



Julian Schnabel: "My parents knew nothing about art, and I came out of it."

by Samantha Reyes
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We met painter, sculptor, art promoter and film director Julian Schnabel during the last Venice Film Festival in September: a classic larger-than-life figure, he debuted as a film director in 1996 with *Basquiat* - the legendary graffiti artist supported and promoted by the same Schnabel - followed by *Before Night Falls*, *The Butterfly and the Bell*, and *Van Gogh - At Eternity's Gate*, each of them critically acclaimed. Schnabel was in Venice, this time just as a father, to accompany and support his son Olmo's directorial debut, *Pet Shop Days*.

Born in Brooklyn on October 26, 1951, Schnabel has emerged as one of the leading figures of Neo-Expressionism and the American Transavantgarde, experiencing an unstoppable rise in the '80s and now serving as a reference point in the entire New York artistic scene. He is renowned for his enormous works, executed on a large scale, characterized by bold brushstrokes, vivid colors, and the use of mixed materials such as broken fragments of ceramics and PVC canvases. In his large Manhattan home, there is ample space for private residence (a venue for notable dinners, parties, gatherings, artistic flash mobs) and for a gigantic loft/studio with a high ceiling, serving as a laboratory and gallery. The tireless Schnabel is also an influencer, art theorist, exhibitor, promoter, teacher, and mentor for the youth. He is an authentic patriarch with a large family, five children he had from two wives, all working for and with him.

In our conversation, Schnabel, 72, showed his penchant

for digressions and asides, forcing us to hyperventilate to keep up with him. We talked extensively about his artistic beginnings in Europe, especially in Italy, and much more. He was dressed in his typical attire: a dirty white painter's jumpsuit topped with an elegant double-breasted jacket and a funny felt hat. A variation from his now proverbial silk pajamas that he wears even on the most mundane occasions (he's quite a socialite), not as a tribute to Hugh Hefner (whom he found very likable) but for pure comfort. He hates anything that requires a belt and constricts the belly, "which is meant to breathe freely," he says, laughing blissfully.

Mr. Schnabel, we know that you, as the classic American artist started your career in Paris and Italy. Can you tell us about it?

In 1976, I came to Italy for the first time. I was coming from Paris...an American in Paris, a classic. I wanted to see the paintings here in Italy. In Milan first, then in Venice and the hinterland. I remember the Scrovegni Chapel, one of my favorite places. It's incredible how many people go to Venice but don't go to Padua to see it. It's madness!

So, you know these places pretty well?

I would say so. I've returned often, for study and passion. I did several exhibitions here in Venice. I was at the Biennale in 1982, I believe it was the first time, when Harold Zeman was the curator. A great curator. And he was the director

of the museum in Zurich. A lighthouse in the fog.

It was the time of Transavantgarde, right?

Exactly. Francesco Clemente, George Boslitz, and Enzo Kiefer also exhibited. 1982, a great year. Oh, there was also Gino di Domenici. What great friends I had! I was just a little more than a kid at that time, but I was already friends with Mario Merz and Calzolari, who helped me a lot.

You also lived in Milan. Where exactly?

I lived at Via Gentilino 9, near Piazza 24 Maggio. I didn't have money, and when I took the tram, I always watched out for the ticket inspector. If he came, I would run ahead and jump off at the first stop... At that time, the *Prospettiva d'Arte* magazine was popular, and I went there to show them some of my paintings. I asked them: do you know anyone who might be interested? They looked and found that my things were similar to those of Lucio Fontana. In short, they introduced me to a guy named Ruggero Giannuzzellim who owned this residence at Via Gentilino 9. He let me live and work there. I left him all the paintings I did during that time as a pledge and thanks.

Lucky Ruggero...

I owed him about three thousand dollars. Now he owns a fortune. Good for him. We've been friends since then. I'm happy for him. Then I went to Venice in 1982, as I mentioned. Germano Celant was also there. I know everyone!

You have a long love story with Venice, also as a director. Any remembrance?

My first film, *Basquiat*, was presented right here in Venice, at the 1996 festival. And then came *Before Night Falls*, for which Javier Bardem won the Volpi Cup for Best Actor, and the film won the Jury Prize. Then I returned to Venice with *At Eternity's Gate*, the film about Van Gogh's last days, with Willem Dafoe, also Volpi Cup winner. I guess I'm good with actors! [laughs]. Alberto Barbera and Giulia D'Agnolo are my friends, I've known them for a long time, smart people, with their hearts in the right place. And when I'm in Venice, I'm always in the right place.

Your son Olmo is here in Venice now, as a director. How proud are you?

All my children make me proud and happy. Family is

everything to me, like Vito Corleone. Call them Nepo Babies, they may be, but who cares? They have great talent, and they work hard. My parents know nothing about art, and I came out of it. It's the same thing in reverse.

Tell us about your parents.

My father came from Czechoslovakia, arrived in America alone. At 12, he went to Antwerp, in the Netherlands, because he couldn't enter the USA, and from there he came here on a ship when he was 15, alone, sadly. My mother, on the other hand, grew up in New York, from a family from Romania. Mom was the valedictorian of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Instead, my father barely had a middle school education. But they loved each other and were together for 65 years. I believe that what brings certain people success is love. If you love your children and give them the opportunity to do what they want and try to prevent them from self-destructing maybe they will make it. And you will have been a good parent. Think of Charlotte Gainsbourg or Josh Brolin... This is the positive side of the alleged nepotism.

No art in your childhood, then?

I grew up in an artless environment, unlike my children, surrounded by paintings, pictures, sculptures. My parents didn't own any paintings, knew nothing about art but one day my mother took me to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and I saw a painting by Rembrandt, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, and I was impressed despite the distance between the painting and the red velvet rope that kept me away. I saw the light of the painting, and something lit up inside me, and I thought "this is what I want to do, what I can do." An enlightenment, an epiphany. Thanks to my mother, who knew nothing about art. I exposed my children to art, and as a father, even more than as an artist, I feel fully fulfilled.