

An Interview With Cristina Fontanelli

By Olinda Turturro



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This is a loosely translated, behind-the-scenes interview excerpt between Olinda Turturro and Cristina Fontanelli, award-winning New York City icon and world-renowned opera singer, a Lifetime Achievement Award In the Arts winner (Previous honorees include Luciano Pavarotti) PBS Television host for Andrea Bocelli, Il Volo, Tony Bennett, Celine Dion, etc. Cristina has sung at the White House, Columbus Day Parade on Fifth Avenue in NYC, Rockefeller Center, Gracie Mansion, to name only a few. Forbes magazine says "*Cristina Fontanelli at Feinstein's At The Regency is like seeing a cross between Maria Callas and Ethel Merman. She has no equal.*" Cristina is the voice behind "Nonna", Lida Batianich's Christmas Special radio commercial, and Domino's Pizza. Cristina sings in eight languages and her accolades are infinite. Cristina is someone whom I am proud to call my friend.

Olinda: Ciao Cristina, bella? How are you today?

Cristina: Oh, Olinda... Oh my Goodness, how well-written is that? It's incredible. Thank you so much. Really, Olinda, that is the most beautiful intro I've ever gotten! You got all the high points I hit.

Olinda: I hit the high points, but did I hit the high notes? (said jokingly).

Cristina: Leave that up to me.

Olinda: Okay. You got it! (we laugh).

Cristina, you're such a spectacular singer and also an actress. How did it all start? Did you begin as a singer, if so, who inspired you and how did your interest in acting begin?

Cristina: Oh, my goodness, we could do a whole interview just on this. See... you choose the most interesting questions. Well, when I was a little girl, my mother had the most beautiful natural voice and I would hear her singing and I would go around to the flowers in the garden and sing to the flowers, singing everything. I was always singing. But, really, my heart was drawn to acting. So, when I was eleven years old, I saw *Gone With The Wind*, in a big movie theater. And, when Scarlett O'Hara, in the middle of the film, pulls out the rotten turnip, from the ground and says: "As God is my witness I'll never go hungry again".

Olinda: Right, right. (small chuckle). You had to act, then.

Cristina: I was eleven years old. I said Okay, that's what I want to do. All of a sudden, I wanted to be an actress. I

went home. I ordered all the Shakespeare plays. You know, in my youth, my childhood, I actually would put on shows, in the neighborhood and put-up curtains with blankets and make paper tickets and choreograph the dances in the basement, with the other kids in the neighborhood. So, I had showbusiness in my blood. But, acting, in particular. When I got out of high school, it was kind of a dicey time in my family. We were having some personal tragic issues as my brother had died. I started, as it was a double program, with Pace University to study law and at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and eventually I just dropped Pace University. I went to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and graduated from there. And, when I got out of school, I was always getting notes from agents and casting directors, "Cristina you have to lose fifteen pounds". "SURE", I said. You know, coming from an Italian family, we didn't know small portions. I always loved to eat. So, I said "You know what... (this sounds like a joke, but it's not)... why don't I just become an Opera singer. Because, in opera, you can sing, you can act and you can eat all the lasagna you want". This has become like a tagline in some of my performances, in nightclubs and other fun places. When I graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, I threw myself, one hundred and fifty percent, into the opera world, absorbing the operas like a sponge. Very seriously, acting them out. La Traviata, where she dies of consumption. And, Tosca, she throws herself off the parapet. And, there's so many incredibly dramatic moments in opera. And, the irony is that in my senior show, at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, with an incredible most wonderful Clifford Odets drama called Awake And Sing...do you believe at eighteen years old, I played Bessie the mother, at eighteen. It was a story of a depression era family and the grandfather loved Enrico Caruso. She was the glue, for the family and her determination kept them going during the depression and what happened was during the rehearsals, I heard over and over and over the Tosca beautiful tenor aria, from Tosca, as we were rehearsing. And, there's a scene where she goes in and smashes all the grandfather's opera recordings, because she's so upset that everyone is up in the air and not with their feet on the ground, to survive. So, when I went to my first opera, at the Metropolitan Opera... Tosca... I heard that Aria and I said "Oh my God. That's from the opera". And, that's when I got the opera bug. But, not quite. One more, very important thing, changed the trajectory of my entire life. One Summer, I was singing with the Light Opera Of Manhattan, in the chorus and I heard Maria Callas' voice on the radio and I remember feeling like I was almost floating, like in a dream, mesmerized by this voice coming out of the radio and that was the day... actually her voice is what inspired me to become an opera singer. Subsequently, I've been compared to her, in reviews, in Forbes magazine, by Mario Fratti.

