1988. FRC.

33. Lida, "Keeping Up with Franco Rossellini," *W Magazine*, 18–25 April 1988, pp. 18–19.

34. Edward P. Gallagher for the Museum of Modern Art: letter to Rossellini, 18 March 1988. FRC.

Next in the file is a society page from *W Magazine*, showing a George Chinsee photo of Franco in tuxedo and bowtie at a New York party with his arm around film producer/Borghese cosmetics CEO/financial genius Georgette Mosbacher.<sup>35</sup> The occasion, the event, the relationship remains a mystery.

Since the only funds arriving were his father's royalties and initial deposits for *Caligula* re-releases, Rossellini desperately needed to supplement his income. His 1973 spaghetti western, *The Short and Happy Life of the Brothers Blue*, had barely been released. Now he started meeting with Massimo Ferrara-Santamaria, John Sarno, and John Hornick about shaking it loose and getting it shown,<sup>36</sup> to no avail. There were similarly the occasional entries for *Teorema* and *Le mura di Sana*, presumably concerning rights issues.

Franco Rossellini found himself frequently in the company of Imelda Marcos, the infamous and soon-to-be-ousted dictator of the Philippines. Whatever other characteristics she possessed, Marcos was an expert at charming people. She would throw parties, telling Rossellini that he must see to it that Andy Warhol and his friend Bob Colacello would come along. Colacello reminisced, "Franco Rossellini would always call us and say, 'Imelda's in town and she would like to see Andy and you, but you must bring very glamorous dates, preferably titles.'"<sup>37</sup>

In 1990, when the US federal government charged Marcos and Adnan Khashoggi with racketeering, it was almost unbelievable that Gerry Spence, the lawyer for the little people, defended them. Astonishingly, Spence had been entirely won over by Marcos, just as Rossellini had been. As someone who had spent his life straddling the fine line between commoners and aristocrats, Rossellini was one of the rare people who could understand that the richest and most powerful people on the planet are, at base, just people, like anyone else. Once one looks past the outward appearances, one can see that everybody is basically the same. He saw Imelda the woman, not Mrs. Marcos the murderous tyrant. Admittedly, though, he was not entirely fooled. "My dear," he explained to a reporter, "everyone here is always going to be corrupt."<sup>38</sup>

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35. "Eye," *W Magazine*, 30 May–6 June 1988, p. 15; *Burrelle's Clipping Service*, incomplete clipping on "Mosbacher" from Rossellini's files, surely from 1989, excerpted from *Texas Monthly*.

36. Rossellini, "At-a-Glance 1990," entries for Monday, 5 March; Monday, 23 April; Monday, 20 August; Saturday, 24 November. FRC.

37. Michael Schulman, "Stomping Grounds — Bling Ring," *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2013, pp. 23–24.

38. Ted Friend, "Power Cock-Fighting with Pac-Man and the Weeping Widow," *Esquire: The Magazine for Men* 117 no. 5, May 1992, p. 103.



Then something had happened. Rossellini had aged with unnatural rapidity beginning with the Penthouse suits. Now, at age 55, he looked 85. In early 1991 Rossellini was visiting his cousin Raffaella's house in Rome. While he was alone, he suddenly felt debilitating pain. He phoned his step-mother Anita Limongelli to come and get him. When she arrived, he stood up to open the door but fell to the floor unconscious. Anita managed to break the door down to rescue him. She saw that his foot was swollen to frightening dimensions. She rushed him to a hospital, where Franco claimed that it was just a minor bout of gout and that he had reduced the swelling with ointment. Anita was not convinced.<sup>39</sup>

Just afterwards he nearly died in his cousin Fiorella's home. He would not hear of being taken to an Italian hospital, and, at Anita's urging, he insisted instead on flying to New York City for treatment at the Cabrini Medical Center, for it was his cousin Isabella who had referred him to Cabrini and paid for his treatment there.<sup>40</sup> On Sunday, 10 February 1991, upon landing, an ambulance delivered him to Cabrini. On Tuesday, 12 February, Cabrini operated on his foot. He remained there at least until Tuesday, 12 March, when the doctors gave him a diagnosis. They found that he had cancer, and further, they explained to him the difference between HIV and AIDS. They gave him four months to live.<sup>41</sup>

Rossellini was confused. He would waver back and forth between acceptance of the death sentence and denial of it. During an interview, in the midst of telling a story, he was beset by a sudden paroxysm of coughing. When he finally caught his breath, Rossellini looked at journalist Ben Brantley and asked, "Do you think I'm going to die?" Once he accepted his fate, he embraced it exuberantly, as his cousin Isabella recalled: "he would go jumping in the streets, telling every doorman he passed, 'I have AIDS! I have AIDS!'"<sup>42</sup>

Yet he would never abide the notion that he had acquired his disease from a sexual contact. His varying stories were that he had likely acquired HIV when he had cut his foot at a beach in Africa, or at a lepers' colony in Africa, or during a pedicure in Morocco, or when he fell off of a horse in Argentina, or when he stepped on a mine in Beirut. What he actually believed, what he actually knew, what the real truth was, will remain unknown. When he was readmitted to

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39. Renzo Allegri, "Era amico delle più celebri 'Star' del cinema ed è stato stroncato dall'Aids," *Gente* 30 no. 26, 22 June 1992, p. 178.

