

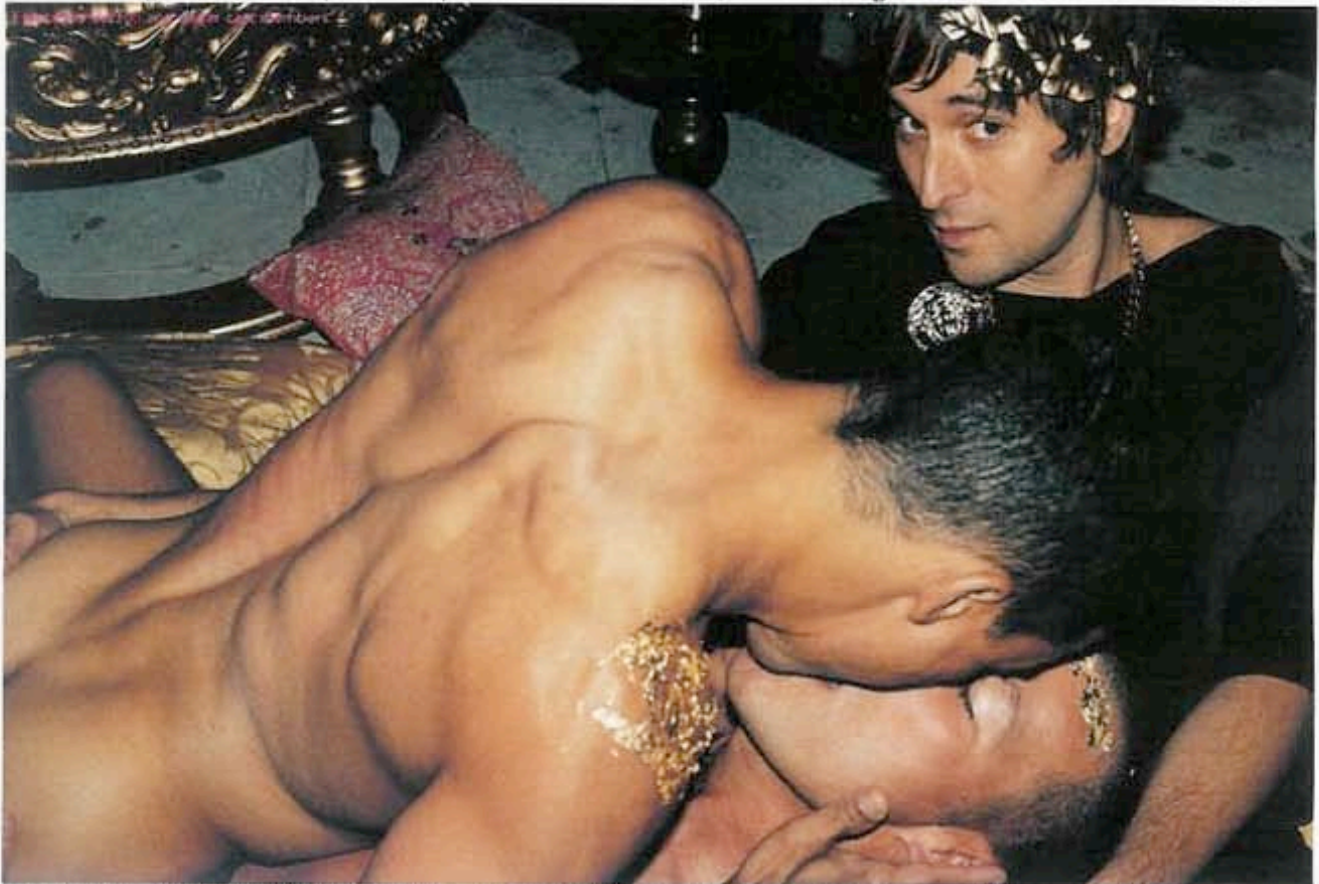
# BAD EDUCATION

What happens when a major Hollywood studio attempts to remake the most notorious film of all time? With an impossibly brilliant cast (and clearly not enough costumes to go round), Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli and legendary writer Gore Vidal set off on a quest of sexual re-discovery and high camp history. This is hardcore

