

## Film Reviews

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*Haiku on a Plum Tree.*

By Mujah Maraini-Melehi.

Interlinea Films, 2017.

74 minutes. Streaming format, color.

Layer upon layer of family memories forged against the backdrop of World War II and its aftermath fill the screen of the 2017 documentary feature *Haiku on a Plum Tree*, told through the deft lens and script of filmmaker Mujah Maraini-Melehi. The granddaughter of Topazia Alliata and Fosco Maraini, daughter of art historian Toni Maraini, and niece of writer Dacia Maraini, Maraini-Melehi has made a film that seamlessly picks up where Dacia Maraini's (2001) *La nave per Kobe: Diari giapponesi di mia madre* leaves off. Some familiarity with Maraini's Japanese accounts will surely augment the viewer's appreciation of this film as the most recent chapter in a family saga. Also a memory piece, Dacia's *La nave per Kobe* was triggered by Topazia's diary (discovered in an old trunk by Dacia's father, Fosco) of the family's journey to Kobe in 1938. When Fosco gave it to Dacia, she was flooded by her own memories of the voyage and life in Sapporo, Japan, where her ethnographer father had been studying Japan's indigenous people the Ainu. *La nave per Kobe* consists of Dacia's lengthy responses to her mother's impressionistic recollections and drawings. In a dialog across space, time, and generations, Dacia gives voice to not only what she remembered as a child but also to how it shaped her and her relationship with family members over time.

Fast-forward some sixteen years to when her niece, Maraini-Melehi, takes up the family mantle in this documentary to answer her own questions about the family's fateful sojourn in Japan just prior to the outbreak of World War II. What had begun as an idyllic journey nearly ended in tragedy when in 1943 both Topazia and Fosco independently refused to sign a document swearing allegiance to Benito Mussolini's Fascist Republic of Salò (1943–1945), despite the insistence of the Japanese, who were allied with Mussolini. The family was placed under house arrest and subsequently interned in Nagoya with other Italian anti-Fascists. The documentary begins far from these troubles with the love story of Topazia and Fosco. It focuses on the intellectual affinities and the curious, independent natures of this young power couple, ready for adventure as they set off for Japan with Dacia. There they will have two more children and live immersed in Japanese language and culture for a few years, before the darkening political reality from which they had taken refuge catches up with them.

The travails of the family as they weather the precarious mental and physical conditions of their internment form the dark center of this documentary, and it will be Maraini-Melehi herself who leads the path out of it and forward, through her ingenious juxtaposition of sources and their potential for new stories and healing. In fact, it is Maraini-Melehi's story that drives the pace of the film, for she is the one who seeks to understand the Japan that she describes as part of her family history and topography. She gathers Topazia, Dacia, and Toni around the family archive, housed at the Gabinetto Vieusseux–Asia's Centro Romantico in Florence. She guides their reflections with questions about the photographs, letters, and diaries that move between Sicily, Florence, Sapporo, Kyoto, and Nagoya, places she will subsequently visit, introducing her own Japanese sources into the family archive. Japan forged the family nucleus in the crucible of exotic discovery and the rush of new love enjoyed by Fosco and Topazia. But it also tore the family asunder. We learn at the end of the film that once they returned to Italy the family split—not only did the parents Fosco and Topazia separate, but the two oldest daughters, Dacia and Yuki, were sent away to boarding school in Tuscany, with Toni remaining in Sicily with her mother until she was old enough to leave. This family was held together by their indelible memories of Japan.

As the film is clearly an exordial work, even the flaws of narrative unevenness, such as the abrupt cuts from the filmed family interviews to the musical and puppetry interludes, ultimately become part of the story, for they replicate the jarring way that memories may be activated. The documentary is exceptional on a number of levels, for not only does it resonate as a salient model for the recounting of transnational family histories with its multiple perspectives, both shared and divergent, but it also restores to the historical archive knowledge about the little-known prison camps in Japan where anti-Fascist Italians were interned during World War II. Beauty and tragedy are punctuated by the soundscapes of Ryuichi Sakamoto's original music and master shamisen musician Yumiko Tanaka. Maraini-Melehi enlisted the eerie skills of master puppeteer and MacArthur Fellowship award winner Basil Twist, whose puppets, including a life-size doll of deceased Maraini sister Yuki as a child, as well as a skeletal figure representing Fosco during his internment, bring back the two family members whose voices cannot be heard. Twist has also employed the Japanese stage design of *dogugaeshi* with its telescoping stages and sliding screens that alternately conceal and reveal perspectives of Japanese life and tradition intermingled with two-dimensional reenactments of episodes recounted by the family. By embedding this seventeenth-century form of Japanese multimedia into the documentary, Maraini-Melehi visually animates the past and its connections with her own multidirectional account.

