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MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2021
Official Selection
A FILM BY PAOLO SORRENTINO
DIRECTOR OF THE ACADEMY AWARD® WINNING FILM THE GREAT BEAUTY
THE HAND OF GOD
The Apartment
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NETFLIX

PRESENTS

A **THE APARTMENT** PRODUCTION

THE HAND OF GOD

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY
Paolo Sorrentino

PRODUCED BY
Lorenzo Mieli and Paolo Sorrentino

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:
Riccardo Neri, Elena Recchia, Gennaro Formisano

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
Daria D'Antonio

1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:
Jacopo Bonvicini

EDITOR:
Cristiano Travaglioli, A.M.C.

SOUND:
Emanuele Cecere, Silvia Moraes, Mirko Perri

COSTUME DESIGNER:
Mariano Tufano

SET DECORATOR:
Iole Autero

PRODUCTION DESIGNER:
Carmine Guarino

CASTING:
Annamaria Sambucco, U.I.C.D, Massimo Appolloni, U.I.C.D.

STARRING: Filippo Scotti (Fabietto Schisa), Toni Servillo (Saverio Schisa), Teresa Saponangelo (Maria Schisa), Marlon Joubert (Marchino Schisa), Luisa Ranieri (Patrizia), Renato Carpentieri (Alfredo), Massimiliano Gallo (Franco), Betti Pedrazzi (Baronessa Focale), Enzo Decaro (San Gennaro), Sofya Gershevich (Yulia), Lino Musella (Mariettiello), Biagio Manna (Armando), Dora Romano (Signora Gentile)

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media.netflix.com

PRESS CONTACTS

Team SP
(USA, Canada)
teamsp@netflix.com

Federica de Sanctis
(Italy)
fdesanctis@netflix.com

Katy Driscoll &
Emma Choudhury
(Rest of World)
kdriscoll@netflix.com

SYNOPSIS

From Academy Award-winning writer and director Paolo Sorrentino (*The Great Beauty*), comes the story of a young man's heartbreak and liberation in 1980s Naples, Italy. *The Hand of God* follows Fabietto Schisa, an awkward Italian teen whose life and vibrant, eccentric family are suddenly upended—first by the electrifying arrival of soccer legend Diego Maradona and then by a shocking accident from which Maradona inadvertently saves Fabietto, setting his future in motion. Sorrentino returns to his hometown to tell his most personal story, a tale of fate and family, sports and cinema, love and loss. †

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Naples, blue and blundering, joyful and merciless—you can't help loving her even when she hates you. The 1980s, infused with an unwarranted and inconclusive lightheartedness.

The arrival of Diego Armando Maradona, the world's greatest soccer player. An event that feeds the hopes and dreams of a bedraggled and beleaguered populace.

The family, numerous and noisy, normal and naive, all striving for one and the same goal: happiness. The protagonist, Fabietto Schisa, age seventeen. A typical, vaguely exhausting adolescence. Real and unconditional love for his parents. Platonic and unconditional love for his beautiful, anguished Aunt Patrizia, whose unbearable pain, which is caused by the loss of her unborn baby after her husband beats her, lands her in the psych ward.

And then the tragic accident, so sudden and strange: the death of Fabietto's parents.

The grief is crippling at first. It doesn't make you cry or think or feel. Instead it takes you home, all alone, staring at familiar objects that have suddenly become meaningless, like dead bodies. Then, out of the blue, the realization that he is free prompts Fabietto to look to the future. The discovery of cinema, which, in those years in Naples, was starting to be made with adventure and enthusiasm.

He longs to make movies—cinema being that celebrated monument that saves the sad lives of people like Fabietto, deluding both those who make it and those who watch it to recover the world they've lost. But delusions fill up our lives. Which is why cinema will never die.

The brief, bewildering, decisive encounter with an older director named Antonio Capuano, a vivacious, provocative intellectual who is both sentimental and contrary.

The painful estrangement from his beloved brother Marchino, an involuntary, invisible separation. Marchino, mindful of his own youthfulness, gives in to life.

Fabietto, mindful of his own premature old age, gives in to his dogged perseverance. Finish and flee. Finish and flee. That's what he has in mind, anyway.

The realistic vision of an invented mythological figure—a popular Neapolitan legend, that of the child monk—makes him suspect that, along with his perseverance, he possesses that elixir of cinematographic narrative: imagination.

The Hand of God attempts to talk about all this.

So what exactly is *The Hand of God*? A coming-of-age story that aims, stylistically, to avoid the traps of conventional autobiography: hyperbole, victimhood, pity, compassion, and the indulgence of pain, through a simple, sparse, and essential staging. With neutral, sober music and

photography. Cinematography's cumbersome apparatus will take a step back so as to let the life of those years speak, in the way I remember them—in the way I experienced them, felt them. Simply put, this is a film about sensibility. And hovering above everything, so close and yet so far, is Maradona, that ghostly idol, five foot five, who seemed to sustain the lives of everyone in Naples, or at least mine. That, too, is probably an imaginative lie. Or maybe it's the truth. No one knows for sure. No one but the hand of God. †

— Paolo Sorrentino

INTRODUCTION

"I did what I could,
I DON'T THINK I DID THAT BAD."

~ Diego Maradona

In *The Hand of God*, Paolo Sorrentino returns to the Naples of his youth to tell a story of a boy's turbulent coming-of-age—a story charged by its intimate link to Sorrentino's own past. It is a story more personal and more starkly emotional than any he has told. It dives into a living memory, an immersion into a beautiful, imperfect world that could not last. But it is also a soul-stirring tale about the drive to move forward, to create, to take any mystifying chances that you get, even amid immense sorrow.

It is the 1980s. Everyone in Naples is talking feverishly about

Maradona, the illustrious soccer legend who it seems, almost miraculously, might come to play for the underdog local team. Promise is in the air, and teenaged Fabietto Schisa is drinking it all in. He might be an awkward outsider at school, but life is alright. His parents are volatile, flawed, yet still in love. Their family is boisterous, sometimes troubled, yet great fun. Lunches are long, family dramas play out daily, laughter is constant, and the future still seems far away.

Then, an inexplicable accident overturns it all. And, as Sorrentino once did in his own youth, Fabietto must find an escape from the depths of tragedy and grapple with the strange touch of fate that has left him alive. With the past shattered, yet his entire life before him, he charts his own course through loss and into the new.

This mix of devastation and liberation is something Sorrentino experienced at the precipice of his own adulthood. And while fiction and reality intermix freely in *The Hand of God*—so freely that even fantastical elements feel part of Fabietto's completely contained world—the film meticulously reconstructs the city and family atmosphere in which he grew up.

