

Napa Valley Register

Enchanting film icon Sophia Loren in valley for Festival del Sole tribute

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Grace, beauty and wisdom came sharply into focus as film icon Sophia Loren walked into Far Niente Winery's Great Hall on the arm of son Carlo Ponti late Saturday afternoon.

Anticipatory jitters among hosts, staff and journalists melted away as Italy's foremost actress sat down to answer questions posed by a gaggle of writers, columnists and bloggers parked around a large rectangular table traditionally used for winery dinners and tastings.

Loren flashed the gorgeous smile that's made men's blood run hot for more than five decades, gently touching the arm of her oldest son, a successful conductor in the valley to introduce his new chamber orchestra, premiere a new symphony and enjoy some private time with his mother.

Recognized for a body of work spanning more than six decades, Loren came at the invitation of Festival del Sole. Napa Valley's Jan and Maria Manetti Shrem, friends of the festival since its inception nine years ago, commissioned American composer Daniel Brewbaker to write a musical tribute that received its world premiere last weekend during the actress's visit. The festival's "Bella Italia" weekend also marked the public debut of son Carlo's new chamber orchestra, LA Virtuosi, which performed "Sinfonietta per Sofia" twice on Saturday.

One of the two performances was part of a gala evening at Far Niente — an evening that paid tribute to the international career of the award-winning actress celebrating her 80th birthday come September.

While Loren has received countless awards — Oscar, Golden Globe, from film festivals and humanitarian organizations around the world — this was the first time a piece of music was composed for the actress. "I am honored," she said during the press conference, also pleased that the world premiere was to be presented by her son.

"It's a beautiful, moving feeling (to be part of the event). I am moved to hear my son speak ... I remember when he was born ... suddenly he's married with children."

"She's my mother — I forget she's a legend," Ponti interjected. When his mother attends a concert where he's conducting, "it's like having a female pope in the audience," he quipped as she smiled, almost sheepishly. "The orchestra tightens up ... (and) they turn gray." He said it takes a while



before the color returns to their faces. Following the Far Niente concert, he said his new orchestra put its best foot forward — pleasing the honored guest as well as successfully competing with early evening winds.

"It's a privilege to have my mother as my mother ... that I am her son. Why? Because it forces you to reach for excellence."

Although she has friends in the Napa Valley, this was Loren's first visit to Far Niente. Her wine appreciation consists of a glass or two of red wine with a meal, she advised.

"It's nice to come back" to the valley, Loren observed. "I like tidy things," she added, referencing the beauty of Napa Valley flora and its vineyards. "It's beautiful here ... I like very precise things."

Her most recent film, "The Human Voice" — based on a 1930 Jean Cocteau monologue set in Paris where a middle-aged woman speaks on the phone to a lover of five years who's about to marry another — has been screened at Cannes and Tribeca film festivals and "is on its way" to be shown in the United States, the actress told reporters. She said she'd admired the Cocteau play for some time but knew "you needed to be of a certain age" to tackle the role.

"Working was like school for me," she said of her film career. "I had no formal training. Now I do things that I really want to do." At present, the actress is reading several scripts.

Asked to address the Brewbaker tribute to his mother, Ponti called it "a wonderful piece. It features many moods — which I can relate to as I am her son — passion, warmth, dedication, effervescence."

Ponti advocates music education for youth. His new 22-member chamber orchestra, LA Virtuosi, donates all funds to "music education in the schools. An orchestra can be a powerful tool to teach."

As the press conference got underway, a San Francisco blogger attempted to steer the conversation to the world of fashion and how Loren viewed her role in it.

Queried about her femininity, Loren noted she could only do with what Mother Nature gave her — and that she didn't need jewelry to complete her god-given looks. "I was born with my mother's DNA."

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A celebrity-filled tribute

Bella Italia began with a wine reception in the vine-circled glade of the Far Niente wine estate as the sun slipped behind the Mayacamas.

Winery partners Beth Nickel and Larry Maguire greeted the evening's honoree and other VIPs — Hollywood's Robert Redford and Francis Ford Coppola, TV host and actress Whoopi Goldberg, composer Gordon Getty, GOP onetime presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich, TV chef/restaurateur Lidia Bastianich and more vintners than you could shake a stick at — prior to the 50-minute performance by the Ponti-led LA Virtuosi.

