

## 'Beauty is the right light for this story': Roberta Torre on *The Fabulous Ones*

Filmmakers February 14, 2023 – By Maria Campaña Ramia

The vocation of Roberta Torre (Milan, 1962) embraces cinema and theater, fiction and documentary, fantasy and reality alike. Visionary, iconoclast, and eclectic: these are some of the adjectives that come to my mind to describe her voice and take on art.

In 1997, Torre released her acclaimed debut *Tano da Morire (To Die for Tano)*, an irreverent musical about the Sicilian mafia which received numerous awards. Since then, in addition to directing films, plays, and video clips prolifically, she has published several novels. During the last edition of IDFA, the Italian filmmaker won the Award for Best Directing in the Envision Competition for her mesmerizing feature *Le favolose (The Fabulous Ones)*. The film saw the light of day at the Giornate degli Autori (Venice Days) and has since moved on to captivate diverse audiences worldwide.

Porpora, Nicole, Sandeh, Mizia, and Sofia, in order of appearance, are five friends who gather after many years without seeing each other to offer a fair funeral to their dear Antonia, who was buried in heteronormative clothes decades ago. To inhumate a trans woman in such attire is to perform a last gesture of cruelty on a body that has already experienced enough violence, but it is often the will of families who fail to accept the actual gender and sexual identities of their kin.

Roberta Torre started working on *The Fabulous Ones* in 2015. By then, she had read many of the books by the sociologist and writer Porpora Marcasciano. "*Un po' donna e un po' no*" (a bit woman and a bit not), as co-star Nicole De Leo tells her when she finds her dressed in a smart black suit filled with buttons promoting the causes she defends, Marcasciano is one of the leading voices of the Italian trans movement and the adhering force of the film.

"I read a lot of Porpora's books, but I didn't find my story because obviously my circumstances are different," Torre acknowledges. "I tried to find a place to recognize myself, and I discovered it when I found the story of Antonia, a person who is a woman all her life, but when she dies, the family decides to bury her dressed as a man. So, I decided to speak about this because, there, I found not only myself but the story of everyone: a tale about memory, about the right that all of us have to be remembered as how we were during our lifetimes.

"Porpora told me about seven women who could be in the cast. We began to have a lot of online conversations because the Covid pandemic started in that period. They were very beautiful and through them I could start to see the film, to see the cast, and to see how they interacted with each other. As I understood the real character and the real person behind each of them, I decided to write the script."

The film starts with a sequence of five women nurturing their friendship around an inflatable pool. An ethereal moment condenses one amongst all the qualities of Roberta Torre's film: a certain atemporality, an enduring elegance in the mise-en-scène and in the attitude of the main characters that feels so warm, seducing, and welcoming. More than a film to watch, *The Fabulous Ones* is a film to witness, a collective ritual of love and life, a provocative piece of art, so intimate and full of force, truth, and, above all, freedom.

Even though the film feels richly imbued by the power of a collaborative process of creation, it was deliberately modeled by the sharp gaze of its author. "This is a method that I have used since my first feature, *Tano da Morire*, a film that I made with real people. I am used to working with people who are not actors. These are the things that I always do. I like to have a story, to have dramaturgy, and I like to put people in the mood to give their own life to the film. Afterward, I take a long time editing. It took between seven and eight months to edit *The Fabulous Ones*. The result is a very delicate balance between the real and the dramaturgy. Obviously, I have a very deep relationship with all these women, because I know their situation, I know their feelings, I know their characters, and I know how they can cooperate to make things work. Another thing I wanted is to let them be free to express themselves. Since they are not actresses, they have to be free, to be funny, to be sincere, to be how they are."

Space and time, the quintessential matters of cinema, encounter a careful treatment in *The Fabulous Ones*. Regarding the sole space of the film, the house—which can be perceived as a set or as an extended stage, almost another living presence within the film—becomes a home for the characters and for the viewer, who feels welcomed inside this space of affection, bareness, and confession. When I asked the director if she ever planned to leave the house during the shooting, she was categorical: "I always knew we had to stay in the house. They felt very safe inside, and I think that only there we could build that kind of mood. We stayed two weeks in the house and soon we felt like family. They explored all the rooms; each of them found the best place to stay. I did one week of tests in the house before shooting and used this time to look at them, to see which place they preferred, and to find the light that suited them best."