Born in 1970, Sorrentino was raised in the Vomero Quarter of Naples, on the hill overlooking the port city's sprawling panorama. When he was 16, both his parents passed away suddenly, wholly unexpectedly, of carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heater in the family's vacation home. By all rights, Sorrentino should have been with his parents that weekend. The only reason he wasn't also killed in the catastrophe is that he had been granted permission, for the first time in his life, to stay home alone to go see Maradona play away for Naples.

Sorrentino came to perceive Maradona, a man already tinged with divinity on the soccer field, as a force that protected his life. But it was also cinema that became a means of salvation for him, a detour from anguish. Escaping into filmmaking with a passion, Sorrentino started working as an assistant director. He made his screenwriting debut co-writing *The Dust of Naples* with Italian writer-director Antonio Capuano, himself a key character in *The Hand of God*. Soon after Sorrentino made his directorial debut with the comedy *One Man Up*

starring Toni Servillo—the last film he made in Naples until he returned to direct *The Hand of God*.

From then on, Sorrentino wrote and directed his own films, including *The Great Beauty* which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film and the Oscar-nominated Youth, as well as the acclaimed HBO series *The Young Pope* and its successor *The New Pope*.

He gained global renown as a vivid stylist given to a wildly kinetic camera and exuberant storytelling. But when it came to *The Hand of God*, all that feverishness fell away, leaving behind something more exposed, and more accessible, than any experience he's created. †

REMEMBERING IN ORDER TO FORGET

It was in the middle of feeling frustrated by a screenplay for *The New Pope* that Sorrentino made a U-turn. To give himself a much-needed break from religious conundrums, he decided to take a few days off, a few days in which he began to experiment with writing something more purely from inner experience, from memories resurrected out of a past that has perhaps been a shadow influence on his work but never directly confronted. For the first time he wrote about the most formative events of his life, some luminous and funny, but some so dark and heartbreaking they might have seemed untouchable.

Sorrentino wasn't thinking about making a movie as he wrote initially—instead, he was thinking of a gift he might give to his own children. "I thought it might provide them with the possibility of understanding not so much my character as my faults," he says.

That aim of undefended, no-holds-barred openness characterized the writing. The screenplay emerged organically, whole, in a mere matter of days. If writing is often a war between what one conceals and what one reveals, here naked revelation possessed him. Still, Sorrentino wasn't sure at all if this emotionally transparent screenplay would stay only in the family or if it would indeed take on a life as a film.

"Sometimes you just get this need to record your memories, to put them down somewhere," he says. "But, in time, I thought that it was maybe a good idea to make the film because it might help me not so much to solve the problems that I've had in life but to look at them from a much closer position and get to know them better. All my films have been based on feelings that I was very passionate about but then after I made them, that passion faded; so, I thought if I make a film about my own problems, I might also forget them, at least in part."

Perhaps in writing to forget, the memories became even more electric and alive, pulled in an onrush into the moment at hand. It might have been a danger zone for Sorrentino to get so near to the live wire of his own pain, but as he forged ahead, he found the filming process actually gave him a little breathing room.

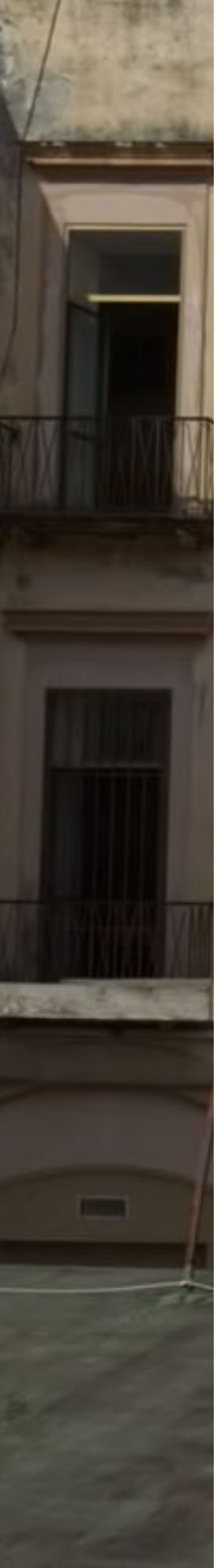
"The interesting thing to me about making an autobiographical film is that now these problems were not my problems anymore, now they were the film's problems," he explains. "And as soon as they became the film's problems then they became more approachable. By the time I started editing the film, watching these memories over and over became almost like a habit, and it's much easier to handle a habit than to handle a memory."

While cinema can freeze time, he also sensed there would be another dimension to the film's story: a communion with audiences bringing to the theatre their own experiences of loss, their moments in life when the wondrous and terrible collided. In that connection might not lie resolution but, perhaps, a kind of solace. "If other people can relate and identify with my experiences, if they see themselves mirrored in the film, that means my pain is divided in two," says Sorrentino, still working out the strange logic of infinite grief. †

SORRENTINO'S ESCAPE FROM STYLE

The emotions surrounding *The Hand of God* were so powerful, even perilous, that Sorrentino decided that if he were going to make the film, he would do what he had not done before: strip back every single other element. Where heightened irony and formal stylistics had been the trademark, if always evolving, instruments in his toolbox, now he would put those to the side and let unadulterated storytelling take center stage.

"I tried to tell this story without any filters, in a simple way. The only filter is the reminiscing, the memories and feelings I had as a boy," he says "I was not concerned with a specific idea of style in this film. I felt it had to come out quite naturally. I actually thought it could be very liberating for me to make a film without a prevailing style, and I even found myself enjoying what I always previously had tried to avoid."



Yet even pared back, there is a rich cinematic energy to *The Hand of God*.

The fabric of the film is woven not only of anguish and family love but equally of mystery, warmth, humor and desire, all at play against the palpable beauty and earthiness of Naples. The mundane and the spectacular share the same space. The human details of the characters shimmer with their own vitality. There is a sense of how lost time itself can become a spur for art and creation.

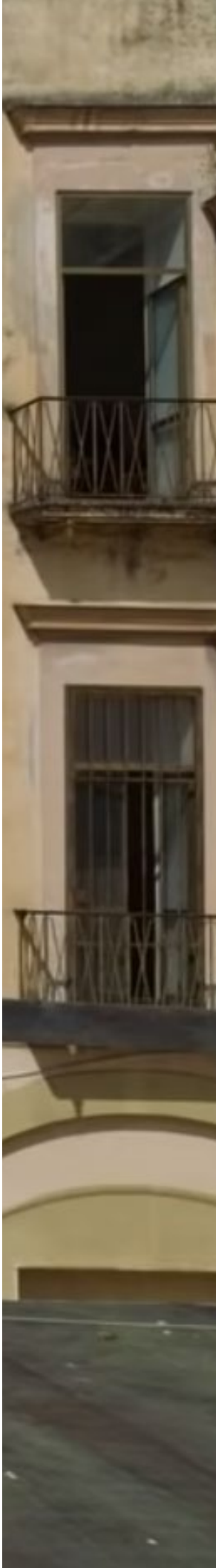
The film also offers a moving depiction of life as a string of moments—a sun dappled family lunch, a madcap soccer victory, the nonsensical words of a doctor, a midnight speedboat ride, a train hurtling to a new city—that slip through our fingers yet make us who we are. Laughter constantly leavens the pain, an unwavering rebellion against it.