INTRODUCTION BY LUCA CORBETTA PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHIAS VRIENS



After the reality dating game with Catherine Deneuve and Jeanne Moreau inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Non-Love Meetings*) and the deconstruction of an imaginary soap opera about Amália Rodrigues (*Amália Traída* with Sonia Braga and Lauren Bacall), artist Francesco Vezzoli has returned to the movie world for his latest project. Showing at the forthcoming Venice Biennale, this large-scale work tackles a tantalising question: what if a big Hollywood studio decided to remake *Caligula*? Written by Gore Vidal, produced by Bob Guccione and directed by Italian master of 'sex and politics' movies, Tinto Brass, the original 1979 version of *Caligula* may well be the most controversial and forbidden film in history. This epic story of Rome's 'crazy' Emperor dared to show the perversion behind Imperial Rome and all the details of Caligula's bizarre reign: his unholy sexual passion for his sister, his marriage to Rome's most infamous



prostitute, his fiendishly inventive means of disposing of those who would oppose him.

The combined talents of cinematic giants Malcolm McDowell, Peter O'Toole, Sir John Gielgud and Helen Mirren, along with an acclaimed international cast (including Adriana Asti and Teresa Ann Savoy), a host of beautiful Penthouse Pets and an endless history of trials and censorship issues made this flamboyant drama a unique masterwork of the screen. Vezzoli has re-adapted all these explosive elements in his new art film project. Producing a faux trailer for a possible remake of *Caligula*, the artist brought together on the stunning Los Angeles set (a mansion on Sunset Boulevard resembling a mix of Versailles and Villa Adriana in Tivoli) Helen Mirren and Adriana Asti (from the original cast) along with a group of actors ranging from contemporary stars of Hollywood (Milla Jovovich and Benicio Del Toro) and American '70s icons (Karen Black and Michelle Phillips) to European queen of B-movies Barbara Bouchet. Conceived as a restitution of the movie back to Gore Vidal (who wrote the screenplay which the original movie was based on), the esteemed writer was himself on set for a brief but meaningful appearance...

**Francesco Vezzoli: I am going to start with *Caligula*. What exactly do you remember from that experience?**

**Gore Vidal:** First, never let the money people take over the actual making of a film. Unfortunately an Italian producer associated with the film decided that Mr. Guccione, the publisher of *Penthouse*, should be allowed to invest in the movie, which I had written for a low-budget realistic film. Unknown to me, Mr. Guccione thought of himself as a Renaissance man. He would produce. Then, in time, he would fire the director and take over the direction himself and so on. If I am vague about the details it is because I had quit the project before filming began. On the strength of my script a first-rate cast, O'Toole, Gielgud, Mirren *et al*, had been signed. Two antithetical films were made. One a travesty full of 'Penthouse Pets' from the magazine, the other with some distinguished actors lost in the remains of my script. I went to law; got my name out of the title but Guccione confused matters by saying it was "based" on a screenplay

*Here: Mirren and friends.*



by me. I have never seen the film but I read the so-called script.

**Who could be the contemporary Caligula?**

Anyone, given the power. I don't regard him as exceptional. In recent times we have had small scale Caligulas - Idi Amin, Pol Pot, large scale ones like Hitler and Stalin. The potentiality is in anyone given the 'right' circumstances. That was the point to my story. It has been said that Caligula the original suffered from lead poisoning like so many upper class Romans. That makes for madness. But the drive for absolute power is visible everywhere. The *NY Times*, a conservative newspaper, just published an attack on Wojtyła and power. Since he was, literally, many think, a saintly man in private life, in public life he was obsessed with papal authority. John 23 and Vatican 2 aimed at reforming the church through a thorough *aggiornamento* but John's successors seized more and more individual power for the papacy. I recall a moment when Pope Montini, a mild man, was suddenly asked about the collegiality-equality of bishops, put his hands forward as though clutching two

Invisible weapons and saying "Le chiavi di Pietro sono qui!" He meant that he alone was the vicar of Christ on earth with the power to loose and to bind.

