

# Spinning the Wheel

By Dario Ponissi

IN my veins runs the blood of explorers, adventurers, seekers of truth, passionate people who made the pursuit of their dreams the very fabric of their lives.

Above all, my ancestors were travelers. Some like Ponce de Leon – who journeyed to the New World with Christopher Columbus and have been rumored to be the discoverer of the secret of eternal youth – went west. Others sought their fortune in the east and became princes of small countries, or national heroes of the bigger ones. Yet others have left their small mark in history by using their diplomatic skills in international disputes between Italy and Austria, during that troubled period of turmoil that has come to be known as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My family tree is more or less traceable from its purported 12<sup>th</sup> century origins up to that point. There is, after that date, a gap of about 70 years for which no valid information is available. Yet, the traveling bug seems to have been alive and well in all my relatives accounted for in recent times. Brazil, Argentina, Australia, Canada, if you look for a Ponissi, you will definitely find one. Oh, and Japan, of course. I have been living here for the past 16 years and found it as adventurous as our modern times

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Ponissi playing the role of Julius Caesar in an NHK TV program

and our modern lifestyle permit. I'm not talking *Indiana Jones*, of course (although I have come across some great archaeological sites, from time to time).

No, in Japan the main adventure, for a westerner at least, lies in trying to penetrate the many layers of a world that seems very familiar at first sight, but that becomes increasingly complex and different once you begin living in it. I have collected many words that could define my experience. Let's spin the adjectives wheel and see where it stops. *Fascinating*. Many possibilities here. Faithful to the fact that, after all, I

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Recording an Italian conversation TV program for NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai: Japan Broadcasting Corp.)

studied languages at university, let me briefly talk about the country's mother tongue. It is fascinating the way the Japanese language evolved and was transformed into a tool not so much as for communication but rather for survival of the fittest. It seems designed mainly to avoid conflict; it contains very few "strong" words, mainly used when there really isn't any other alternative. In Italy, the country where conflict has been a way of life since Roman times, whole dictionaries of "strong words" are actually published, with regional, provincial and often urban variations. The source of such wealth is probably to be found in the millenarian struggle between the haves and have-nots. Lacking actual weapons, the poor often resorted to taunts to strike at their oppressors, sometimes even more effectively. In Japan the lower classes very likely never had a chance to express themselves in such a way. The country was unfortunately trapped in rigid caste-like systems, that put divine attributes on their leaders, thus eliminating any possibility of real criticism or even of satire (would you use irony on a god who could slice you in two with his *katana*, sword?).

I find this attitude still extant even in contemporary Japan, and am often awed by the power it wields in many aspects of life. But things are inevitably changing and I have also noticed that sharp differences of lifestyle and ways of thinking (especially among the new generations) have begun to appear.

Here I think we need another spin of the wheel.

*Changing.* Being a seeker of truth, this word interests me a lot. Now, I have had the good fortune of being able to successfully pursue my artistic career of director, actor and teacher throughout my stay in Japan. This has brought me in direct contact with scores of people, of all ages and of every social provenance.

Talking to all of them has made me notice a tendency to search for a model of living that has nothing to do with what has made the country go up until now. After the long and dynamic season of rebuilding the country and transforming it into a huge economic powerhouse, the following years of uninspiring and uninspired political stagnation have created an immense craving for change.

Traditionally, Japan has always looked abroad for viable models (with the exception, of course, of the Edo Period from 1603 to 1867), finding them, in recent history, in countries like Germany and the United States. These models, though, were basically always “imposed” on the population by their leadership either by choice or because of inevitable historical conditions. The result was thus quite artificial and not exactly attuned to the natural

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Ponissi appearing on an NHK TV program with the soprano Inoue Yuki (center) and a lute player Nagata Heihachi (left)

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Ponissi hosting a concert by the 100-year-old singer Nakagawa Makizo

and geographical tendencies of the Japanese people. Widespread mass tourism has changed all this and given new horizons to explore to many of the country's travelers. A strong interest has been increasing towards Mediterranean countries, more similar to Japan in climate, food, music and even in temperament. I like to think that some of this interest was also partially spurred by my constant TV activities as unofficial “ambassador” of Italian culture. And if that is so, I'm proud to have been an active part of this trend. But all in all I think in a way Japan is rediscovering its southern roots and that this is a journey that is taking place, unprecedentedly in the history of this country, “from the bottom up.” That is to say, experienced and spread by a wide majority of people.

*Exciting.* Well, I definitely would like to give the wheel another spin, but I'm running out of space and am forced to come to the end of my brief observation sketch. Let me finish with the words of a poet. Lord Alfred Tennyson once said: “Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.” Positive change always comes from knowledge, and the people who search after it are often explorers, adventurers, seekers of truth, passionate people who made the pursuit of their dreams the very fabric of their lives. I won't be surprised if the next ringing grooves of change will be drawn by Japanese travelers coming of age in this great world. **JS**

Dario Ponissi is an actor, TV personality, playwright, musician, dancer, interviewer, essayist, and Theater and Opera director. He describes himself as an unofficial “ambassador” of Italian culture.