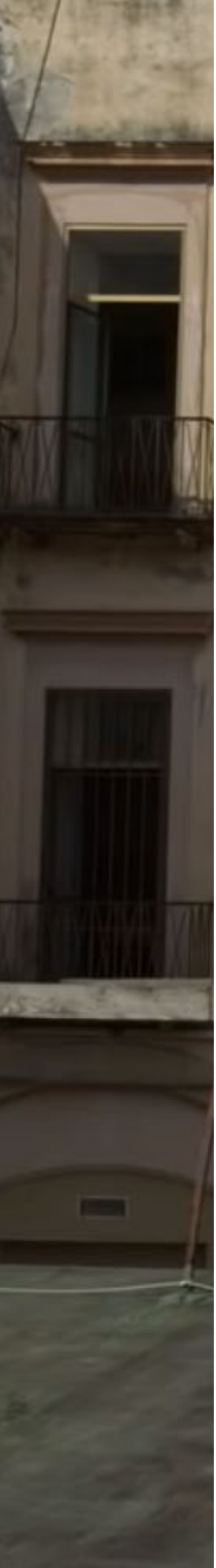
Like the autofiction of literature, Sorrentino collapsed the lines between the real and the imagined, making fact and fabrication of the same piece—and using the inherent messiness of that to find a fresh way to evoke the essence of a time in life when everything is in limbo.

"Everything we see in the film might not necessarily have happened," he notes. "Some events did, while others didn't. But it is all an authentic take on what I actually felt at that moment in time."

Sorrentino continues, "The biggest difference between this film and my others I think is in the relationship between truth and lies. While my other films feed off lies in the hope of tracking down a shred of truth, this film started from true feelings that were then adapted to the cinematic form."

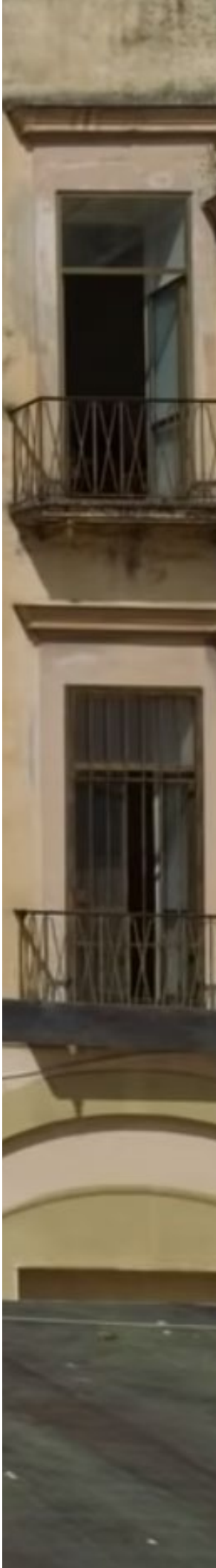
Producer Lorenzo Mieli, who has worked with Sorrentino on *The Young Pope* and *The New Pope*, was surprised when Sorrentino told him about the script. "He told me he had finally written a film he'd been thinking about for years, and that he wrote it in one go, in 48 hours," Mieli recalls. "When I read it, I was shocked at how he could have written something so dense, so seemingly simple yet so complex in what it talks about, in such a short space of time."





For Mieli, *The Hand of God* evokes "that delicate, crucial moment when we go from being children to becoming adults. It is a change which can be a leap in the dark, but it is also when we learn about the business of living."

Despite the stylistic departure, Mieli sees the film as fitting in with Sorrentino's overall vision of life and movies—retaining an essence and themes that are undeniably Sorrentino. "At first glance, the film is indeed different to most of Paolo's movies," says Mieli. "It's easy to note how the visual grandeur of his filmmaking, or the use of music, differs from his previous films. Yet *The Hand of God* sees Paolo exploring things he has always talked about, even if in a new manner. I think this is Paolo's most mature film to date, and it allows everything we've always seen in his filmmaking to bloom." †

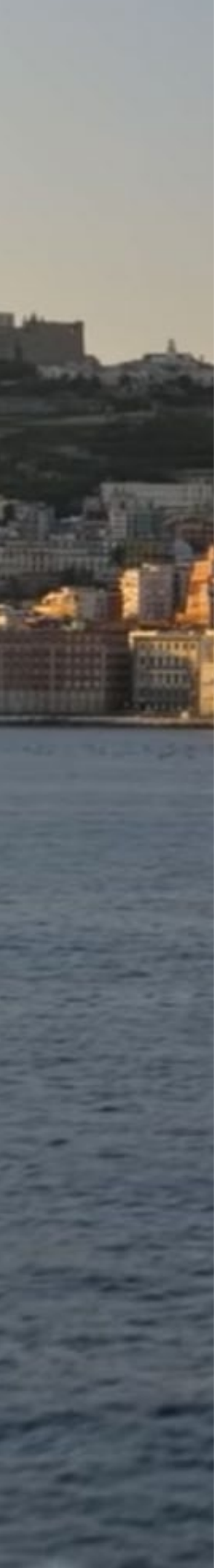


FABIETTO, BOY ON THE BRINK

Nearly every moment in *The Hand of God* is experienced through the eyes of Fabietto, right up until he closes his eyes, while speeding towards a new life, in the film's final moments. At 17, he is at a juncture in life where all is dreams. He has accomplished nothing, not even a girlfriend. Most of what he knows is from books, or from family conversations about sports, politics and the various schemes and hopes of one another.

Fabietto is a natural observer, though, which Sorrentino notes "can ignite a spark that leads you to do work of an artistic kind, which is exactly what happens to him. The women around him, but also his brother, father and colorful relatives, become the territory that will start to foster thoughts of his own."

"This age is a damned age, anyway," muses Sorrentino on adolescence.



"You're living in a limbo, in that middle land between the child you no longer are and the grown up you are not yet. Therefore, your relationship with reality is already complicated. For Fabietto, it gets even worse because then he loses the reference point of his parents and doesn't know how to get back onto his feet."