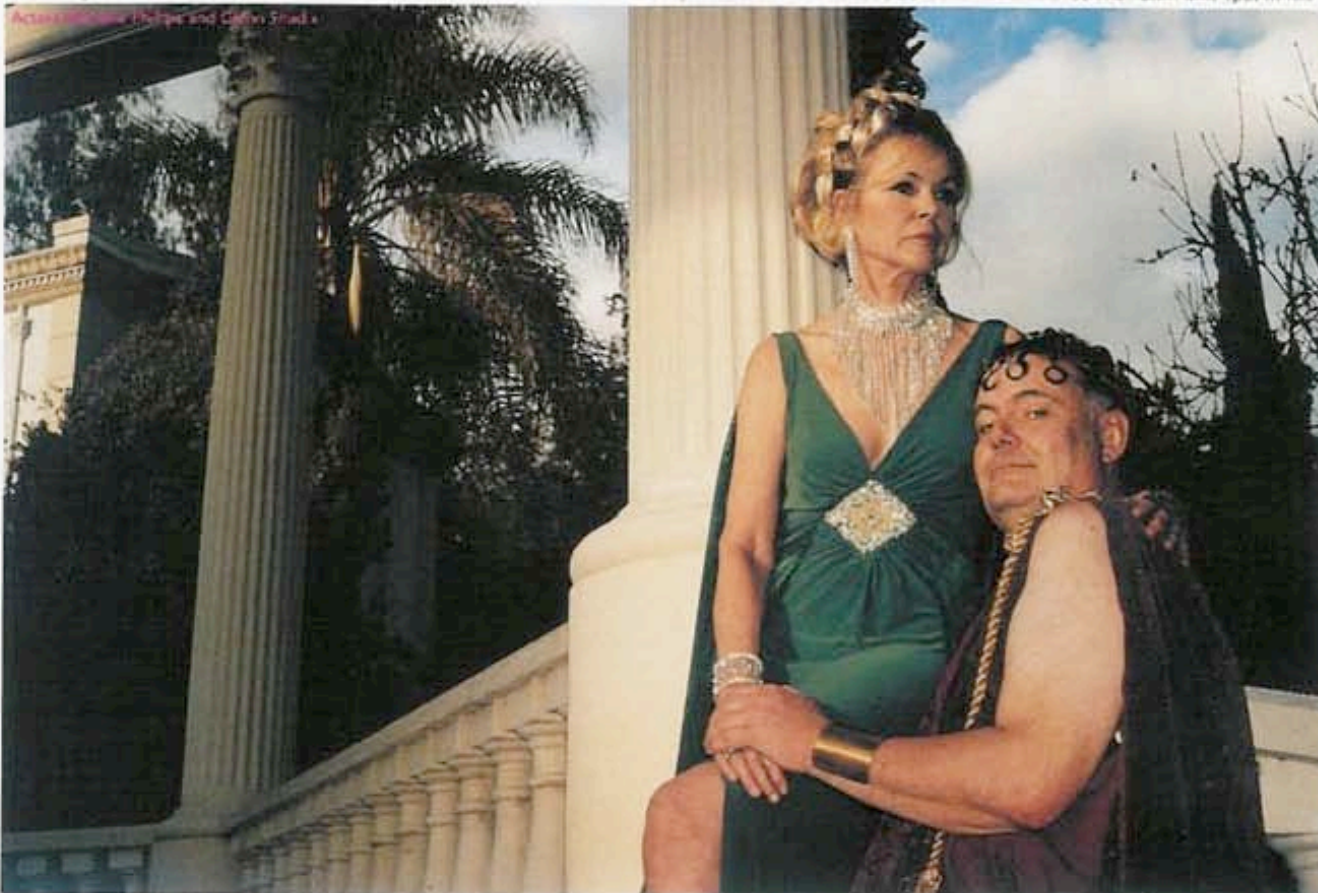
**Now they are rushing to make John Paul II a saint.**

Perhaps he was one but the church that Roncalli, and others wanted to open up has now shut its doors. The *NY Times* reports that priests are leaving the church and there are few replacements.

