

I'm Not Scared

by Emily Soares | June 29, 2009

I'm Not Scared (2003), based on the popular book by the film's screenwriter, Niccolò Ammaniti, takes place in the economically depressed southern Italy of the '70s, and the prospects for village youth and adults alike are bleak. In a rural area, a group of children play in the remarkably vast and golden summer fields, where a deserted farm house offers a place for mean games and something more - a discovery that lands young Michele (Giuseppe Cristiano) in a morbid adventure.

During the 1970s in southern Italy, known as "gli anni piombi" ("the years of the bullet"), a rash of bombings and ransom kidnappings underscored the desperation in that less developed and poorer part of the country. **I'm Not Scared** hinges on the tenor of those times, and the world of Michele is shared by a shiftless and frequently absent father, an unhappy mother and a town more like an uncharted outpost, where shoes are sold off a truck like ice cream cones in luckier parts of the world. What neighbors are present appear to be without hope, work or anything but the bare necessities.

Director Gabriele Salvatores (*Mediterraneo*, 1991) intended **I'm Not Scared** to be told from a child's point of view and had Ammaniti rework the story so that a child is present in nearly every scene. He recalled in an article for *The Washington Diplomat*, "The Making of Four Films" (May 2004), his approach to the material: "Preparing for the movie, I studied child psychology. I used primary colors like the drawings of children. I used very large lenses as I read [that] children have trouble focusing on one item. If they want to see one thing, they get very close."

To further convey the feeling of a child's perspective, the camera's viewpoint in **I'm Not Scared** is closer to the ground, reflecting the height of the child protagonist. A fan of Yasujiro Ozu, Salvatores says he was also inspired by early Tom and Jerry cartoons, which often framed characters in compositions which cut off their heads, emphasizing their largeness.

Ammaniti's book, which stayed on international bestseller lists for years after its 2001 publication, was born from the real-life farmland of southern Italy. On a summer drive through the regions of Apulia and Basilicata, Ammaniti was so struck by the landscape of golden hills that he decided to set a story there that included children playing in the summer heat. The idea branched out into a three-page movie outline and from there, thanks to an impatient editor expecting another Ammaniti novel, it was expanded into 219 pages.

Salvatores loved the contrast between the golden, sunlit fields and the literal and figurative darkness beneath them and agreed the film needed to be shot there.

I'm Not Scared was cast locally after filmmakers visited nearby schools and posted signs inviting locals to participate. They saw approximately 500 children and cast Giuseppe Cristiano, one of the last to be auditioned, when he arrived late from babysitting duty. The boy's nurturing side, something that the character of Michele required, was what won him the role. The film was generally well received by Italian film audiences, as well as many overseas viewers, winning several national awards. In his review of the movie for *The New York Times*, Stephen Holden wrote, "Even as the truth of a child's real-life nightmare sinks in, **I'm Not Scared** remains warm-blooded, and the viewer, put in Michele's position, is left, like him, clutching at whatever beauty can be salvaged from a landscape that was once synonymous with an idyllic but lost innocence."

Producers: Marco Chimentz, Giovanni Stabilini, Maurizio Totti, Riccardo Tozzi
Director: Gabriele Salvatores
Screenplay: Francesca Marciano; Niccolò Ammaniti (screenplay and novel)
Cinematography: Italo Petriccione
Art Direction: Ivana Gargiulo
Music: Ezio Bosso, Pepo Scherman
Film Editing: Massimo Fiocchi
Cast: Giuseppe Cristiano (Michele), Mattia Di Pierro (Filippo), Adriana Conserva (Barbara), Fabio Tetta (Teschio), Giulia Matturo (Maria), Stefano Biase (Salvatore), Fabio Antonacci (Remo), Aitana Sanchez-Gijon (Anna), Dino Abbrescia (Pino), Giorgio Careccia (Felice), Antonella Stefanucci (Assunta), Riccardo Zinna (Pietro), Michele Vasca (Candela), Susy Sanchez (Filippo's mother), Diego Abatantuono (Sergio).
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