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Discovering her inner Italian

Despite a series of unexpected encounters, Dina Morrone still longs for a life in Rome

By John Hanan

Globalization may have homogenized most of the world, but when it comes to show business and unwanted sexual advances, Italy remains in a world of its own.

At least that's the impression 'felt' by actress Dina Morrone. The blond-hair, blue-eyed Italian Canadian left for Rome with dreams of getting her foot in the door of Italian cinema, only to discover that many of the nation's men were only interested in seeing other parts of her body.

Her experiences after eight years of living overseas have been distilled into a one-woman show, *The Italian in Me*, based on her real-life adventures in the Eternal City.

"It's an adult show but it's not R-rated. It does poke fun at Italians, but in the same way Canadian standup comics make fun of Canada. It really is just one girl's 'Alice in Wonderland' experience in Italy," said Morrone, over the phone from L.A., where the show is wrapping up there after a long, successful run.

Born and raised in Thunder Bay, Ontario, by parents who immigrated to Canada before her birth, Morrone always knew she was destined to entertain. At the tender age of four, she was already onstage singing at a local Italian banquet hall with an elder sibling. Raised by her strict Catholic Nonna (who is a central character in the performance), she received a reluctant blessing before leaving home in search of fame and fortune.

"She was beyond Catholic – you couldn't even think of a swear word in her house," laughs Morrone. "They were extremely not supportive (of becoming an actress). Never, ever, ever! My family wanted me to be a teacher or a banker, something they could identify with."

Although she eventually made the trip in 1987 (after a casting agent suggested it would be a good career move), the roots of her relocation can be traced back to a Miss Chin Bikini contest in Toronto, where she realized her heritage was not as deeply imbedded as she'd always assumed.

"I remember at the time my Italian really sucked compared to some of the other contestants. I felt so ashamed at having denied my 'Italianness' I just figured I had to go," said Morrone, who quickly improved her linguistic abilities to the point where she can now slip in and out of the various dialects depicted by the characters in her show.

As for the characters, there was no shortage of them to be found. She recalls, without wanting to give away too much of the show, a casting agent asking her to disrobe for a role that required no nude scenes, or receiving an unwanted 'massage' on a crowded bus while heading to the Vatican to see the Pope. With



each disturbing encounter, Morrone reverts back to her Catholic upbringing, heading to the nearest church in search of salvation. Eventually her prayers are answered, after a chance encounter with legendary filmmaker Federico Fellini, who offered her not only his wisdom but also a role in his next film (in a sad, fateful twist, Fellini would die a short time later).

In fact, one of the greatest compliments she's received since performing *The Italian in Me*, was from director Gabrielle Muccino (*Pursuit of Happyness*), who congratulated her on a near perfect depiction of Fellini.

"The life of an actor in Rome is kind of like being in a circus," explains Morrone, who eventually landed a job as the frenetic host of an Italian variety TV show. "In L.A. or Toronto, if you go to theatre school, pound the pavement and get enough experience, eventually you'll get recognized for your hard work. In Italy, a director once said 'talent is optional.'"

Thanks to the play, her comedic talents are finally being recognized. She's received a series of rave reviews, including a comparison to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* by fellow Canadian thespian Nia Vardalos. There has been interest in developing *The Italian in Me* into a feature film or sitcom, but for the time being Morrone is content to focus on theatre, allowing her to relive a period in her life, that was as enchanting and fulfilling as it was frustrating.

"At times you feel like prey, but it turned out to be the most wonderful experience of my life and I wouldn't trade it for anything," said Morrone, adding that she's kept many of her personal belongings in a storage locker in Rome, mulling over the possibility of a return. "Italy remains everything to me and luckily I get to go back (with every performance) without ever having to get on a plane."

The Italian in Me opens at the Diesel Playhouse Theatre (56 Blue Jays Way) on May 3rd and runs until May 13th. Tickets, which are \$15 at the door, can be purchased in advance by calling 416.971.5656.

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