

Ingeborga Dapkunaite

*A Castle on Sand*

The ampler the daily routine of our lives, the fuller it is of events and people, the more we appreciate having to ourselves some corner of the world where our energies can be restored, where hardly anyone knows us and nobody can find us. People in the public eye understand this better than most. The wonderful actress Ingeborga Dapkunaite, who divides her time among London, Vilnius and Moscow, prefers to holiday in Italy, at the Villa Rocca del Circeo situated between Rome and Naples on the Tyrrhenian Sea.

"The enchantment of it all is that the house is set between a sea and a lake. If you look at it from the air, you can see that it stands on a sandy beachhead, with water all before it and all behind it. You see, this little unremarkable hamlet called Sabaudia is an hour's drive from Rome. You drive through and then you arrive at the Lungomare, which really is a road that runs along the sea. Here are some magnificent villas, and some of them look out on the sea while others look out on the lake, but this is the only one that looks both ways! At any rate, one of the very few."

Sabaudia's environs are something other than merely remarkable. To begin with, it is an exclusive enclave, regarded by some as a retreat for the Roman intelligentsia. Villas belonging to Bertolucci, Fendi, Armani dot the seafront. It is also a place rich in history. The grotto of the witch Circe, who nearly brought Odysseus and his companions to ruin, is nearby. As for the ruins of the palace that once belonged to the high-living Roman general Lucullus, this is reality, not myth. Not for nothing did Lily Volpi, widow of Count Giuseppe Volpi to whom the world is indebted for founding the Venice Film Festival, decide to build a Neo-Classical villa in her husband's memory right at the foot of Mount Circeo.

The sandy beachhead, reflected Countess Volpi, would be the perfect place for her dream. To build a castle on sand? Nothing was impossible for the Countess. A giant block of concrete to support the foundations was sunk into the sand, whereupon the renowned Milanese architect Tommaso Buzzi proceeded to erect this half-temple, half-palace, a monumental structure with soaring Classical columns and a broad staircase that descends from the terrace to the edge of the sea.

"Usually we arrive in the evening, when dusk is just gathering, tired stiff from all the flying and driving... The front door opens and I enter the house. The rooms have been designed in such a way that, even before you go inside, through any of the windows, you can see the sea. Then I run out to the terrace. Or sometimes I just start screaming with joy, I swear. Just imagine it. The long broad staircase down to the beach, the sand, the water... And not a soul in sight. There are few peo-

ple on the beach, usually it is completely deserted. In Italy there are no private beaches as such, but the house looks so imposing that hardly anyone dares to trespass. In the morning I get up between six and seven, I rise with the sun, then walk to the mountain and back, have a swim... It's an amazing feeling, when there's no one to your right and no one to your left, no neighbours at all. It's just fantastic."

The villa's interior merits a separate mention. The furniture for the most part consists of bronze copies cast at the beginning of the last century from Pompeian originals; other pieces have been specially commissioned by Lily Volpi for the Villa Rocca. Curtains of dark crimson are hung from massive brass rings. The asceticism of the guest rooms is illuminated by candelabras of terracotta in the shape of ancient oil lamps. The effect is one of extreme severity, of extreme sophistication, of extreme taste. Walter Wanger, the producer of the famous *Cleopatra*, was so impressed by the décor that he presented Countess Volpi with a truckload of sculptures used on the film set. The statues, in the spacious subterranean passage that runs under the street, are now part of the villa's ambience.

"That passage is just incredible. Brick vaults, antique statuary, cars passing overhead but you can't hear them... There are many secret spaces there, running into each other deep underneath the ground. In one of these they even constructed a theatre. Everything is very functional, and yet you never get the sense that somebody was sitting there with a ruler, planning and calculating everything... Also, the house gives you the feeling of being well worn, which personally I find so charming. You hardly feel time's passing. The longest I've spent there was three weeks, for me it's incredibly long, and in all that time I never once wanted to go some place else, not to Naples, not anywhere."

The house's present owner, Count Giovanni Volpi, is an old friend of Ingeborga's who upholds the charitable tradition begun by his father. He rarely comes to Rocca del Circeo, preferring to stay in his house in Venice. These days he's even thinking of selling the villa, so long as he can find the right buyer – one who would preserve it all, fix what needs fixing and treat the rest with respect and care. For him, the house is about the memory of his parents. From his as from anybody else's point of view, it would be a great pity to approach its classical harmony with any but the most sensitive touch.