

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Stanley Tucci

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, November 4th, 2020

Last week I interviewed [Stanley Tucci](#) via Zoom about *The Witches* (HBO Max) directed by Robert Zemeckis from the 1983 children's novel by [Roald Dahl](#). He plays the hotel manager attending to the needs of the Grand High Witch (Anne Hathaway) during a witches convention. Octavia Spencer plays the wise grandmother who helps her nephew after he's turned from a boy into a mouse, which is the witches' grand plan for all children. I had read the book, and all of Roald Dahl's amazing stories for children, when my child was little, I had watched the [1990 movie](#) by Nicolas Roeg with Anjelica Huston.



Stanley Tucci-The Witches © Daniel Smith-WB

I also interviewed Octavia Spencer and Anne Hathaway, but speaking with Stanley Tucci was the highlight of my week, he is such a delightful man and a fantastic actor. I connect with him because he's third generation Italian American, while I'm first generation, and we share a love of cooking.



The first time I interviewed him was in 1996 for *Big Night*, a movie he co-wrote with his cousin (Joseph Tropiano) and co-directed with his friend actor Campbell Scott. I remembered loving it at the time and it's free on Amazon Prime, so I watched it again. Tucci plays the younger brother and Tony Shalhoub the older brother, Italian immigrants from Calabria who own a restaurant called *Paradise* on the New Jersey Shore in the 1950s. I won't spoil your pleasure of watching this delightful movie if you have never seen it, and you must, I will only point out that the naming of the brothers, Primo (first) and Secondo (second), is an ancient Italian custom. My paternal grandfather was named Ultimo (last) by his mother, with the middle name of Sperindio, which always made my aunt, his daughter, laugh, because it means "Hoping in God." My maternal great-grandmother had 16 children, so to hope that a child would be the last was common among women of their generation who had no birth control to protect themselves from their husbands' lust.



Stanley Tucci (c) HFPA 2006

When I interviewed Tucci in New York for *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) I asked him about his Italian background. He said: "My grandparents were Italians from Calabria, and I lived in Florence for a year as a kid when my father, now a retired art teacher, had a sabbatical and studied at the Academia. So it was there that I learned Italian and a great appreciation for the culture. I have been back to Italy quite a few times since, and I worked there, I am without question addicted to Italy and my Italian heritage is a huge part of who I am."

As to my other question about what he most appreciated about the Italian culture and lifestyle, he replied: "I think that they live the right way. I believe that the Italians are a culture that can survive just about anything, because their attitude toward life is maybe the healthiest of all. They're unashamed to be who they are and there's a real consistency to the behavior, even though there's real inconsistencies to the government."

It was on the set of that movie that Tucci became friends with Emily Blunt, who played Meryl's Streep assistant (he also worked with Anne Hathaway as the newly hired assistant), and met her sister Felicity Blunt. Years later, in 2011, after his first wife Kate died of breast cancer in 2009, Stanley and Felicity fell in love and married in 2012, they now have two small children. Tucci is also the father of three older children and two stepchildren with Kate. He seems like a gentle and caring family man.

The role that I loved the most was when Tucci played Julia Child's real life husband Paul, again opposite Meryl Streep, in *Julie and Julia* (2009) written and directed by Nora Ephron. You don't often see in movies or in life men who are so supportive of their wives' talent and ambition, and this story is set in the 1950s.



As for his passion for cooking, Tucci is working on a fourth cookbook, which will also be a memoir. In 1999 he had co-written *Cucina & Famiglia: Two Italian Families Share Their Stories, Recipes and Traditions*, with Gianni Scappin, chef at Le Madri restaurant in New York, and his mother Joan Tropiano Tucci. In 2012 he had co-written *The Tucci Cookbook* with his parents, including his mother's traditional recipes from Calabria, such as the Timpano that is prepared as the centerpiece dish in *Big Night*. In 2014 he had co-written *The Tucci Table* with his wife Felicity Blunt, and he claims that she makes excellent lasagne.

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