



## Zeffirelli, Franco (b. 1923)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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For half a century, Franco Zeffirelli has been in the spotlight for his visually extravagant opera, stage, and film productions. While his self-proclaimed "crusade against boredom" in the dramatic arts and his emphasis on spectacle have brought him considerable acclaim, they have also been the target of significant critical derision.

The controversial Italian director has also been lambasted by religious groups for his supposedly blasphemous representation of biblical figures, yet he has also provoked the ire of many gay men and lesbians for siding publicly with the Roman Catholic Church on homosexual issues.

Zeffirelli was born February 12, 1923 in Florence, the son of Ottorino Corsi, a wealthy businessman, and his mistress Adelaide Garosi, a fashion designer. Through his father, Zeffirelli was related to the family that centuries before had produced Leonardo da Vinci.

He was originally Gianfranco Corsi, but his mother subsequently followed the Florentine tradition of naming a child born out of wedlock with a created name beginning with the letter "Z." After his mother's death, he was placed in the care of an English governess, from whom he learned the English language and its literature.

Zeffirelli graduated from art school in 1941, and, following his father's plan, became an architecture student at the University of Florence. While at the university, he became active in directing student theatrical productions, including stagings of operas under the tutelage of his aunt Ines Alfani Tellini, a retired soprano.

In 1943, he left college to join the Partisans and fight against the Nazi occupation of Italy. Subsequently he became an interpreter for the British Army after the Allied invasion.

As a result of meeting British troops who shared his dramatic interests, Zeffirelli abandoned his plans for a career in architecture and, after the war, became a theatrical set and costume designer.

During the late 1940s, he worked as an assistant to director Luchino Visconti, whose attention to realistic detail and action profoundly influenced the young apprentice's own work.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Zeffirelli firmly established his reputation as a drama and opera director. In the former capacity, he presented highly naturalistic stagings of Shakespeare at London's Old Vic.

Simultaneously, he was responsible for noted productions at Milan's La Scala, London's Covent Garden, and New York's Metropolitan Opera starring the leading divas of the period, particularly Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, and Leontyne Price.

His lavish visual appeal created greater mainstream interest in legitimate theater and opera, but Zeffirelli's

characteristic style--which he likened to that of the Hollywood epics of Cecil B. De Mille, "but in good taste"--did not meet with universal acclaim.

Many found his productions overdone to the extent that the sets and stage action drew attention away from the actual performance. Indeed, this was the case with the 1966 world premiere of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which was commissioned for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center. The technology operating the prodigious stage machinery malfunctioned, the spectacle was almost unanimously panned, and Barber's career was effectively ended.

His detractors notwithstanding, Zeffirelli continued to expand his audience during the mid-1960s with his debut as a film director. His first feature film, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), featured the most discussed theatrical couple of the day, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. As a cinematic rendering of a traditional work of English literature, it set the tone for many of his subsequent screen productions.

His best-known film, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), soon followed. It was controversial for his casting of unknown and inexperienced (if highly attractive) teenaged actors in the title roles. He would again present such adolescent sensuality and sexual awakening in *Endless Love* (1981), which tells the story of an obsessive teen romance set against the backdrop of parental prohibition.

Zeffirelli's later films have received widely mixed reviews and are generally regarded as uneven in quality. These include *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1973), *Jesus of Nazareth* (television miniseries, 1977), film versions of Verdi's operas *La Traviata* (1982) and *Otello* (1986), *Hamlet* (with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, 1990), *Jane Eyre* (1996), the autobiographical *Tea with Mussolini* (1999), and *Callas Forever* (2001).

Although Zeffirelli is openly gay and has frankly discussed his sexuality in his autobiography, he is nonetheless somewhat paradoxical in this regard. Some critics have noted a "homosexual gaze" in his films, particularly in their lingering and erotically tinged close-up shots of the semi-nude male body. In *Tea with Mussolini*, moreover, he cast Lily Tomlin as an unambiguously lesbian character.

At the same time, however, his advocacy of Catholic dogma in opposition to gay activism has not gone unnoticed, particularly his backing of Vatican efforts to thwart the inception of a Gay Pride parade in Rome.

Yet this seeming contradiction is, perhaps, characteristic of Zeffirelli's career and work, for which he has long been regarded with extreme degrees of reverence and revilement, in almost equal measure.

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

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