Olinda: Yes, Mario Fratti. I know Mario Fratti. What a wonderful playwright. He wrote Nine, a musical adaptation of Fellini's film Eight And A Half. I saw it on Broadway, with Sergio Franchi. I also auditioned for it!

Cristina: Well, Mario called me a "young Callas". And, Maria Callas has always been in my heart. You are very involved in the film world... I really had a yearning to make the movie about her life. I think it would make a beautiful film.

Olinda: I agree. well... you put it out there. Ya' never know. We can speak further about how this can be done.

Cristina, who did you grow up listening to? For me, as a singer, it was a combination of the great jazz singers, like Billie Holiday and lots of Motown, Diana Ross and the Supremes and of course, the Temptations! And, the same for actors...

Cristina: Wow, that's such a hard question to answer... you know, because we're in the industry and we've been trained. We know what goes into being a great actor. I'm gonna mention Sir Lawrence Olivier. Of course, Sir Anthony Hopkins and Daniel Day Lewis. I used to love the old Hollywood movies. Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart. I want to be transported into a world where we are all uplifted, as in the old Hollywood films.

Olinda: Sir Anthony Hopkins is one of my favorites, as well.

Touted “la diva della canzone” (the diva of songs) you have sung for and with a long list of celebrities, as well as two sitting president’s, president Bill Clinton and president George W. Bush. Also, with some of the best singers of all time. One of them, of course, is Tony Bennett! How did you get to sing with Tony?

Cristina: Oh, my goodness... isn’t that just special, that I sang with him? I was on the bill with him, as an Italian singer, at Hunter Mountain, at a big Italian festival, which they hold each year. I also sang with Tony at a private party, in Boston, at the Park Plaza Hotel. On the bill was Tony Bennett and his trio, myself and...believe it or not, Red Buttons and Joan Rivers. I met Tony, backstage and was completely starstruck. I was so young and shy, then. I had to learn how to push out of my comfort zone, to be an entertainer.

Olinda: I just saw “One Last Time”, Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga. It was Tony Bennett’s last concert and his 95th birthday celebration, at Radio City Music Hall, which aired on CBS. I thought of you. What did you think of this concert and grand farewell to Tony Bennett?

Cristina: I mean it is just so heartwarming and moving. And, I really am a big fan of Lady Gaga’s, because, as you know, anyone who knows about singing and good singing knows that she really has “chops”, as we call it. So, the two of them, together... I think they did more for the intergenerational appreciation of the old classic music. And, of course, he’s an American icon.

Olinda: My sentiments, exactly, Cristina. Tony Bennett allows today’s youth to truly see what this music was and still is all about. There’s pure magic, in the writing of the old songs. The lyrics, the orchestrations... and, Tony Bennett’s phrasing! Pure magic!

Cristina: Oh yes. This is part of my foundation. The Cristina Fontanelli Foundation. After so many years of producing shows with children and preserving our music, one of the things I will be expanding on is just what we spoke about. Continuing to share the gorgeous music of yesteryear. Of kinder and simpler times.

Thank you for letting me do this interview, Olinda, because it’s a great way to get all of this out into the public.

Olinda: My pleasure, Cristina. (continuing...)

You make singing and performing seem effortless. Yet, I know, as a singer and also because we have spoken about it...the rigorous preparation and regimen you have, in preparing for a concert. I know it is all-encompassing. Please elaborate on this. and, those high notes! Amazing!

