

Jason Wood on *The Tale of King Crab (Re Granchio)*

In a remote corner of contemporary Italy, a group of elderly hunters communing over food, wine, and song reminisce about the tale of Luciano, a wandering drunkard in a remote Tuscan village. His story has been passed down through generations and mutated so many times that there is little point attempting to discern how much of it is true. Falling into dispute with the local prince over his right of passage through a gateway, the untamed Luciano commits an unforgivable crime and is forced to flee. An exiled criminal, he finds himself in Tierra del Fuego, an archipelago shared by Chile and Argentina at South America's southernmost tip. There, amid dramatic landscapes comprising snowy mountains, glaciers, tundra, and wind-sculpted trees, Luciano hooks up with a band of ruthless gold-diggers in search of a mythical treasure that may pave the way for his journey towards redemption.

A cinematic diptych, *The Tale of King Crab (Re Granchio)* was one of the glittering jewels at Directors' Fortnight in Cannes 2021. The narrative debut of Italian-American filmmakers Alessio Rigo de Righi and Matteo Zoppis, the film emerges from the duo's interest in folktales and legends of the peasant tradition. As with earlier documentaries *Belva nera* (2013, also shot in Tuscia) and the award-winning *Il Solengo* (2015), the film playfully interrogates the imperfections of an oral tradition that ends up giving rise to new tales and stories. A beautifully realised mediation on narrative and re-imagining narrative, it is a work reminiscent of Michelangelo Frammartino's Calabrian set *Le quattro volte* (2010) in its innate naturalism.

*Belva nera* arose from a folktale about villagers being terrorised by a leopard – animals always feature in the films of Rigo de Righi and Zoppis, with the crab in this instance lending the film a magical surrealism – and there is something incredibly organic about their latest work. This undoubtedly stems from weaving the hunters who provided the source material into the very fabric of the film, drawing upon their memories and even casting them in supporting roles. Luciano is played Gabriele Silli, a nonprofessional actor cast for his resemblance to the surviving physical descriptions of the character he portrays (in real life, he's now even referred to as Luciano). A project that seems to have begun as a documentary but subtly and successfully navigated the transition to fiction, *The Tale of King Crab* also eloquently reflects, in its Argentine sequences, on myths drawn from the culture of immigration.

Making the habitat in which it unfolds central to the film – shooting in Tierra del Fuego would prove a physical challenge, a challenge exacerbated by COVID-19 protocols – music also plays a pivotal role, and contributes to the themes of mythology and folklore. Vocal music conveys narrative content, but the filmmakers also draw upon popular folk songs that may be similar in melody but that may have contrasting relationships to the texts on which they are based. Rigo de Righi and Zoppis have also spoken of their desire to have the music engage in a dialogue with the images, and in this sense, there is reflection, refraction, but also counterpoint.

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