40. Adriano Magistretti: phone conversation with RS, 1 December 2014.

41. Allegri, "Era amico," *Gente*, 22 June 1992, p. 25.

42. Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair*, May 1993, p. 183.

Cabrini, his late father's friend Jonas Salk phoned to say that there was hope, as he was working on a cure.<sup>43</sup>

During his first Cabrini visit in February, Rossellini received a telegram from María Amalia LaCroze de Fortabat, the prominent Argentine businesswoman, industrialist, and philanthropist, who announced that she was surprised to find herself a great-grandmother. Rossellini's undated response was filled with affection:

Dear Dear Amalita,

As much as I am thrilled that the family is growing bigger and bigger I am saddened by the acknowledgement that the possibility of flirting with the most beautiful grandmother in the world has practically vanished.

Tons of Love,<sup>44</sup>

Despite everything, Rossellini continued working.

His friendship with Marcos led to a fax message from Andrea Reynolds, journalist on the TV-tabloid show *A Current Affair*, who wished to interview the former Philippine leader. *A Current Affair* would not have been a suitable forum for Marcos, and so Reynolds suggested a more dignified venue, possibly the Tribune Corporation's "Hard News."

Franco Darling,

More important than my TV project, let me tell you how overjoyed I was to hear about the improvement of your health. You have always been the kindest and most generous person (as in von Bulow, for example) and I know that life has not been easy for you.

Unless you disagree, I think that it would be constructive if Mrs Marcos were to meet me. The reason being that if she doesn't like me and is not able to trust me, it would be counterproductive to go any further. Some of the other friends she and I have in common are Lyvia Weintraub and Christina Ford.

For the record, here is a sample of people I have interviewed President Zia (Pakistan) President Gierak (Poland) Valerie Giscard d'Estaing, (France) Saddam Hussein (Iraq).

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43. Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair*, May 1993, p. 185; Giorgio Serafini: conversation with RS, 5 March 2012.

44. Rossellini: telegram to de Fortabat, February 1992. FRC.

My last job was on October 5th, when I was in the private airplane which took Crown Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia and his family, from Zurich to Belgrade. He had been invited to return by a faction of the Federal government....

Let me hear.

Much love  
Andrea<sup>45</sup>

Franco Rossellini also had a few other scant left-overs as well, some of which would occasionally earn him some pocket change, such as revivals of the Pasolini features he had produced. A filmmaker by the name of Tony Palmer wrote to Rossellini about acquiring rights for a 45-second clip of *Medea* for use in his upcoming television documentary about *Maria Callas*.<sup>46</sup> It looks as though Rossellini never responded, probably since he did not control those particular rights. Then he discovered that properties he controlled, not merely legally but even physically, were being used without his authorization, and that he was being robbed of his profits. He wrote to his old friend Laura Betti, who controlled the Pasolini Foundation.

Dear Laura

what a pleasure to see you nice and round and healthy!!!

I thought a lot about what you told me about the Taormina Festival and the fact that some material robbed from me was projected in the scope of the event.

The Festival has become implicitly guilty of criminal conspiracy.

*Medea's* unutilised material belongs to me, inasmuch as I had it printed and I paid for it.

Such material was unduly taken away from the developing and printing house, where it had been, by me, placed in good faith. The film, moreover, can't be edited or used without the authorisation of the heirs of Pier Paolo who are the holders of the moral rights rendered to them by hereditary lineage. Therefore, Mr. Farina not only committed fraud damaging to me but he also infringed upon the moral right of the Pasolini family since he made an illicit assemblage and projected the whole thing without having the proper licence.

I wonder if the Festival made people pay for tickets.

The situation is serious and such as to be able to pursue Mr. Farina and Mr. Gezzi criminally. Now if these people understand the severity of their conduct, they don't have to do anything other than give back the material to the legitimate owner.

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45. Andrea Reynolds: fax to Rossellini, 10 October 1991. FRC.

46. Tony Palmer of Isolde Films: letter to Rossellini, 1 September 1987. FRC.

Only at that point if we would want to utilise the film for purposes other than what would be the original "Medea" project we would have to obtain the consent of the Pasolini heirs.