While Fabietto is Sorrentino's alter ego, he looked for an actor not so much his spitting image as one who could expose to the camera, without barriers, private emotions. In an open casting call, he met Filippo Scotti, a young Italian newcomer who, unbeknownst to Sorrentino, also has an interest in directing. It would become Scotti's debut as a leading actor.

"Of all the actors I auditioned, Filippo was the most gifted and I felt he fit the character. I felt the same tenderness towards him that I feel for myself at that age," Sorrentino says. "I didn't ask him a lot of questions at the audition, or about his personal life. What was important is that I could see he had the ability to be the lead of a film and to shoulder this kind of movie."

Scotti says he preferred not to dwell on the idea of channeling Sorrentino. "I tried not to think about it like that, because I'd have probably ended up getting all wound up about it. Reading the script, I instead looked for elements of myself in Fabietto," he explains.

There were many qualities that resonated. "Fabietto is quiet and thoughtful, but he also has a tendency to overanalyze situations. His shyness makes life more difficult," observes Scotti. "Between the age of 15 and 17 I went through very similar feelings. I didn't lose my parents, but I felt very alone, if in a different way."

He also was a child, like Fabietto, who spent most of his time with adults. "Apart from my few real friends, I always got on better with people older than me, because I didn't feel as awkward with them," Scotti says. "Perhaps I wasn't quite as thoughtful as Fabietto when I was 16, and I was certainly less intelligent. But the journey Fabietto goes on in the film has, metaphorically speaking, similarities to my own."

A particular fascination for Scotti was Fabietto's relationship to his older brother, Marchino. They have nearly opposite temperaments, giving them the push and pull of magnetic poles. "Marchino is the cause of much happiness, but also many disappointments for Fabietto," notes Scotti. "Marchino has friends, and even a girlfriend, while Fabietto doesn't Fabietto mainly has his Walkman, and he seeks refuge in his relationship with his mom and dad. But over the course of the film, Fabietto meets people who shake him up, who give him an injection of energy. Together with Capuano and Armando, Marchino helps give Fabietto a jolt."

Though Sorrentino had few discussions with Scotti, per his usual manner of working with actors, Scotti felt a bond. "With Paolo, you work in an orderly, tranquil way. The atmosphere was always really calm, and that helped me a lot," he says. "I will always remember one particular moment with Paolo when we were on the boat at dawn, and Paolo said to me, 'This for me is the most beautiful place on earth.' He said it with this certain voice, with such sincerity, and in that moment, I fully saw Paolo the man." †

THE SCHISA FAMILY

The members of the Schisa family closely resemble Sorrentino's own family as it existed in the 1980s, right down to the poignant, chirping whistle his own parents exchanged whenever they needed to communicate beyond words.

To portray the film's father and mother with visceral, life-like nuances, Sorrentino turned to two actors he knows well. Playing Severio is Toni Servillo, the renowned Italian actor and stage director who has starred in Sorrentino's films since he was the protagonist in *One Man Up,* up to the lead role in 2008's *Il Divo*. (Servillo won the European Film Award both for *Il Divo* and again for *The Great Beauty*.)

"For me, Toni is like an older brother," says Sorrentino. "But he's also a father figure, so it felt natural to ask him to play the father. It was really interesting for me to see that, just like all great actors, even though he

was in no way connected to my real father, Toni still somehow resembled him. It's like a magical mystery only the most outstanding actors can pull off."

Despite knowing Sorrentino well, the script stunned Servillo. "It moved me to tears and I told Paolo right away," he recalls. "This is the sixth film I've made with Paolo, and we have a great understanding, and a lot of affection and respect for each other. It's always a real thrill to work with him. So, when he asked me to play this role, I felt it was more proof that there is something in our relationship that goes beyond the professional dimension. I picked up on this feeling, and I hope I managed to convey it, to him and to the audience."

One thing he did know is that Sorrentino would expect him to bring his own instincts to the role. "Paolo tends to never give many guidelines before starting work on a film. But he is really precise between one take and the next, and he knows how to give clear indications as to what he wants to achieve in the handful of minutes before the next take," Servillo describes.

Playing Maria is Teresa Saponangelo, who has been directed several times by Servillo and has known Sorrentino for years. She was struck by the depth of feeling in Maria, who holds the family together yet sometimes falls apart. "Maria can be sad and melancholy, but also lively, joyful and funny. She has this range of characteristics which, when put together, make her explosive. I was delighted Paolo gave me the opportunity to play her," Saponangelo says.

In the first half of the film, the story between Severio and Maria has the vividness of a love story, that of a long, zigzagging marriage built on abiding through hurtful and infuriating times. "Maria loves Severio, "says Saponangelo, "although at times he makes her suffer. I wanted to explore this contradiction--a contradiction that renders the character and relationship quite interesting."

Those aren't her only contradictions. Maria's penchant for pranks and meddling stands in contrast to her role as an affectionate and tolerant mother to Fabietto. "She has this playful side which tends to catch everyone off guard, because you don't expect someone who is the driving

power of the family to muck around so much," observes Saponangelo. "Maria is permanently teetering between happiness and sadness. which I personally can identify with."

Due to their long-standing friendship, Servillo and Saponangelo were able to burrow right into the natural rapport of husband-and-wife, at once knowing and silly, skeptical and trusting, disgruntled and affectionate. The family-like atmosphere on the set enhanced all of this, Saponangelo believes. "The filming was a full immersion not just into the pain but also into the intimacy of a family made up of very different kind people," she says.

When the rhythms of their family are so abruptly disrupted, Fabietto and his older brother Marchino, a would-be actor, are momentarily united in the sheer, raw omnipresence of their grief. But their responses, like everything else about them, contrast. Though Marchino's heart breaks for young Fabietto, he makes his own decisions on how to face the future.

"It's hard for me to speak about Marchino as a character because he is indeed very much my brother," Sorrentino comments. "He's typical of my family and of a way of thinking in Naples—that way of always searching for the light-heartedness of life even amid the most dramatic situations, of always looking for the light note and for the laughter. It's not a matter of being superficial, it's a philosophy of life. Cowardice can be a smart move. It's true that your problems might eventually catch you, but you never know, they also might not."

Marlon Joubert, who makes his feature film debut as Marchino, was quite taken with the character's jovial take on life, but also his love for Fabietto. "Marchino's an ordinary guy, like so many others, but he has his dreams. I myself am a big brother, so I understand that responsibility when you have a little brother who looks up to you," says Joubert. "It's a big task, and someone like Marchino is very wrapped up in his own life at 20. Yet, I think there is an unconditional, boundless love between them as brothers, even if there's a natural distance."

Joubert spent time with Sorrentino's real-life brother, Marco, to get a better sense of how the two brothers do and don't relate. "He was really

open in telling me about his life, in spite of all the difficulties in doing so. That really helped my work," says Joubert.

