

Fellini, Pavarotti and Levi

Germaine Greer interviews three Italian artists

Sebastian Gurciullo

During a reflection at the official launch of her archive at the University of Melbourne, on the occasion of International Women's Day 2017, Germaine Greer explained why she was not interested in having her life interpreted, or in writing an autobiography. That kind of self-examination does not appeal to her; instead she insisted that it is best to do what you must and hope to be eventually understood, without attempting to justify or explain yourself. What she hopes to achieve with her archive is to paint a picture of the times she lived through.¹

Among the many surprises in the Germaine Greer Archive at University of Melbourne Archives is a handful of audio tape recordings of interviews with three prominent Italian artists: writer Primo Levi (1919–1987), opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti (1935–2007) and filmmaker Federico Fellini (1920–1993). The interviews are conducted solely in Italian, a language that Greer speaks and writes fluently. Throughout her dialogues with these three men, Greer demonstrates an intimate knowledge of Italian culture and regional dialects, in itself a revelation to people familiar only with Greer's public persona in the Anglosphere.

Greer recorded the three interviews with a view to publishing

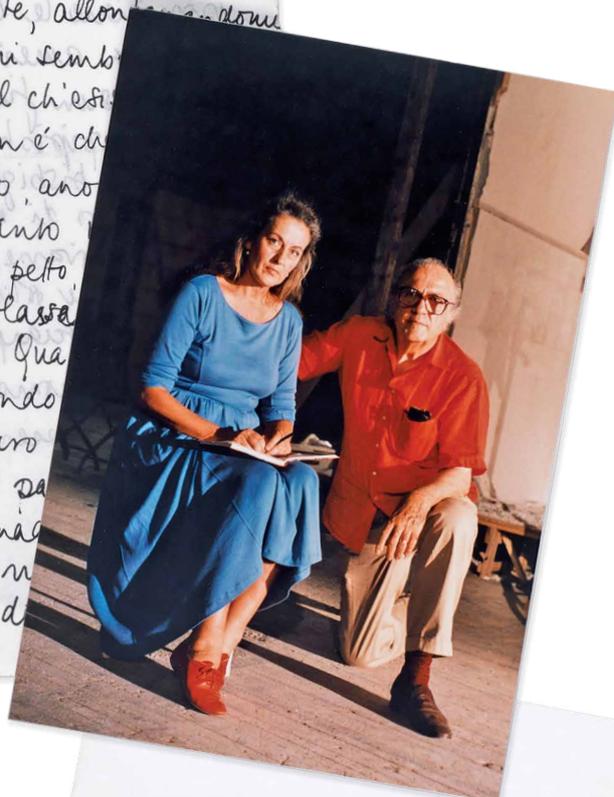
commissioned articles in various Italian- and English-language magazines.² The audio recordings on standard compact cassettes are complemented by written correspondence and notes in other parts of Greer's archive, some in Italian, among them intimate letters exchanged with Federico Fellini over the course of many years.

Greer's amorous affair with Fellini has been public knowledge since 1991, when she wrote about their relationship in a 'Home Thoughts' column for *The Independent Magazine*.³ More recently, in 2010, she wrote of her first encounter with the legendary Italian film director, in her column in *The Guardian* newspaper.⁴ In the summer of 1975, casting director Paola Rolli [Roli] recommended Greer try out for the part of the giantess in Fellini's *Casanova*. During her meeting with the crew at Rome's Cinecittà, Greer made such an impression on Fellini that he gave her a copy of the film's script so she could provide her thoughts on it, and instead of the giantess he suggested she might consider the part of Madame Chatelet. A copy of Greer's comments to Fellini, sent via Rolli, are in Greer's correspondence. The letter and marked-up copy draw attention to historical inaccuracies

in the part written for Madame Chatelet, and even include a scene re-written in Greer's own Italian, aiming to make the dialogue 'wittier'.⁵ In response to her suggestions, Fellini came personally to see Greer at her house in Montanare di Cortona. After Fellini told his driver to return the following morning to pick him up, he and Greer spoke all afternoon about the film and, according to Greer, '[t]here was never any question of his sleeping anywhere but in the big bed with me'.⁶

Greer explains that during the recording of the interview, conducted in Rome over a number of sessions in late July 1988 (some 13 years after their initial meeting there), Fellini had:

made sure that I had everything I needed, loaded me with books, sat me on his right hand for eight perfect meals, arranged a projection of *Intervista*, shown me the storyboards for the new movie, made sure I was always comfortable and never left alone and bored in my exquisite room at the Hassler, sent his air-conditioned car for me that I need never confront the heat and cagnara [ruckus] of the Roman streets, busied himself to find an Italian publisher for those of my



books not published there, and given me fifteen hours of taped conversation to make any use of that I wished.⁷