Cristina: Well, thank you. We would need another ten interviews, in order for us to cover everything. So, let’s get to the meat of it. You know that there’s the vocal journey. You train. You need the right teachers. I was blessed with a natural voice, which enables me to hit all the high notes. Breath support and articulation, of the phrases, is another thing I worked on. And, unless I’m sick, I can roll out of bed and in five or ten minutes, I could go on any stage. That’s how solid my technique is now.

Olinda: Everytime we speak, you are quite busy, working on several projects, at once. Right now, you are preparing for your spectacular 18th annual Christmas in Italy concert. What a beautiful concert! I completely recommend this for anyone who is looking to revel in the Christmas spirit! And, ironically, it falls on December 18th! For several years, the concert was at Carnegie Hall. This year, it is in Little Italy. It must be such a rush, doing this concert. Tell me about how this feels, as a singer and an entertainer, doing a concert of this magnitude?

Cristina: Oh, what a nice question. Well, you had said that you wanted me to speak from my heart. So, here it is. I started this eighteen years ago. It is truly a labor of love. And, through the years we've had hundreds of children and youth performing, dancing and singing, in Italian. We've given thousands of dollars to charities, such as Saint Jude's and the Wounded Warriors and various food pantries, in New York City and in Italy. It's taken on a life of its own. This year, it will be in Little Italy. It's so special in the church, that the Italian immigrants built because they weren't allowed to go into the big Cathedral. It's called The Most Precious Blood and it is now the official shrine of San Gennaro. It's an Italian Christmas extravaganza.

Olinda: As an actress, you appeared in a principal role, in the award- winning short film, "Santino". And, I remember how wonderful you were, when we both did a screenplay reading of "The Curfew", for Danny Aiello, directed by Bob Giraldi (known for Michael Jackson's Beat It video and Pepsi Commercial), with a star-studded cast. How would you say acting differs, from singing, for you, as a craft and a career?

Cristina: Wow. You ask the most incredible questions.

Olinda: Thank you. (Smiles).

Cristina: It's so ironic. I explained that I really wanted to be an actress and for me to be in that short film, Santino and then to win two best actress awards, in the two International Film festival's Cutting Room and the Venus in June. It was a childhood dream come true. And, doing that reading, with you and Danny Aiello... he represents an era of warmth and Italian congeniality. And, although it was just a reading, I worked very hard on the role. There were lines in Italian and although I speak Italian, fluently, I met with an Italian friend, Leonardo, who coached me. Because, as you do, we take this seriously and I wanted to get it right. It was a special day.

Olinda: What is your favorite restaurant in New York City?

Cristina: One of my favorite spots is the Boathouse in Central Park.

Olinda: What is your favorite New York City neighborhood?

Cristina: For me it would be Little Italy, because it is the most meaningful neighborhood, to me, as it's where my grandparents immigrated to.

Olinda: What is your favorite thing to do in NYC?

Cristina: Mangia! Mangia! (Eat! Eat!)

Olinda: What do you think makes a true New Yorker?

Cristina: I think it's the ability to bounce back, from everything and anything. That calm determination. Toughness, with heart. What do you call those chocolate covered cherries? Or, like a chocolate covered marshmallow, you know? We're tough on the outside with soft parts on the inside.

Olinda: That's perfect, Cristina. (continuing...)

So, Cristina...at this time I'm going to say grazie, for a truly wonderful interview. It's such a pleasure being friends with you. I know that we've spoken about doing a duet, together and I know that we will do it, with your operatic voice and my jazz and rock and roll style...I can see it climbing to the top of the charts. And, that will be something to add to our (as the French say) the Raison d'etre; meaning our reason for living, which is said tongue and cheek, of course. In New York City we say "Yeah! We gotta do it!". And, on that note I say thank you and grazie mille!

Cristina: Of course, we will do that duet. Grazie and Buon Natale to you, Olinda!



- (1) Cristina Fontanelli (headshot, top of page)
- (2) Cristina Fontanelli's concert flyer, "Christmas in Italy"
- (3) Cristina Fontanelli and Tony Bennett, "Cheek to Cheek," in concert together
- (4) Staged Reading of "The Curfew" with Cristina Fontanelli, Danny Aiello, Bob Giraldi & Olinda Turturro



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