For Marchino, grief is something that perhaps you can outrun. "Marchino doesn't seem to want to face the present, but in actual fact I think he tackles grief in his own way," Joubert reflects. "He has difficulty digesting and rationalizing everything that has happened. He needs to put up more defenses than Fabietto, who is drawn to tackle things more courageously, but Marchino also is finding his way."

To dive into intense emotions and defenses was not easy, admits Joubert. And it was also challenging to revivify such moments while being directed by the man who lived through them. "Entering such an intimate sphere from the life of a person you see every day, and who is also the director of the film, was a very unusual experience," he says. "The only way to approach it was completely honestly, without affectation, without passing comment or overthinking things. It was about just being there with Paolo, hearing his words—even hearing how he said them—and trying to really connect with the scene and the circumstances."

This forged an unusual closeness among the actors. "One of the most magical, beautiful things about this film was building relationships," summarizes Joubert. "Not just between me and Fabietto, but some wonderful relationships formed between all the actors on the set, too."

One member of the Schisa family rarely seen is their sister Daniela (played by newcomer Rossella Di Lucca), who is perpetually missing in the bathroom while others wait, and wait, and wait, for her to emerge—only exiting her hideout in a surprising instance.

The character, more than a comedic device, is a riff on reality. "In my memories as a child, my sister spent literally hours locked in the bathroom," muses Sorrentino. "It seemed she was always getting ready for a date, always preparing. It was only years later, well after we were grownups, that I learned that she held a deep and secret love for me and for my brother which she could not reveal at the time. So, this is why I created this mysterious character, the voice behind the doors who only admits her pain when everyone leaves." †

PATRIZIA, THE BARONESSA AND THE WOMEN OF *THE HAND OF GOD*

If Maradona provides a touch of the divine, the earthly strength in *The Hand of God* is propelled by the film's women—whose gifts of generosity, affection and insight ground Fabietto when the earth falls out from beneath him. "I was quite lucky to grow up in a city in which women are very strong, respected figures who people look up to," Sorrentino says. "As is often the case in real life, the women in the film are more clued up than the men. Being a boy, Fabietto finds things out late. Mostly, he works them out because the female characters scattered throughout the film help him with their more precise understanding of life."

Yet, Fabietto is also a lonely teenager typically full of inexpressible desires and constantly overwhelmed by beauty and confused by the power of sexuality. Sorrentino links this adolescent frame of mind to cinema itself, to its undercurrents of longing and desire.

Says Sorrentino, "When Fabietto is lucky enough to see the relationship between cinema and the female sphere through a crack in the door, it is a revelation, a bit like the one Fellini said he had with women; a revelation that led him to portray women as superhuman beings. Fabietto senses this and somehow makes it his own. He doesn't hone in on it in the way Fellini did, but visually speaking, he senses it."

Two particular women characters have a monumental effect on Fabietto. One is his sensuous and sensitive Aunt Patrizia, who opens the film with her surreal encounter with the patron saint of Naples, San Gennaro, and Monaciello (the Little Monk), a fairy tale figure of Naples and an impish spirit who can be both benevolent and mischievous.

To Fabietto, Patrizia is a larger-than-life presence in his family—at once troubled, teasing and understanding. He is drawn to her beauty but also to her vulnerability and depth. Says Sorrentino, "Often in large families there is someone's wife or husband who stands apart—they think differently, they act differently, they are even physically and aesthetically different. And they arouse the curiosity of others because they stand outside all of the known facts that connect a family. This is true of Patrizia, She has a dramatic view of life while most of the Schisa family sees life as something to be lived lightly."

Luisa Ranieri, a Naples native known, amongst other things, for her portrait of opera icon Maria Callas in Callas And Onassis, auditioned for the role of Patrizia because "something about her touched me profoundly," she says. "The script made me laugh a great deal, but it also deeply moved me."

She felt tenderly towards Patrizia, whose life is complicated by marital strife, violence, infertility and, at times, uncontainable anger and sadness. "Patrizia is a really raw woman. When I first read the script, I thought about how we often define people as crazy who don't have any filters or don't fit in with society or are extremely sensitive," says Ranieri. "What I found most interesting about Patrizia is the despair she feels. Working with Paolo, we accentuated this aspect a bit, bringing her flaws to the fore."

Ranieri also perceived what links Patrizia and Fabietto. "I think what Fabietto sees in her is her unconventionality as well as feeling an attraction. She makes him smile and she surprises him. Patrizia, on the other hand, is drawn to Fabietto because she feels he can comprehend who she really is. Theirs is a relationship built on things left unsaid. Patrizia really wants to have children, and I think this maternalism pulls her towards Fabietto as well."

Sorrentino confessed to Ranieri that the character was based on a favorite aunt. "But she has obviously been exaggerated, taken to a cinematic extreme," Ranieri says. "I let myself be guided by Paolo in the role. I laid myself bare and placed myself at the character's disposal."

Another woman, the aged and officious Baroness who lives above the Schisa family, unexpectedly offers to Fabietto a transformative moment out of the blue. She is portrayed by Betti Pedrazzi, who previously was directed by Paolo Sorrentino and starred with Toni Servillo in the Italian telefilm Saturday, Sunday and Monday in 2004. Here, in this unsettlingly touching scene, she inhabits a woman who chooses to use her power to give Fabietto a push forward, to return to him a surge of feeling.

"It is something made up but at the same time true to emotions that I had at that time in my life," Sorrentino says of the provocative scene. "I had a more conventional sexual initiation, but this scene is, as others in the film are, a reprocessing of things that happened to me or to people that I knew. I liked very much the idea that this old woman makes this an act of sheer generosity. For her, it is an outpouring of real love in the sense that she conceives the idea that she can help this suffering boy, if maybe she can relieve him of this one small problem amongst the many he is experiencing in that moment." †

THE HAND OF MARADONA

There may be no sportsperson who has ever inspired the fierce devotion, or acquired the sheer demiurgic powers, that Diego Armando Maradona did in his brief lifetime.

For many, watching the champion play was nearer to spiritual epiphany than rooting for a team. He may have been in form a roguish, street kid, just five foot five and sporting a chunky physique that belied his sublime speed and ball control, but that only deepened his mystique. Indeed, he was almost wrenchingly human off the field—his personal life laced with struggle, addiction, feuds and marital problems—which made the magic he could conjure with his body and heart that much more unearthly. The writer Eduardo Galeano summarized it in a few words, calling Maradona "the most human of the gods."

The native Argentine was already a blazing superstar in Europe when rumors began that Napoli Football Club might sign him. Since Naples was a tough city and lacking large funds and Maradona the most expensive soccer star of all time, it sounded absurd enough to require an act of divine intervention. Yet, it happened. At the time, Napoli FC had never won so much as an Italian league championship. Suddenly, Maradona brought not just triumph (and two Serie A titles) but a palpable wave of hope and pride to the oft-overlooked city—and the city adopted him, then worshiped him, as they became what they had never expected: contenders.

