

Document Citation

Title	La terra trema
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Visconti, Luchino (1906-1976), Milan, Italy
Film Subjects	La terra trema (The earth trembles), Visconti, Luchino, 1948

La Terra Trema

It's generally held that a characteristic feature of Italian neo-realism is the employment of non-professionals. But with the exception of La Terra Trema you seem to prefer working with professional actors.

The use of non-professional players isn't an indispensable part of neo-realism. Certainly, you can take "real" people straight from the street who match the character you want exactly, but then the problem becomes how to make them into actors. I spent hours and hours with my fishermen in *La Terra Trema* over one little line of dialogue. I wanted the same effect from them that I'd have got from an actor. If they had talent, and some certainly did (plus something even more extraordinary—a complete lack of nerves in front of the camera), they could pick up what you were after quite quickly. The root of the matter with actors is to get them to conquer their own nerves, their complexes. But these people hadn't any. What I got from them, it would have taken me even longer to get from actors. At the same time, the text wasn't pre-planned: I got them to make it up for me themselves. For instance, I took the two brothers aside and told them: "Now look, this is the situation. You've lost your fishing boat, you're desperate, you haven't enough to eat, you don't know what to do. One of you is young and wants to clear out, the other wants to keep him here. Tell him what it is that is taking you away." He answered: "I don't know—to see Naples, I suppose . . ." ". . . Good, that's the right idea. But why exactly is it that you don't want to stay here?" He answered with the precise words he uses in the film: "Because here we are like animals. They give us nothing. So I want to leave right away and see the world." For him, the world was Naples, a long way away, it might as well have been the North Pole in fact . . . Then I turned to the other: "What would you say to your brother, your own brother, to keep him here?" He was already very upset, tears in his eyes. He thought this really *was* his brother. Now that is the sort of thing one wants from actors and yet never seems to get from them. With tears in his eyes, then, he said: "If you go further than the Faraglioni (that was the name of the two rocks) the storm will carry you away."

Now who'd have been able to write that? Nobody. He said it in Sicilian and I can't repeat it exactly as I've forgotten the dialect, but it sounds very beautiful, like Greek.

The dialogue was built up like that. I only sketched it in myself. They gave it their ideas, their images, their flourishes. Then I made them rehearse the text through, sometimes for three or four hours, as one does with actors. But the

words weren't changed: they'd become fixed, as if they'd been written. But of course they weren't written, only invented by the fishermen.

Does the Sicilian-dialogue version exist at all?

The original version, my own personal property and the one shown with subtitles at Venice, is in real Sicilian. It's an extraordinary language, a language of imagery, and Verga is the only writer who has been able to do something with it. He invented a special language, something between Italian and the Sicilian dialect. But the real thing is very hard even for Italians to understand.

De Sica sometimes does things that I can't understand. In *Bicycle Thieves*, for instance, he had Maggiorani's words dubbed in by an actor, and even the text didn't really go with Maggiorani's appearance. Mind you, *Bicycle Thieves* was a very fine thing, very strong, but to my way of thinking it had this grave miscalculation. Unfortunately I had to use dubbing myself in *Senso* because Farley Granger and Valli played their parts in English.

You know, my first choice for *Senso* was Bergman and Brando. But Rossellini was very jealous at that time, refusing to let Bergman work for anyone but himself, and although she might have accepted, it just wasn't possible. And Lux didn't want Brando and gave me Farley Granger. Strange, isn't it? And a pity, because it really would have been something extraordinary to cast Bergman and Brando together.