

## Tribeca Interviews — Craving the ‘Human Voice’: Filmmaker Edoardo Ponti Discusses His Short and Working With His Mother, Sophia Loren

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Pictured: Sophia Loren stars as Angela in the Italian short “Human Voice.” Photo Credit: Rodrigo Prieto.

Therapist Russ Harris once wrote that “the feeling of love comes and goes on a whim; you can’t control it. But the action of love is something you can do, regardless of how you are feeling.”

We see this quote come to life in Italian-American filmmaker Edoardo Ponti’s short *Human Voice* (*Voce umana*), in which the character of Angela (played by Ponti’s mother, Sophia Loren) comes to the painful realization, during the course of multiple phone conversations, that the man she has been involved with has become enamored with another. It is through these beautifully crafted telephone monologues from her side that we recognize the understanding and respect that both parties still share for the other — the action of him calling and comforting her through heartening words, despite the unraveling of her seemingly stable emotional state and the approaching date of his impending wedding.

After the loss of her husband during the war and the many years of agony and loneliness that followed, Angela had allocated all of her hope and feelings into this new love when it came along, much like a teenager in the throes of passion. Therefore, it is with horror and disillusionment that she accepts the fact that despite the fondness she feels, she has once again been left completely and utterly alone – a state that she views much like a death sentence. And while what Harris probably had in mind is that feelings of love don’t always last, but friendship and the movements of love can be sustained, throughout this powerful 25-minute film that resembles something of a puzzle whose pieces slowly come together, we comprehend that both Angela and her now ex-lover both crave the intimacy, security and memories that come with a simple conversation, even if after the dial tone only silence will forever remain on both ends.

*Human Voice* is not only an unexpectedly breathtaking and emotionally saturated piece of cinema in the short film category from esteemed director Ponti, who also directed *The Nightshift Belongs to the Stars* (2013), but it is the revival of the legendary Italian actress Sophia Loren. After 10 years away from the cinematic lights, she has come back shining like the bright star that she is with a performance that will leave you stunned and wishing for a chance to converse with her character. Ponti, who is no stranger to working with his mother after casting her in his 2002 feature film *Between Strangers*, found time during the festival to discuss

with *GALO* his adaptation of the play to film, working with his mother, and the story of how he met cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, a collaborator on the film.

**GALO:** Your film is based upon Jean Cocteau's iconic one-person stage play of the same name. What drew you to this production and made you want to adapt its story to film? And did you make any alterations from the original?

**Edoardo Ponti:** This film was a double dream: the dream of my mother to inhabit this role for 40 years and my dream to tell this story after I fell in love with it as a teenager. The main change we applied to the original is to create a character that was perhaps less resigned to her fate at the beginning of the piece and more intent on getting her man back, in order to give more of an emotional character arc to the piece.

**GALO:** I read somewhere, I believe the *ASC*, that you wanted the film to have a romantic yet realistic atmosphere to it; that you wanted to stay away from overdramatizing the scenes. I personally think you did a fantastic job with that as we watch Angela longingly talk on the phone, desperately trying to hold onto the voice at the other end, as she revisits the past five years in her mind's eye. Her portrayal is so realistic that one begins to imagine themselves in her situation when at a certain age – an age when we wait around for a phone call to fill up our days, craving the human voice just as much as the human touch.

**EP:** The interesting thing of my mother's performance is that not only she runs the emotional gamut of a woman going through a deep crisis of the heart, but each stage of this pain recalls a different age of her life. At times she manifests the behavior of a high school teenager, at others a 40-year-old, and finally, a woman at the final stage of her life. All these different colors intrinsically are linked to the emotional state of Angela throughout the phone call.

**GALO:** As insinuated above, this film is as much about human loneliness and the need for social interaction as it is about the carefreeness and tribulations of love. Why do you think that Angela, despite trying to act strong, has such a hard time letting go of this love? Could it be that she put all of her faith in being able to love again into this one man after the loss of her husband and is unable to picture going through that uncertainty again?

**EP:** Yes, with the death of her husband during the war she had given up on love, and then this man unexpectedly came into her life in a time when she had drawn a curtain on the sentimental part of her life. But he succeeded in reviving in her heart those feelings of passion. The pain comes from the fact that Angela took an unlikely chance at life, she believed in this man, only to be betrayed by him.

**GALO:** This was your mother's first movie role in what I believe to be 10 years. Was it your choice to cast her in the film, and if so, why? And can you tell us a bit about what it was like working with your mother and how she felt being back on a movie set after such a long absence? (I know this wasn't the first time you've worked with her, as in 2002 she starred in your first feature film *Between Strangers*, alongside Gerard Depardieu and Mira Sorvino.) I imagine there was a certain level of admiration as well as pride that you felt for each other's work.

**EP:** No one could have played this film better than my mother. As a director, it is my duty to cast the best person for the role and that person just happened to be my mother. She has that combination of strength and fragility; she is both grounded and elusive, tough but also vulnerable. She lives for love. She is Angela.

**GALO:** Were there any disagreements in terms of character portrayal or dreams for the adaptation between yourself and your mother, or would you say that you both shared the same vision?

**EP:** My mother totally gives herself to the vision of the director. She trusted the way I was telling the story. If she didn't, I don't think that she could have given us such an unforgettable performance.

**GALO:** You worked with cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Babel*) on this film, who you met initially during one of your times at Tribeca. I believe this is also when you approached him about this project. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? What was his reaction to the idea like?

**EP:** Getting Rodrigo for this film is one of my biggest success stories. Last year, both our films were showing in the same program at Tribeca. After the show, I bluntly walked up to him cold and pitched him the film. I was expecting him to blow me off completely, but when he emailed me that he liked the script and wanted to do it, I was overjoyed. I couldn't believe it. Our collaboration has been a dream come true. His work is deeply romantic but it has this edge to it that keeps it current. Perfect for this kind of film. I sincerely hope this is the beginning of a long collaboration with such a great artist and friend.

**GALO:** What other filmmaking plans do you have for yourself after the festival?

**EP:** When it comes to my plans, I have three feature films in the works. One set in contemporary Manhattan, one set in Guatemala in the 1990s, and one set in Rome at the end of the 19th century.

**GALO:** You've been at Tribeca a few times already. Is it as exciting for you as the first time you were here? And how is each visit different – what did you like most about this year's festival, for instance?

**EP:** What is always thrilling is to connect with the audiences after your film. To feel the people as they watch the story unfold. What is also inspiring is to view the films that Sharon Badal and Ben Thompson have compiled and curated for the festival. They are true masters at shaping these programs. Every year, it is a pleasure to participate in such a warm, inspiring and prestigious festival. I am very grateful for the opportunity to share my work there.