One of the most emotionally raw sequences of the film captures memories ricocheting between Topazia and her daughters Toni and Dacia, as they tell of the hardships endured during the years of internment. A prime example of how Maraini-Melehi has achieved the multisensorial layering of memory in the film is the telling of Fosco's self-amputation of his little finger in front of the guards and all of the Italians interned at the Nagoya camp. Topazia recalls the gesture for its political boldness in communicating the ultimate refusal of the Italians to capitulate to Fascism. Dacia and Toni remember the horror and fear that their father's deed instilled within them. They recall the pool of blood and the Italians who retrieved the finger, wrapping it up and hiding it as a sort of talisman against death. As Topazia, Dacia, and Toni recount this turning-point moment in their confinement, the self-amputation is reenacted by a skeletal puppet, with the separated finger standing defiantly on its own against a deep scarlet background. The amputation sequence serves as a conduit between the Japanese and Italians as a third space of cultural reflection where Fosco's gesture also acquires an ethnographic connotation, rich in its ritualistic connection to traditions of finger amputation, or *yubitsume*, among the Japanese. We are reminded of Fosco's towering stature as an ethnologist, the *métier* that brought them to Japan in the first place, but also of a father's gesture for his family, for as Dacia recalls, following Fosco's sacrifice the guards gave them a goat whose milk sustained them.

Herein lies the brilliance of Maraini-Melehi's documentary. It tells history and culture, with culture and the traditions that made up the fabric of the Alliata-Maraini experiential genealogy abroad ultimately overcoming the most brutal moments of war, isolation, and starvation. Told only through the lens of history, these events would remain unbridgeable, even for future generations, setting up inherited hatred and hardened positions. When Maraini-Melehi makes the journey to Japan that her mother cannot bear to make, back to Nagoya in search of any traces of Tempaku, the camp where her grandmother, mother, and aunt were interned, she reconnects, for all of them, with their family traditions and beyond, recuperating fresh elements for the archive. She finds Dacia's childhood friend who hugs her upon learning she is Dacia's niece, singing for her in Italian the child's counting song she had learned from Topazia; Maraini-Melehi compares notes with the Italian-speaking Japanese researcher who offers archival information about the camp of which traces can barely be found today; and finally, she has a Proustian moment with a group of Japanese children, especially a joyous two-year-old girl who, Maraini-Melehi reflects, must have been close to the age of her own mother, Toni, so many years before. This final, healing moment brings the documentary to an uplifting close, reminding us in the most tangible of ways how the archive of cultural memory operates as a protean force, one into which we should collectively delve and

seek to complete through new additions and perspectives. *Haiku on a Plum Tree* is a masterful example of transnational, transgenerational storytellings, of the “choices that make up a family tree, of its forks in the road, its maps and places,” to quote Maraini-Melehi. And though she inherited stories that emerged from those choices and felt their epic weight, through her documentary she adds her own choices, maps, and places, reinscribing and reimagining them for herself, for her elders, and for her progeny.

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#### Work Cited

Maraini, Dacia. 2001. *La nave per Kobe: Diari giapponesi di mia madre*. Milan: Rizzoli.

#### *Shalom Italia*.

By Tamar Tal Anati.

Tamar Tal Films, 2016.

70 minutes. Streaming format, color.

The very first image of *Shalom Italia* offers a metonymy that sets the tone for the entire movie: A close-up features Bubi, one of the three brothers at the center of the story, wiping away a thick layer of dust from the rear-view mirror of his motorcycle, revealing for a brief instant the reflection of his own face. The opening gesture serves as an invitation to remove the heavy crust of personal and familial amnesia over traumatic events of the past. As director Tamar Tal Anati explains in an interview, she wanted the documentary to show “how memory is being constructed” (POV Filmmaker Interview 2017).

The premise of the film itself takes the form of an experiment: Three Italian Israeli brothers search for the cave where they hid during the Shoah. They produce three contradictory accounts of the same narrative, while pursuing three different approaches to their journey back to Italy. From Israel, Bubi came up with the idea of the trip to find the cave in the Tuscan Apennines in a quest for the “place to which we owe our lives.” As the youngest brother, he barely remembers the time spent in the cave and relies on the recollections of his two older brothers, Andrea and Emmanuel, known as Meme. But after only a few minutes, the audience gets a sense of how different their recollections are. For Meme, who was thirteen when his family went into hiding, the persecution of