Let me know, kisses

Franco<sup>47</sup>

Rossellini, of course, was free to talk of pursuing criminal charges against the festival directors, but talk was all he could do, for he had no funds. He did not even have physical strength, and was now unable even to drive a car.<sup>48</sup>

When the Museum of Modern Art scheduled a 50th-anniversary screening of *Casablanca*, featuring Rossellini's aunt Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini responded with a guest list.<sup>49</sup> Though Rossellini was well enough to walk, Isabella suggested that he use a wheelchair. Rossellini thought an arrival in a wheelchair would make for a grand entrance. He was right, and he got a standing ovation.<sup>50</sup> Jane Fonda was in the audience, and she was taken aback by Rossellini's appearance. She was terribly concerned and asked what was the matter. Rossellini's jovial response was priceless: "Oh, it's nothing, my dear, just a little touch of AIDS."<sup>51</sup> Not to be outdone, Franco insisted on attending the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective of the films of Vittorio De Sica as well as the celebrations in honor of Sofia Loren.<sup>52</sup>

Through it all, Rossellini could never completely recover from his conflicts with Penthouse. His pride would not allow him to admit defeat, and he lied to journalist Ben Brantley that of *Caligula's* exceptional earnings, he had only gotten "a few million."<sup>53</sup> That was wrong. As we have seen, he never made a penny on *Caligula*. He lost, only lost, and always lost money on that movie, the movie that, effectively, destroyed his life.

Knowing that he was not long for the world, Rossellini bequeathed all his property to Enzo Natale. He also had someone type a letter to the SIAE (Italian Society of Authors and Publishers).<sup>54</sup> Rossellini was inheritor of 50% of the rights to his father's music, with the other 50% going to Anna Limongelli in care of Mrs.

47. Rossellini: fax to Laura Betti, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, 10 October 1991. FRC.

48. Rossellini: fax to Mark (last name not provided), nd. FRC.

49. Rossellini: fax to Mary Lee Brady of the Museum of Modern Art, 16 March 1992. The eight-page guest list is not included in the surviving files. FRC.

50. Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair*, May 1993, p. 186.

51. Paul Morrissey: telephone conversation with RS, 22 September 2007. According to Brantley's article, that was Rossellini's typical response.

52. Allegri, "Era amico," *Gente*, 22 June 1992, p. 178.

53. Brantley, "Rossellini Requiem," *Vanity Fair*, May 1993, p. 185.

54. Rossellini: letter to the SIAE, 29 May 1992. FRC.



Delia Bailetti Peratoner.<sup>55</sup> The royalties amounted to between a few dollars and a few thousand dollars every few months, hardly enough to live on but a nice supplement to a steady income. He now transferred his 50% inheritance to Enzo Natale. He signed his name to the letter with some difficulty, and that is probably the last message he ever sent.

Elizabeth Taylor, who was by now an activist devoted to raising funds to find a cure for AIDS, visited Franco in his hospital room and embraced him, leaving him with encouraging words.<sup>56</sup> Franco kept in touch with his relatives several times a day, sometimes with a voice so weak that he seemed at death's door, and sometimes with some vigor. He certainly spoke with vigor, and bitterness, on the thirteenth of May, the tenth anniversary of his father's death, when no one in Italy played a note of his father's music to commemorate the day. He vowed to rectify this ignominy on his next trip to Rome, and to do all he could to make his father's music known once again.<sup>57</sup>

The Cabrini doctors thought they might be able to save Rossellini's life by amputating his leg, but Rossellini preferred death.<sup>58</sup> Over his objections they operated anyway, to no avail. He died at four o'clock in the morning at the Cabrini Medical Center on Wednesday, 3 June 1992, the sixteenth anniversary of his uncle Roberto's death. The official cause of death was AIDS. His friend, theatre director Valentina Fratti, agreed that AIDS was an accurate prognosis, but when asked, she expanded upon that and said that AIDS had triggered the immediate cause, which was lung cancer, the result of a lifetime of chain smoking.<sup>59</sup> Anyone who has read this far may feel justified in postulating other causes on top of that.

The final irony is that Doris Duke, who had befriended, assisted, and then exiled Franco Rossellini, still had some concern for him after all. In her Last Will and Testament, she bequeathed to Rossellini \$158,000. Unfortunately, she did not execute that will until 5 April 1993, nearly a year after Franco had passed away. Had he had access to that sort of money two years earlier, he could have won his legal battles.

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55. SIAE: letter to Delia Bailetti Peratoner and Rossellini, 1 April 1989. FRC.

56. Allegri, "Era amico," *Gente*, 22 June 1992, p. 25.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

59. Valentina Fratti: telephone conversation with RS, 22 September 2007.