The Maradona Effect transcended sports entirely. Soon Maradona became inseparable from Naples, his face plastered across walls and buildings, his name sacrosanct. “I represent the nobodies,” he once said, and the nobodies made him into their patron saint.

It can be challenging to explain Maradona’s spellbinding impact on the people of Naples.

Says Sorrentino, “I think the only way you can explain Maradona is that he had a stronger relationship with the divine than with the fact that he was a human being. Maradona did not land in Naples on an airplane so much as he just appeared like a god. He offered redemption to the people, like a religious figure, and invited us to love him for his sins. For kids in my generation, it created a relationship with football larger than just being a fan, a relationship which verged on a joy that knew no bounds, an exhausting, almost unbearable joy.”

Going to see Maradona play gave ordinary life a buzzing charge. “It was happiness on turbo speed, because it was not just about seeing a footballer, but about everything that went with it, that feeling that everything in your life is working properly, of waiting for Sunday, a day of celebration, a day when you’d always be in a frenzy. You’d go to the stadium with your friends in a state of complete over-excitement, and it was all a bit madcap. At times we hitch-hiked there, or we’d use any vehicle we could get hold of, or we’d go on foot It was an excuse for having adventures,” concludes Sorrentino.

The phrase "the hand of God" first became associated with Maradona at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, when he scored Argentina's two winning goals against England. The second goal is considered an eternal masterpiece but during the first, replays would reveal his hand had fouled the ball. When asked about it after the game, Maradona cheekily replied: "A little with the head of Maradona, a little with the hand of God."

The words resonated around the world, but they became more like a shockwave for Sorrentino. In the film, it is Fabietto's Uncle Alfredo (played by Neapolitan actor, stage director and playwright Renato Carpentieri) who uses the phrase to describe the only plausible explanation for why Fabietto's life was spared—raising the specter of his destiny, even if it has been radically altered.

"I've always really loved the phrase because it sums up an attitude towards life," says Sorrentino. "Fabietto is saved from certain death thanks to his passion for Maradona, something he only begins to consider when his crazy or enlightened uncle—I'll leave it to the audience to decide--says it was the hand of God."

Maradona also provided Sorrentino with an early glimpse at the freedom of imagination. "I came from a family that didn't have many artistic inclinations. The highest form of fantasy in my family was irony and to have a good laugh, to have fun. As a boy, I wasn't exposed to cinema, literature or photography. The only artistic figure in my life was Maradona. I chose a completely different route thanks to the creativity I found in him, as well as in the fairy tale creations of Naples like The Little Monk. It became my way of escaping reality." †

CAPUANO

Another real-life figure who plays a cathartic role in *The Hand of God* is the Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano, Sorrentino's first mentor who, as Sorrentino says, "gave to me the joy for filmmaking." Capuano's films—including *Vito and the Others*, *The Dust of Naples* co-written with Sorrentino, *Sacred Silence*, *Red Moon*, *Dark Love*, *Mario's War* and the recent *Il Buco in Testa*—are known for being soaked in an intense love for Naples and its people.

In *The Hand of God*, Capuano steers Fabietto, if not so gently, towards his future just when he is most at sea. Full of rigor and fervor, which both scares and entices, Capuano warns Fabietto that hope can be a trap and dares him to be completely honest with himself.

"The dialogue with Capuano in the film is a composite of many conversations we've had, not only when working together but in our

long friendship," Sorrentino explains. "They sum up exactly the kind of human being Capuano is—someone I simultaneously love and hate, because he has a way of provoking me to disclose myself, to be completely naked emotionally and to reveal the way I truly am. It's beautiful and rare to meet a person like him but it's also very demanding for someone like myself."

Sorrentino continues, "For Fabietto, whose vitality has taken a battering, meeting Capuano shakes him up. Capuano is someone who is never reassuring; he doesn't like chitchat or convention. For me, and for Fabietto, he proves decisive in developing courage, not just to make movies but to do it with bravery."

The presence of other Italian directors is also felt in the film: Fellini is in town holding auditions, Zeffirelli is part of a prank, and sitting atop the Schisa's TV throughout is a favorite movie of Sorrentino's: Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*. The epic 1984 crime drama would become a cinematic touchstone for a generation of filmmakers to come. Though renowned for its grandiose imagery, complex structure and transporting close-ups, it is perhaps most beloved as a quintessential depiction of broken illusions.

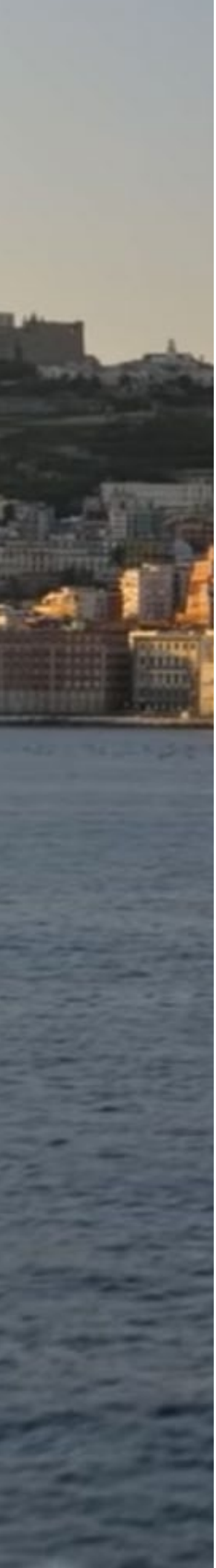
"I discovered *Once Upon A Time In America* when I was about 20, later than Fabietto in the film," says Sorrentino. "For me, it a film that is a dream, and a film that made me dream about becoming a filmmaker as it has for many others. I also liked having the cassette on the TV, because it reminds of a time when the primary means of watching movies was renting VHS cassettes—and everyone in Italy lived in fear of not returning their rental on time." †

RETURN TO NAPLES

Standing in the shadow of volcanic Mount Vesuvius, perched on the sparkling sapphire waters of the Mediterranean Sea, Naples has always been a place of stark contrasts. It is one of Europe's oldest cities and one of Italy's most complex, making it equally full of the epic sweep of history and everyday grit.

The Hand of God is both a love letter to, and a portal into, the life-loving spirit of Naples. But the very specific Naples that Sorrentino sought out for *The Hand of God* was simply the one he called home. It was the narrower, intimate Naples he knew as a lower middle-class kid who mostly went to school, hung out with his family and waited every Sunday for the soccer match.