Greer adds that Fellini did not believe in the truth of interviews; what he encouraged her to produce was a portrait, 'compiled from the false and half-false answers, the half-sincere responses, the contradictions, seeing through the blind spots'.⁸ Alongside the correspondence in Greer's archive, this interview as portrait gives insights not only into a surprising amorous and intellectual



A selection of cassette tapes from the audio series, including one of the Fellini cassettes. The series comprises 138 cassettes, seven digital audio tapes (DATs) and three minidisks, recorded by Greer between 1971 and 2010. 2014.0040, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives. Photograph by Kate Hodggets.



relationship that spanned more than a decade, but also into the thinking of two creative intellectual equals. The correspondence in Italian between Greer and Fellini bears witness to their friendship, Fellini writing on 18 January 1981 how glad he is to hear from her after a long time, and immediately resuming their intimacy ‘as if they had only parted the night before’.⁹

During their discussions, Greer often chides Fellini for his attitudes to women, asking for instance why he insists on calling her ‘bella’, ‘whether he sees it as his sacred duty [*un dovere santo*] to say this to women’,¹⁰ or questioning him about his portrayal and treatment of women in his films, and how this was fictionalised by his one-time assistant Andrea De Carlo in his novel *Yucatan* (1986).¹¹

Taken together, these audio recordings conducted over many hours at various locations—including alfresco Roman restaurants with the buzz of street life and traffic providing an evocative backdrop against which Fellini and Greer riff on filmmaking, ideas and life—constitute a significant testimony on Fellini’s life and work that may be unparalleled, even in his own personal archive.

In each of the Italian audio interviews, Greer digs beneath the surface of the mythologies and clichés that

have surrounded each of these men, whether it be Pavarotti’s projection of ‘cuddly Latin man’ in his English interviews, or the myth that Levi’s masterpiece about the experience of the death camps, *If this is a man*, was written spontaneously without any plan or literary calculation, or the way Fellini’s portrayal of women in his films turns them into ciphers for his inner fantasies and desires.

In her dialogue with Levi, Greer spends a great deal of the recorded interview probing him on the question of how an experience as awful as survival in the Nazi death camps can be transmuted into art. Perhaps she had in mind Theodor Adorno’s dour dictum that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.¹² This is not just the individual guilt often associated with accidentally surviving the Holocaust, but questions in a broader sense whether it is possible for a civilisation to simply brush off this episode in human history and then carry on, as if the fundamental capacity for cruelty and exploitation had been exorcised.¹³ ‘We are “the Germans” [meaning the Fascists] of the world in this discussion’, Greer observes at one point during the interview, when the issues of colonialism and inequality are raised: ‘We have exploited the world’.¹⁴ The interview ranges over the period of

Fascism, Levi’s strategies for survival in the German death camps, the Zionist project in Israel, Levi’s primary cultural identification as an Italian alongside his Jewishness, and the state of contemporary politics in the West.

Greer’s interview with Levi proceeds in a spirit of scholarship, occasional levity punctuating the overall sobriety. Levi responds thoughtfully to Greer’s line of questioning, and a cordial exchange of ideas emerges, despite the troubling nature of the subjects discussed, which for Levi at least are not merely abstract concepts but are intimately entwined with a nightmare that he experienced in body and spirit. Time and again, Greer returns to this during the interview: how Levi was able to not only put the nightmare behind him somehow, but also to draw upon it to sustain his artistic production of novels that gained him worldwide fame.

The encounter with Pavarotti takes a very different trajectory. Over the course of the 40-minute recorded interview, Pavarotti occasionally sounds prickly and annoyed, and grows progressively impatient with Greer’s exploration of the conflict between the sheer spontaneous joy of singing and the

harsh discipline and work routine of an opera tenor. During the interview, she recalls a photo shoot with Plácido Domingo. Domingo arrives just as Greer is playfully singing an aria (she had been taking operatic lessons at the time) and, overhearing her, exclaims that he can no longer sing like this—that singing spontaneously for the pure joy and subjective expression is no longer possible for him.¹⁵

Of course, the encounters with these three Italian artists is presented from Greer's point of view. It would be intriguing to see what views emerge from the personal papers and other archival sources of the men in question.¹⁶

Dr Sebastian Gurciullo is an archivist, editor, curator and researcher. He currently works in collection management at Public Record Office Victoria and freelances as an urban and social historian.

