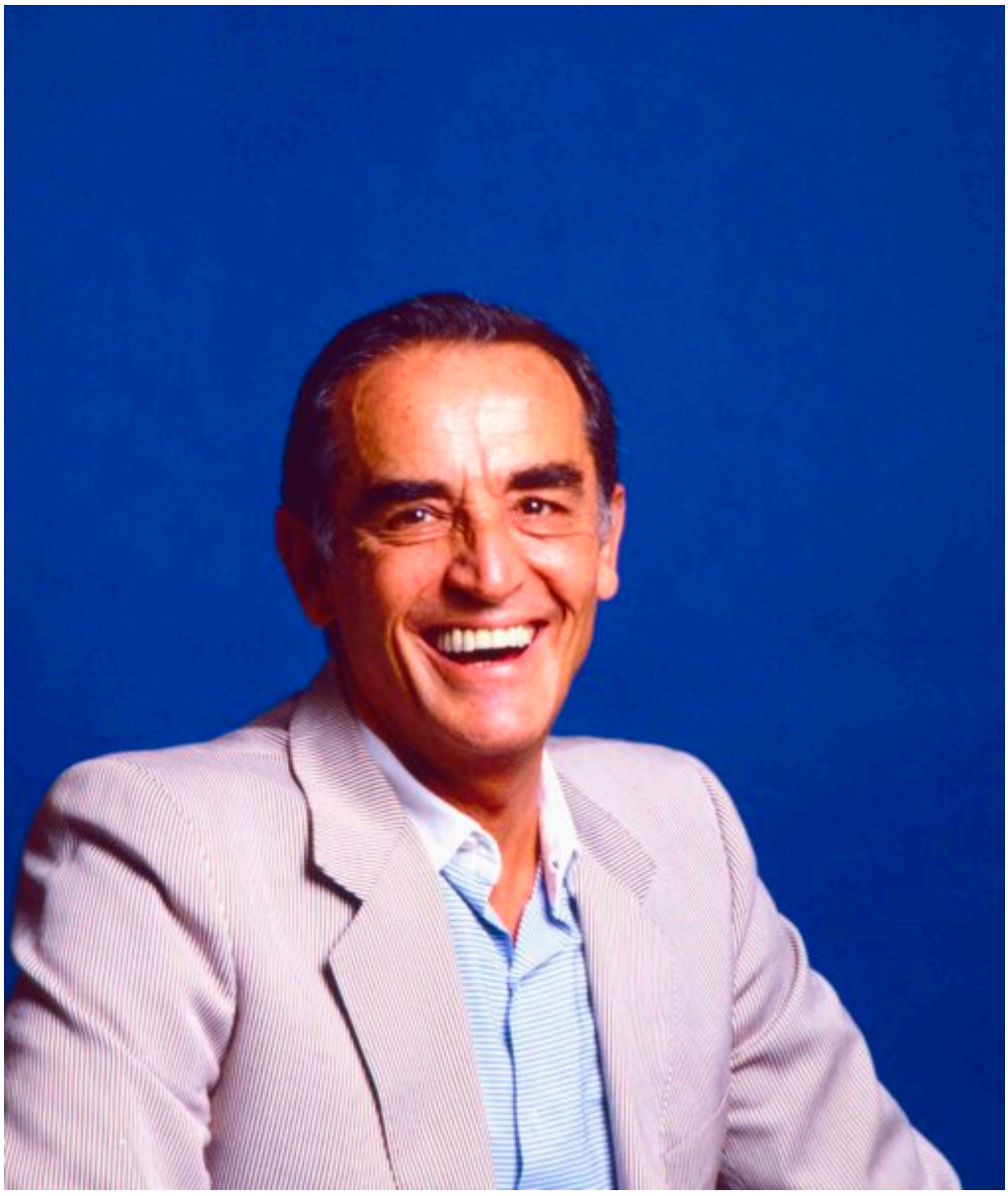
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Remembering Vittorio Gassman

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, June 24th, 2020

In the summer of 1984, right after photographing the Los Angeles Olympics (read about that experience here), I had the amazing opportunity to spend a day with Vittorio Gassman, the legendary Italian actor. He was in town to perform a one-man show of his creation, *Viva Vittorio!*, at the Mark Taper Forum, and I was on assignment from the Italian newsweekly *Panorama* to do a photo layout.