Twenty years after he directed his first film, *One Man Up*, in Naples, Sorrentino returned with a film crew for the first time. "What was it



like going back? Wonderful, really exciting. It was fun," says Sorrentino. "It's not easy for me to sum up what it felt like going back to Naples because it's like having to sum up a lifetime."

Shooting there at this moment in his life and career, he saw the city in new ways.

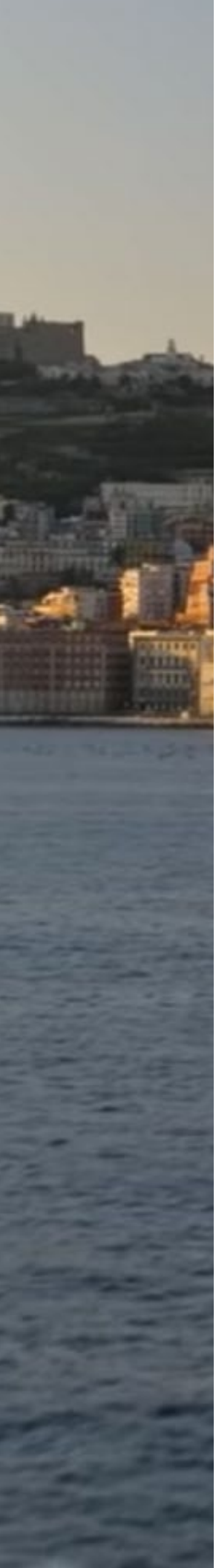
"I always lived in a place where you couldn't see the sea. But in making this film, I had the privilege of sitting right on top of it," Sorrentino reflects. "At last, I understood what Rafaele La Capria meant when he wrote The Mortal Wound [a prize-winning novel in which La Capria wrote of the distance between 'the Naples bathed by the sea and the Naples of the back alleys, Vesuvius and counter-Vesuvius']. Naples is not just a city of neighborhoods. Some enjoy the sea whilst others are deprived of it. And I realized this can radically change a person's gut feeling for the city."

Many cast members also grew up in Naples and have seen it evolve. Says Toni Servillo, "Naples is a fleeting city that you can never pin down. Compared with the Naples in *One Man Up*, it has really changed, as has the world. But Naples always stands up for itself."

Since the Naples of the film had to be the Naples inscribed in Sorrentino's memory, he traced his own steps to the degree possible. "I went looking for the places where I grew up," Sorrentino says. "The set for the Schisa family home is in the same building I lived in, but on the floor above our actual apartment. It might not be the most cinematic, but it is very real."

While the world of *The Hand of God* is clearly not our own tech-saturated era, Sorrentino eschewed any glaring 80s references—to keep the film in an emotional state partly unmoored from time. "There's no doubt that the film is set in a specific moment and place, but it's not set within the culture of the 80s," he explains. "Instead, we opted for a middle-ground approach to sets and costumes, with some indications of the 80s but without overdoing it."

Production designer Carmine Guarino, who previously worked with



Sorrentino as an assistant production designer on *Il Divo*, braided Sorrentino's remembrances with imagination and character-building details. "Paolo wanted everything to be in a space which could be as universal as possible, so that was the direction I pursued," he says. "Still, there are some sets that refer more to the era, such as Patrizia's room, where I used an all-white laminate which was really popular in the early 80s because I felt it helped to illuminate the character."

Though they were able to shoot in the same building where Sorrentino lived, it had since been renovated, which left Guarino the task of bringing something ephemeral back to life. "Paolo could recall every square inch of his home," Guarino notes. "We reproduced everything—the floors, the wallpaper and the furnishings—based entirely on his recollections. In Fabietto's room we recreated what Paolo's room was like, right down to the smallest details, so we could convey the emotions and feelings of that setting."

Authentic locations were a mainstay of the shoot, but digital effects also helped replicate vintage Naples—carving away the towers and wires of current-day life., "For example in the background of the scene where Fabietto and Severio are talking while two kids are kissing, there was a very modern building. We replaced it with a very pale building to give a lighter impact to that moment," Guarino explains.

The opening shot of the film, cruising into Naples from the glimmering bay, was also digitally enhanced. "We started by reconstructing an authentic speedboat of the kind cigarette smugglers used to use," explains Guarino. "But as the speedboat travels towards the center of Naples, we touched up almost everything you can see, erasing the modern ships and contemporary elements such as antennas, satellite dishes and the modern parts of the city."

The digital and real combined again to recreate Sao Polo Stadium, today known as Diego Armando Maradona Stadium. "That was an important scene for Paolo," notes Guarino, "so we had to work out how to create this stadium as it was in 1985. First, I searched for a running track as similar as possible to the one in Sao Paolo at the time. I then embarked on a search for a stadium to match the texture of the pitch. Ultimately,

we redesigned the whole of the Sao Paolo stadium in 3D, from the railings to the tracks to the stands. Once we had constructed the textures and materials of the stadium in 3D, we could then lay it over the original shots."

There is one location in *The Hand of God* that exists outside, or at least at the edge, of reality—at the very beginning of the film, when Patrizia takes a ride with Naples' patron saint, San Gennaro, to a mansion where she meets The Little Monk, and ill-fatedly receives a payment from him. That vision was fully fleshed out in the screenplay, and for Guarino, it was a matter of making It manifest. "The location needed to be in a state of decay, but also noble and sumptuous, which was not easy to find," notes the designer. "In the hall where Patrizia meets San Gennaro, the fallen chandelier was described in the script as recalling a beached whale."

This kind of resonant visual metaphor is typical of Sorrentino, says Guarino. "His writing is very, very specific and precise. Paolo is the only director I know who, when I read the script, I can already see the finished film." †

EMOTION TAKES THE LEAD: THE CINEMATOGRAPHY

The Hand of God exchanges the swirling camerawork and pageantry associated with Sorrentino for a quieter, stiller camera. Yet, if the visuals were to be less heated, they had to be more acutely in tune with emotions, relationships and the nature of childhood time. Sorrentino turned to Daria D'Antonio to be his director of photography for the first time. She has worked for many years as part of his camera crew—and was the first woman to win the Globo D'Oro for Best Cinematography twice for Marco Segato's *The Bear Skin* and Valerio Mieli's *Ricordi*.

D'Antonio was a seamless partner. "I didn't even have to speak to her about what I wanted because she instinctively and sensitively understood that the visuals needed to be sober, to take a step back in order to leave space for the emotions," Sorrentino says.

For her part, D'Antonio says she drew all the inspiration she needed

from the script. "From the outset I felt this was going to be a very intimate, stirring film, but also really funny. It got under my skin right away," she recalls.