Time is represented in circular layers, while the juxtaposition of formats provides rich textures and different temporalities that suggest the coexistence of distant epochs in a single moment. Torre attributes the sensation of temporal fluidity particularly to the use of Super8 because, according to her, "when you use Super8, you are always in the past. This is a kind of format that holds memory inside." The film goes further in its exploration of time, drawing on the Bergsonian method of using adult actors to play younger characters in an attempt to represent memory and souvenirs, not as visions of the past, but as palpable images reconfigured in the present. "I didn't want to use younger actresses to play the past. When I decided to do the movie, I knew that the same women with their current age would also perform the moments of the past. I think this is very strong because it creates a strange sensation of time traveling."

Time also seems impregnated in the beautiful outfits proudly worn by each of the *favolose*: Sandeh and her iconic Missoni, Nicole's sequin bodycon dress, Sofia's golden goddess robe, Mizia's bright colored geometric jacket, Porpora's tailored ensembles, and the feline faux fur coat purposely burned by Massimina (a cheeky companion from earlier days who briefly appears in the film in the shape of a virginal spectre issued from afterlife). In *The Fabulous Ones*, dresses are much more than breath-taking objects; they are political statements on the bodies of women who had to fight all their lives to wear them legitimately. Costume design might not be the most called-for profession in documentary cinema, yet it plays a fundamental role in Roberta Torre's film.

"The first time I went to the house of the actresses, I looked into their wardrobes and chose some outfits. I also used some vintage dresses. A friend of mine owns a shop with beautiful vintage garments, so I asked them to go to this shop and choose what they wanted. I gave them the dresses before the film and I said: 'OK, now you will wear this dress for some time when you go out, whenever you want, so this dress can feel like yours, even if in reality it's not yours.'

"When we shot with Antonia, she had to stay the whole time in a man's suit. Only in the end did she put on the green dress. This situation was shocking for her. She told me repeatedly, 'I don't want to stay all the time in this man's suit,' and I had to say: 'Antonia, this is the story.' In the end she had to do it, but it was very difficult for her. Sometimes she cried, and I had to remind her that it was the film, it was not real, but this was a sort of violence for her in the beginning. Only in the end, when she had the green dress on and her hair was down, was she happy. This is incredible because she felt that man's suit as violence against her body, and I understand, because it is the story of her life."

Here, Torre refers to the film's closing sequence, when the fabulous ones bring their friend Antonia back from death and, together, they perform a revitalizing ceremony of much-deserved closure. She considers the filming of this scene a life changing experience for herself, the cast, and the crew. "They made a lot of preparations with the choreographer to dance and move in front of the camera, but when we shot, I let them completely loose from the beginning till the end because it was a real act. For me it is not a film; it is life. They were so happy, and this can be seen in the film. When Antonia lies in the chair and all of them kiss her and touch her, we were glued to the monitor as if witnessing a miracle. Still now I feel emotional when I recall this moment."

Though a collective impetus guides the 75 minutes of the film, it is also a piece that manages to go deep into the individual lives of exceptional characters who open up about intimate life lessons. It also seems to me that participating in the film allowed them to resignify unsolved chapters of their lives. This is why, as Torre explains, Antonia Iaia was chosen to perform the role of the dead friend:

"Antonia has a very close relationship with death because a friend of hers died when they were very young. This girl was like her other half in this life. The first time I saw her I didn't know that she would be the dead friend, but soon I could detect in her face a strong feeling about death. I decided immediately that she had to play the dead person even if the years were passing by in her body, because this happened a lot of time ago. After this came the idea of the meeting with the phantom of Massimina, a situation that is lighter and funnier.