Vittorio Gassman (c) Elisa Leonelli

We met at the Music Center at noon on August 30, and Vittorio graciously agreed to drive to various locations I had selected to represent Los Angeles and Hollywood as backdrops. We first stopped at the mural by Terry Schoonoven on the 101 Fwy. I had been photographing the painting of these incredible Olympic murals from their inception, and I knew where to park and how to access it. The Roman Coliseum next to LA City Hall seemed appropriate for this subject. Then we went to the Bonaventure Hotel, that I had recently photographed for a feature on Los Angeles architecture in *Epoca* magazine. On to the Hollywood sign, that was near my home on Beachwood Drive and I had photographed many times, when it was broken down and after it was restored, then to a mural representing a clown face, a fitting symbol for the chameleonic actor. Finally we spent several hours at my photography studio in Hollywood, where I took a formal portrait, and watched the consummate actor apply his own make-up and put on the costume he wore on stage to play the ape that learns how to behave like a human in *A Report to an Academy* by Franz Kafka.

Vittorio Gassman-Report to an Academy © Elisa Leonelli.

I don't remember what we talked about all day, only that it was a pleasant and unique experience. So this week, on the 20th anniversary of his passing (June 29, 2000), I spent hours researching and learnt many interesting fact about this icon of Italian cinema, who stands on par with Marcello Mastroianni, Alberto Sordi, Ugo Tognazzi, Nino Manfredi.

Vittorio Gassman was born September 1, 1922 in Genova to a German father, Heinrich Gassmann, and an Italian mother from Pisa, Luisa Ambron. He had an older sister, Mary. He moved to Rome where he studied at the National Academy of Dramatic Arts, then started acting in the theater, which remained his life-long passion. He played *Hamlet* in 1952 and performed many other Shakespearean and classic roles throughout his career touring all over Italy. In 1979 he founded his own theater school in Florence, Bottega Teatrale di Firenze.

Gassman acted in countless movies, my favorites being *I soliti ignoti* (1958) by Mario Monicelli with Marcello Mastroianni, *Il sorpasso* (1962) by Dino Risi with Jean-Luis Trintignant, *C'eravamo tanto amati* (1974) by Ettore Scola with Nino Manfredi and Stefania Sandrelli, *Profumo di donna* (1974) by Dino Risi. A 1992 American remake starred Al Pacino.

But I found *Il Mattatore* (1960) by Dino Risi (that I was able to watch on YouTube) the most emblematic of Gassman's protean talent. The title is the Italian translation of the Spanish Matador, bullfighter, and comes from a sketch comedy TV show that Gassman created in 1959. In the movie he plays a classic theater actor who attempts to perform in vaudeville by imitating Amedeo Nazzari's famous line in *La cena delle beffe* (1942) "Chi non beve con me, peste lo colga," but is booed off the stage. He then pretends to be a businessman from Bologna for a robbery scheme and ends up in jail, where he meets a con man played by Peppino De Filippo and embarks in a life of crime. He dons several disguises and speaks in various accents to impersonate many different characters, just as an actor does, with an arrogant self-assurance that came to define Gassman's persona. The nickname "il Mattatore" remained with him his entire life.

The real Gassman was actually an introverted man, who confessed to have suffered from depression, and not to understand women or his children, despite his many relationships. He had two daughters, Paola (born 1945) with Nora Ricci and Vittoria (born 1953) with Shelley Winters, and two sons, Alessandro (born 1965) with Juliette Mayniel, and Jacopo (born 1980) with Diletta

D’Andrea.

Vittorio Gassman-Olympic mural © Elisa Leonelli.

I did read the third chapter of Shelley Winter’s tell all 1980 autobiography *Shelley-also known as Shirley*, titled “My Spaghetti Years”. I suggest you check it out if you wish to get all the juicy details, such as Vittorio’s affair with his 16-year old Ophelia, Anna Maria Ferrero. But I wish to conclude with a quote from an interview that he gave to journalists of the Hollywood Foreign Press in 1979. “There were too many differences between Shelley and me to be able to handle a marriage, which is always a very difficult task to achieve on both sides, We were both very possessive, so it was a constant duel, but having had battles, that can help to develop a new relationship where everybody is free and you can more easily recognize the merits and interests of the other person. And that’s what happened to me and Shelley, we are really very good friends now.”

Other sources of information we recommend (if you understand Italian and can find them), are the 2010 documentary *Vittorio racconta Gassman*, also the two autobiographical books he wrote, *Un grande avvenire dietro le spall*e (1981) and *Memorie del sottoscala* (1990). Here’s the link to a revealing 1967 interview with the tall and handsome Gassman, who was 6’3” and had been a champion basketball player in his early 20s.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 24th, 2020 at 12:20 pm and is filed under Film, Photography
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