- 1 Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists, event held on 8 March 2017 in the Kathleen Fitzpatrick Theatre, University of Melbourne. Video recording available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOcMazsj6OQ, timecode 00:38:30.
- 2 Primo Levi was interviewed for *The Literary Review*, 'Germaine Greer talks to Primo Levi', no. 89, November 1985, which later appeared in Italian translation as 'Colloquio con Primo Levi', in Marco Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: Conversazioni e interviste*, translated by Erminio Corti, Turin: Einaudi, 1997; Federico Fellini for *Annabella* (1988), which appeared in English in *Interview*, vol. 22, 1988; and Luciano Pavarotti for *The Evening Standard*

(1991). Files are in GG talks to Primo Levi, xi.85 (2014.0046.00149); Fellinissimo, Interview/Annabella (2014.0046.00192); and Pavarotti (the Beauty and the Terror) Evening Standard, vii.91 (2014.0046.00244), all in the Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

- 3 'Germaine Greer on falling out of love', 'Home Thoughts' column, *Independent Magazine*, 18 May 1991 (cutting held on 2014.0046.00237).
- 4 Germaine Greer, 'Federico Fellini wanted to cast me in Casanova. We ended up in bed together', *Guardian*, 12 April 2010, www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/apr/11/germaine-greer-federico-fellini.
- 5 Germaine Greer (at Montanare di Cortona), letter to Paola Rolli [Roli] (Rome), July 1975, in Fellini, Federico (2014.0044.00220).
- 6 Greer, 'Federico Fellini wanted to cast me in Casanova'. This discussion of her affair with Fellini was subsequently widely re-reported, for instance in the *Daily Mail* on 12 April 2010 (www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1265294/When-feminist-met-Fellini-Greer-admits-affair-married-Italian-director.html), and in *La Stampa* on 13 April 2010 (www.lastampa.it/2010/04/13/spettacoli/germaine-greer-lamia-storia-con-fellini-sul-set-di-casanova-tlbhYQaRGimEFcF4d4u0ZI/pagina.html).
- 7 Germaine Greer, 'Fellinissimo', in *Interview*, vol. 22, no. 6, December 1988, p. 106. The Italian version appeared in *Annabella*, no. 9, 1988, p. 34. Copies of the interview typescripts and related notes (as well as of the published interview in both languages) are in Fellinissimo, Interview/Annabella (2014.0046.00192). *Intervista* was a 1987 documentary for Japanese television about Fellini's filmmaking at Cinecittà.
- 8 Greer, 'Fellinissimo'. Fellini discusses his views on interviews in Fellini IV (Fellini interview with Germaine Greer) (in Italian), audio cassette recording, 27 July 1988, side 2, timecode 00:21:45 (2014.0040.00060).
- 9 '... come ci fossimo lasciate la sera prima', Federico Fellini (Rome), letter to Germaine Greer (London), 18 January 1981, in Fellini, Federico (2014.0044.00220).
- 10 Fellini III (Fellini interview with Germaine Greer) (in Italian), audio cassette recording, 24 July 1988, side 1, timecode 00:00:05 (2014.0040.00059).
- 11 Fellini IV (Fellini interview with Germaine Greer) (in Italian), audio cassette recording, 27 July 1988, side 1, timecode 00:13:50 (2014.0040.00060).
- 12 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 34.
- 13 This expanded significance is explained in Theodor Adorno, *Negative dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1973, pp. 362–3.
- 14 Germaine Greer, in Primo Levi (interview with Germaine Greer) (in Italian), audio cassette recording, 1985, side 2, timecode 00:29:10 (2014.0040.00084).
- 15 Luciano Pavarotti interview 3 March 1991 (interview with Germaine Greer) (in Italian), audio cassette recording, side 1, timecode 00:10:28 (2014.0040.00091)
- 16 Unfortunately, in each case it appears that the archives of these three artists remain fragmented across different collections and institutions. The Fondazione Federico Fellini in Rimini was established in 1995 and aims to bring together a range of collections, including the archives of his personal papers; see www.federicofellini.it/en/foundation. The Centro internazionale di studi Primo Levi has acquired some archives relating to Levi and also provides a list of archives held in other collections; see www.primolevi.it/Web/Italiano/Strumenti/Archivio/120_Fondi_sparsi. The Fondazione Luciano Pavarotti has established a house museum at the singer's former home, but its website makes no mention of archives at all; see www.lucianopavarottifoundation.com/gallery-3-columns-2/?lang=en. All websites accessed 13 June 2017.