"However, the other night, Massimina told me: 'But you were right, thinking about me as a phantom! So many times in my life I've felt like a phantom because no one recognizes us as people.' And I feel this is true; they feel like ghosts because for a lot of people they are not women, they are not mothers, they are not persons."

The friends have confronted rejection from society, and emotional and physical aggressions, as Sandeh vividly remembers when she describes an horrendous attack she suffered while working as a prostitute. They have also experienced the innermost frustrations due to the limits of their bodies—as Mizia confesses in a poignant statement where she confronts her circumstantial paternity with her real desire to be not a father but a mother for her daughter, who was born while she was still living as a man. Certainly, the film is a safe haven for them to disembark with the heavy load of unfairness that life has brought, but in spite of that, a spirit of elation, beauty, and pleasure prevails.

Torre has no doubt regarding the bright angle she chose for her film: "I think that beauty is important because it is the right light to put in this story. I didn't want to set this story in a trashy situation because it is not how I see them. I see them as fabulous creatures. I see the fabulous side of their life. I see they are very beautiful, funny, and joyous. Joy is very present in their lives, so I wanted to represent this radiance, this kind of feeling that also has to do with their elegance, their love for fashion, dresses, and beautiful things. They love to be beautiful, so it is right that they stay in that beauty for all of us.

"There is a common feeling that wants trans people sad, but they are not sad, there's no victimization. There is a misunderstanding, and I think it is a political misunderstanding, regarding the representation of the transgender imaginary. I feel this is a political problem, because then it is easier to marginalize them, to cast them as bad people, ugly people, but this is not the case. It is important to show their force, their grace, and their elegance to the world. It is important to have this kind of image of trans people, so we can change our perception about them."



### Related

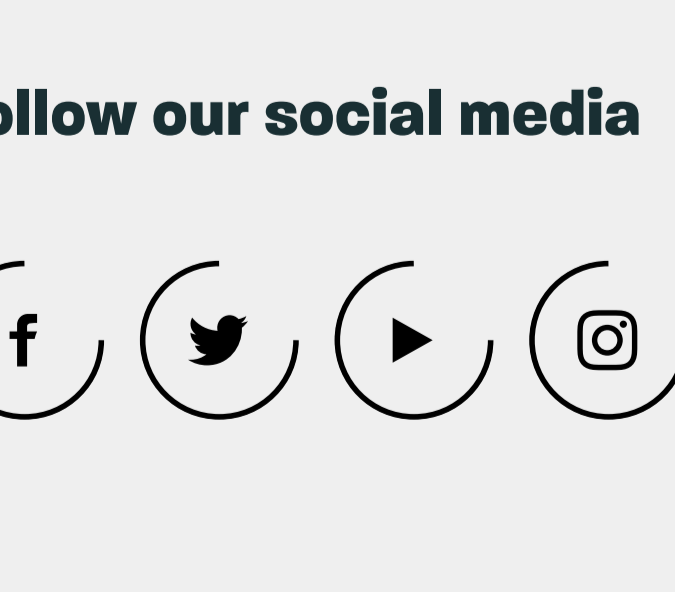


**The Fabulous Ones**  
Roberta Torre – 2022 – 75 min  
A group of fabulous trans women gather to honor their deceased friend Antonia in a way denied to her by her family, who buried Antonia in men's clothes. Politics, pain and joie de vivre combine in this rousing and heartwarming tribute.

**A close up of an overnight country: In conversation with Abbas Rezaie and Zaki Daryabi from The Etifaat Roz**  
Filmmakers February 14, 2023 – The staff

**Fragments of a generation: Making Company of Steel**  
Filmmakers February 14, 2023 – The staff

**Sign up for the newsletter**



<b>About IDFA</b>	<b>Contact</b>	<b>Online collection</b>
Mission	Contact	IDFA Film Archive
Annual report	FAQ	Watch free films
Staff	Press	Watch paid films
Work at IDFA	Nieuwsbrieven	Theme's
ICFR	Advertising	
Inclusion & solidarity		
Festival reports		
IDFA Vondelpark		