**As an historian who has written much about Rome what was Caligula's relationship with sexuality?**

Obviously, great enthusiasm. More important what was Rome's? In Latin there is no word remotely like 'gay', an American invention to label a new category. Homo-hetero categories were simply noted under the heading 'sex'. With money, with power, with slaves, you could buy sex of whatever sort you wanted.

**This free attitude about sex is the most fascinating thing about that film *Caligula*.**



I took it for granted that Caligula would be as versatile as everyone else. But the dark side to him was the megalomania that comes with absolute power. It was Tiberius, of all people, who warned Rome against political tyranny. Sexual tyranny – more bluntly put – sadism was very much a part of Caligula's temperament, like raping a pair of newlyweds. But what alarmed Tiberius when he became emperor was a delegation from the Senate that came to him and said that no matter what laws or edicts he might propose they would reverently endorse them. Tiberius was horrified: "Suppose," he said, "the emperor is mad or being controlled by others. What then?" The Senators repeated their blanket endorsement of imperial power. To which Tiberius commented, "How eager you are to be slaves!" This syndrome is not unknown today.

**What do you think of Hollywood today?**

Depressing, a bit lifeless. The only significant, useful film last year was *Kinsey* which was ignored by the Academy.

**Did you know Kinsey personally?**

In 1948 he wrote to congratulate me on a novel *The City and the Pillar*. We met and he took my sex history. I never saw him again but he was a formidable influence on the twentieth century, for which he is still being attacked.

**Do you have any memories of being on the set of *Suddenly, Last Summer*?**

No, because the set was in London and I lived in upstate New York where I had written the screenplay for the film.

**Did you know Tennessee Williams?**

Yes, from '48 until his death. I laughed more with him than anyone else I've ever known. He didn't go to London either. There was nothing but trouble on that set. Hepburn hated her part: "I'm far too healthy a woman to play this woman. I've never known such people." Her lover Spencer Tracy reminded her of her queer brother. She ignored him.

**Montgomery Clift was also in that movie.**

Elizabeth Taylor, who is very loyal to friends, insisted that he be hired even though half his face was frozen due to an automobile accident. Joe Mankiewicz did not care for fairies so he gave Monty a hard time. Hepburn remonstrated with Sam Spiegel the producer. Finally, when the picture was finished she asked for an audience with Sam and spat in his

eye. He was impressed. She then got an Academy Award for her role and the picture was the most successful commercially of all of Tennessee's works.

**What are your memories of filming Fellini's *Roma*?**

The cold. We shot in February in a little empty piazza off Via dei Coronari. It was supposed to be the Trastevere festa of Noi Antri, which is in August. Fred - I called him Fred, he called me Gorino - kept setting up tables, food, inventing a trattoria. We are all shivering. He had the same question for four of the film's protagonists, Magnani, Sordi, Maistroanni and me: "Why you live in Rome?" We all improvised. I said, as the world was ending, what better place to end than in a city that calls itself eternal.

**Are you interested in reality television?**

Only when it shows what we are doing in our pre-emptive wars against other, weaker countries.

**We saw Katherine Hepburn being imitated in *The Aviator*. What actress of today will be imitated in twenty years time?**

My beloved Susan Sarandon. Bette Davis once told me that if she was ever to be played on the screen only Sarandon could do it. ☺  
*Francesco Vezzoli is showing in the Italian Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale.*