

THE SEVENTH ART | SPOTLIGHTS | EVENTS | REVIEWS

LAVINIA PISANI

“I have often gone to start a film only to find the producers surprised to discover I am American.”-Alessandro Nivola says.

This is what this year’s Tony Award nominee Nivola faces by carrying Italian roots.

It was the performance on Broadway as Frederick Treves opposite Bradley Cooper in “The Elephant Man” that scored him the nomination.

Nivola, 43, has recently competed filming on Nicolas Winding Refn’s movie “The Neon Demon” opposite Elle Fanning and Christina Hendricks, as well as Barry Levinson’s film for HBO “The Wizard of Lies” about the Madoff Ponzi scheme.

During our email exchange, Nivola writes he plays Mark Madoff. The older son, who committed suicide two years after the fraud was revealed and Robert DeNiro plays his father Bernie Madoff.

His next focus is on “Weightless” produced by Greg Shapiro and directed by Jaron Albertin.

“I’ll be starring opposite Julianne Nicholson,” Nivola shares.

Digging into Nivola’s filmography background, I read titles such as “American Hustle,” “Selma,” “Face/Off,” “Jurassic Park III” and “Coco Before Chanel.”

Q: Tell me about your Italian origins and in what way you feel connected to the culture, if so.

A: My grandfather was the Sardinian sculptor Costantino Nivola. He grew up in a small village near Nuoro and earned a scholarship to attend art school in Milan where he met my grandmother Ruth Guggenheim who was a German Jewish refugee from Frankfurt. Together they emigrated to the US during the war. My father was born in New York but had Italian as his first language and only learned to speak English in school. As a child we spent the summers living with my grandparents and Italian was the language they spoke with my father. Growing up I always had a strong sense that I had European roots and I felt thoroughly Italian until I began regular visits to my extended family in Sardinia who all thought I was the most American person they had ever met.

What inspired you to start your acting career at first?

I had an older cousin who was studying to be an actor and I



Italian American actor Alessandro Nivola

A Conversation with Italian American Star Alessandro Nivola

saw him in a play at his college when I was about 10 years old. It made me want to be an actor. I wasn’t a film buff. I wanted to

be in the theater. But that all changed later on.

What acting role did you feel the most and why?

Perhaps the most enjoyable role I’ve played was Ian McKnight in Lisa Cholodenko’s “Laurel Canyon”. He was very



Alessandro Nivola in a scene from Coco Before Chanel. With Emily Mortimer in the photo below



mischievous and sexually irresponsible, but he was also a passionate musician and a loving person. He was both soulful and comic. Two great qualities which are rarely combined in one character. I also got to record all my own music and be naked in a swimming pool with Frances MacDormand and Kate Beckinsale.

What was the hardest role for you to interpret and why?

Boy Capel in “Coco Before Chanel” was difficult. It was all in French and the director kept criticizing my accent.

Who would you like to work with that you haven’t had the opportunity yet and why?

I’d like to work with the Iranian director Asghar Farhadi who made “A Separation”. It’s one of my favorite movies in recent years. Hopefully he will direct something in English.

What is the biggest advice you would give to young actors/actresses?

Relax. Both when you’re acting and when you’re not.

What is the biggest life lesson you have learned throughout your career?

Not to take anything personally. And that everything is always changing (for better and for worse).

Let’s say that one day people wouldn’t recognize you and your life as an actor would be over, what would you do?

Sink into a deep depression and hope that my children would support me financially.

What is your next goal?

My wife Emily Mortimer and I have a production company and we’ve begun producing for film and television. Our first outing is the HBO series “Doll & Em” but we have many other things in development. The company is growing and we want to write and direct our own projects.

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