At times, it was D'Antonio who tempered Sorrentino's aesthetics. "From a chromatic standpoint, I was at first tempted to use the acidic tones of that period, to give it the feel of watching a VHS tape," Sorrentino recalls, "but Daria, who is sharper when it comes to lighting, was skeptical, and I realized she was pointing me in the right direction for the story."

The color tones do shift subtly through the film, reflecting the course of a boy falling rapidly into and rising more circuitously up from desolation. "Paolo and I talked about the first part of the film being colorful and then, as Fabietto's happiness fades, the colors fade as well, only to come back to vivid life at the end," D'Antonio describes.

The camera is so unobtrusive that there can be a sense of snatching from the air life-like moments—such as the summer lunch Fabietto enjoys with his family, languishing over overflowing plates of food, laughing at one another's vanities and going for a boat ride that will linger in his mind. Says Sorrentino of the scene, "It's a prosaic, elementary poetry made up of swear words, food, and family interactions, but it's a poetry that I think is common to lazy afternoons in the mind of a child."

For D'Antonio, it was about giving a scene like that the room it needed to unfold organically, as family gatherings do. At other moments, the camera is a quiet witness to pure emotion. "My aim was to always respect the sensitive nature of the story. We wanted to capture very particular moments, and to avoid large-scale visual constructions in which such moments might get lost," she says.

Sorrentino kept D'Antonio on her toes, but she wouldn't have liked it any other way. "Paolo is a highly focused, hard worker, and he rightly demands that those working with him maintain a certain level of concentration and attention," she describes. "I really enjoy working with him because he asks a lot from you, but he also helps you achieve wonderful things." †

DRESSING THE SCHISAS

As with the rest of the film, Sorrentino wanted the film's costumes to mirror the stuff of memory yet blend seamlessly into the background. There are no flashy designer outfits or typical 80s brand names, just the faint outline of early 80s silhouettes. "Paolo wanted to recreate truth and he didn't want anything over the top visually," says costume designer Mariano Tufano, who works here with Sorrentino for the first time.

Tufano also grew up in 1980s Naples, so he began mixing and matching Sorrentino's very specific recollections with the impressions of his own youth along with archival photographs and the character descriptions to create the wardrobe. "I started out as a spectator on a voyage through Paolo's memories of what his brothers wore, what he wore and what his friends wore. But then all of this melded with my own thoughts and experiences as a Neapolitan teen to create something that isn't quite fully-fledged realism," he explains.

In addition to clothing the Schisa family, Tufano crafted some 3500 costumes for the film's extras. "We relied a lot on Italy's vintage markets," he notes. "We spent weeks collecting material in Florence and Naples and we made anything we couldn't get hold of from scratch."

With the exception of the Fellini audition, Sorrentino sought a subdued color palette in the clothing as well. "I tried my best to respect this, although fashion colorways in the '80s were pretty loud…electric blues, reds and yellows," says Tufano. "For Fabietto, I chose a color which I felt was of the time, lovely yet melancholy: a very pale shade of straw yellow."

Tufano did strike one fantastical note in the opening scene. "That is a dreamlike moment, so Paolo opted for a vintage car, and we dressed the chauffeur as if he'd just stepped out of the 1920s. Patrizia is wearing this weird, out-of-context white dress. It was my own personal choice, approved by Paolo. We used a transparent, superfine fabric that reveals Luisa's curvy silhouette. It was a bit of a risk, but I think it really works for this moment." †

BRINGING THE STORY HOME: EDITING & MUSIC

As with the photography, design and costumes, the aim of the editing was to keep a disarming honesty at the heart of the film's life-like, flowing structure. Sorrentino collaborated with his long-time editor, Cristiano Travaglioli, who won the European Film Award for *The Great Beauty*.

The two have a unique creative give-and-take. "I've known Paolo for 24 years now and I've followed his journey as a director, so we don't really need to talk too much about his vision of the film, because inevitably we have an understanding without needing to define every single thing," describes Travaglioli. "It's like a ping-pong match, the ball flies quickly from one side to the other."

Travaglioli came in with a deep appreciation of how different this film is from Sorrentino's previous work. "This simplicity and the streamlined

nature of the film are formal choices I always took into consideration," he says. "But the aspect of the film I was most interested in, and the one I hope will most touch audiences, is the focus on the most basic, yet profound, emotions of our existence—happiness, serenity, the joy of an afternoon at the seaside, loss, disorientation, the grief of bereavement… all the human emotions we all feel."

Editing began even while shooting was under way. "While Paolo was filming, I started structuring the film," Travaglioli explains. "The pace was often dictated by the footage itself, and by the emotions in the writing. Later, after the production finished, Paolo and I then went back over the film to focus on the narrative fabric of the story, moving scenes around to places we felt were more stirring."

Whenever they came to decision points, of which there were many, the impetus was to always take most forthright path. "I feel that the choices we made were focused and bold," says Travagliolo. "Paolo is always very courageous. It might seem that's a characteristic all directors need to have, but I assure you it's not a common trait. In fact, it is rare. Paolo's not afraid to experiment, to search for things and he's not afraid to try out new terrain."

Still, at times Travagliolo was overwhelmed by how closely some scenes hit. "Sometimes I found myself alone, editing these events which I had known about from Paolo for years, and I felt deep grief, along with sacred respect for the actors' performances," he says.

One final element that differs drastically from Sorrentino's usual flourishes is the film's music. Similar to Fabietto, who is habitually attached to his Walkman, Sorrentino listened to a lot of music growing up. But when it came to the film's soundtrack, he chose not to delve at all into those influences, keeping the human voices the primary rhythm of the film.

"Like everyone else, I find that music is a main detonator of emotions, helping you remember, and arousing deep feelings. But I felt that including the music that I listened to in those years would have meant descending into rhetoric," he explains.

"So, I deliberately chose the soundtrack as if I were making a film about someone else."

Music only takes the foreground in the film's very final scene. As Fabietto rides the train to Rome, and Naples physically disappears, the song "Napule è" by Neapolitan singer-songwriter Pino Daniele plays on his headphones, sending the film at once into the promise of the future and a sweet-and-sad reverie. The hit song, first released in 1977, is a sentimental ode to the city, with lyrics that begin "Naples is a thousand colors, Naples is a thousand fears, Naples is the voice of children slowly rising so you know you're not alone."

"It's a very beautiful and melancholic piece that says you can leave Naples if you want, but Naples will always stay within you. In some ways it's a perfect summary of the whole film," says Sorrentino.

The ending also seems to roll back into the words of reckoning from Maradona that open the film: "I did what I could, I don't think I did that bad." They are words—not quite regretful but infused with an ongoing yearning--that could apply to Fabietto in that very moment or decades later, that could apply to any one of the characters, or to anyone who has walked through the no man's land of loss and continued. †