

VARIETY

Francis Ford Coppola, Whoopi Goldberg Praise Sophia Loren at 'Bella Italia' Tribute

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At the “Bella Italia” tribute to Sophia Loren at the Far Niente winery on Saturday night, the penultimate event of the ninth annual Napa Valley Festival del Sole, wine country locals Robert Redford and Francis Ford Coppola, along with MC Whoopi Goldberg, found common ground with the legendary actress.

Redford, who was meeting Loren for the first time, spoke of their shared lower working class backgrounds and the struggle to counter perceptions based on their looks. Coppola reminded the audience of their common Neapolitan roots, the fact that his daughter is also named Sophia (spelled with an F) and his father Carmine, like Loren’s son Carlo Ponti, was a composer and conductor. Coppola also recalled the time when he was enrolled in a military academy “on a tuba scholarship,” his misery only alleviated by a photo of a 16-year-old Loren pinned in his locker.



But it was Goldberg’s anecdote about Loren as a role model that placed the evening in an unlikely perspective. The comedienne recalled advice her mother gave her in light of early criticisms that Loren wasn’t beautiful or camera-ready enough for Hollywood. “And my mother said ‘the minute you have a doubt that you’re not enough, look at Sophia Loren... Now, I don’t know if you’re going to grow as well as Sophia Loren, but because we don’t know, take the shot’...”

President Bill Clinton and Robert De Niro also sent regards via video, while Newt Gingrich was among the revelers.

The centerpiece of the evening was an outdoor performance of Daniel Brewbaker’s “Sinfonietta per Sofia,” a 15-minute composition conducted by Carlo Ponti (Jr), Loren’s son, and his Los Angeles-based chamber orchestra, the LA Virtuosi.

But it was the theme from Vittorio De Sica’s “La Ciociara” (“Two Women”), the 1960 film that featured an Oscar-winning performance by Loren, that set the tone for the musical program. Its pastoral qualities flowed in perfect harmony with the Arcadian setting and magic-hour lighting — like a Gainsborough landscape come to life.

Everything about the lavish affair was molto Italiano. The \$700 a plate dinner that followed the concert, conceived with the help of celebrity chef and local restaurateur Michael Chiarello, featured flatbread stenciled with music sheet notes from Brewbaker’s “Sinfonietta” in squid ink. The spaghetti was from the famed pasta region of Gragnano in Naples, cooked in tomato leaf-infused tomato water; and the bone-in tenderloin was charred over wood bistecca fiorentina style.

As Ponti pointed out during the press conference earlier, his mother is like “the female Pope,” and her followers, at least on this night, could not have been more worshipful.