Prepared by well-known chefs Piero Selvaggio and Michael Chiarello, the four-course dinner menu featured shrimp-stuffed calamari, spaghetti di Gragnano (a specialty from the mezzogiorno), bistecca alla Fiorentina and tiramisù.

Interlaced with the courses were tributes of varying lengths from invited guests. Emcee Whoopi Goldberg kicked things off with a quip about being a native Sicilian. "I'm the black one," she declared.

Acknowledging that some of the 400 guests might question why she was asked to emcee a tribute to Sophia Loren, the TV host said she'd admired Loren's accomplishments for quite some time. Growing up "in the projects of New York," Goldberg's mother — a Loren fan — informed her that early on in her film career Loren had been told "you weren't camera enough for Hollywood. But you went on to win many, many awards. My mother then told me that when you doubt you're not enough, look at Sophia Loren ... take the shot, go for it.

"I love her cookbooks. I'm not a good cook, but I can make Sophia Loren sauce.

"When I won my Oscar, you were in the audience. I think I told you then it was your fault ... (because) I believed I could do anything ... because of you."

"Then there's your movies — 'Nine,' 'El Cid,' 'Man of La Mancha' ... no one else can play Dulcinea. You are to me not just one of a kind, but a god-damned one of a kind. I love you to pieces."

Noting that Far Niente doesn't have film legends stopping by every day, hostess Beth Nickel allowed that Saturday's event was "the most lavish party we've ever thrown. I grew up a farm kid from Oklahoma ... I wish my friends could see me now being introduced by Whoopi Goldberg." She in turn introduced Margrit Mondavi, "the queen of Napa Valley," who "gives us a little advice and a lot of style."

Growing up in Switzerland and then moving to the United States to start a family, Margrit Mondavi said "it was a dream" to see Sophia Loren on the screen. "Each film was a feast ... (and) you're more beautiful than ever. You've given us so much joy."

"To hear this orchestra play (Brewbaker's tribute) warmed my heart," son Carlo Ponti declared. "To be able to play for my mother and family (brother Edoardo also attended), it couldn't happen without this festival."

The lovefest continued with pre-recorded video tributes from actor Robert De Niro and former President Bill Clinton. "For decades she's captured the hearts and minds of people like me," Clinton declared. He praised her artistry as well as her humanitarian endeavors.

"I don't know why they gave me this to read when Newt Gingrich is sitting right there," declared Goldberg as she presented a testimonial from former President George H.W. Bush.

Festival co-founder Barrett Wissman pointed out Festival del Sole was launched in Cortona, Italy, and that Loren came to the festival early on to see her son conduct.

"My parents sent me to military school on a tuba scholarship," noted director Francis Ford Coppola. "I had a picture on my locker of Sophia at age 16. When I ran away from that military academy, I took the picture with me."

Another Napa Valley resident, Robert Redford said he and Loren are "roughly the same age" and came from similar humble beginnings. He addressed Loren's struggle to be cast against type in films, that she was a lot more than just another pretty face.

"With films like 'Two Women,' 'Marriage Italian Style' and 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,' she grew and grew and grew. I'm excited that tonight I get to meet her. She's a very special person." Welcoming Loren to the stage, Redford added: "She signifies the best of Italy."

As radiant as she appears in film, Loren approached the microphone and began thanking those responsible for the tribute — in Italian. After a minute or so, son Carlo sidled up to her and reminded her she was in the United States, not Italy.

"Madonna mia," the honoree blurted out, as her fans laughed and applauded the nervous mistake.

"This is a fantasy ... it's like a film. It's a dream my mother never saw. I'm very, very moved and happy at the same time ... that I reached something that people admire. Here I am."

Referring to Carlo, she noted he "is doing something very beautiful ... I'm proud of what he's accomplished. I really hope his dream is going to come true.

"I'm very honored ... (and) hope next year we can be together again."

As she walked from the microphone, the Italian film icon added: "It was easier doing 'Two Women' than this."