

# THE SALT OF LIFE

2011 Italy ST

**Cert (UK):** 12A, 90 mins

**Director:** Gianni di Gregorio

**Cast:** Alfonso Santagata, Elisabetta Piccolomini, Gianni di Gregorio, Valeria Cavalli

In *Mid-August Lunch*, Di Gregorio was single and lived with Valeria; in *The Salt of Life* he is married, with a stropky daughter, and paranoid that his increasingly erratic mother is blowing all the family money on expensive food and extravagant gift giving. (Indeed, the opening scene sees Gianni attempt to foist a power-of-attorney on her, but is too sappy to actually pull it off). But Di Gregorio's central concern here is the romantic life of his screen alter-ego: his feminised existence, as nursemaid to his mother and house-husband to a not-especially-sympathetic wife, is jolted out of its torpor when he notices the voluptuous home help employed by his mother. Still, it awakens some long-buried desire to assert his masculinity, a desire only amplified by the sense that all the other ancient gents around him are snaring beautiful young things left, right and centre.



Roman holiday: Gianni Di Gregorio's **Trastevere Amy Raphael, The Observer** The street is wide, quiet and tree-lined, with ridiculously steep steps at one end and a chaotic crossroads at the other. Several old men sit outside a bar on plastic chairs, contemplating the world in silence as they absorb the intense early-morning heat. Through a heavy wooden door, up four flights of stairs, there is the screenwriter, actor and director *Gianni Di Gregorio* on the landing, bowing slightly as he welcomes me into his flat. He looks exactly as he does in the wonderful low-budget film *Mid-August Lunch*, the 2009 arthouse hit in which he cast himself as an unemployed bachelor whose life is dedicated to looking after his 90-year-old widowed mother. It's crazy to think that the film almost didn't get made. He wrote it in 2000 but no one would fund it. Finally, after Di Gregorio co-wrote the script for the brilliant Neapolitan mobster film **Gomorra**, its director, Matteo Garrone, offered to produce it. Di Gregorio ushers me into the simple, sparse kitchen, makes a pot of strong black coffee and sits down to build the first of many roll-ups. This family flat in the old Roman district of Trastevere is where he shot *Mid-August Lunch*, so the kitchen is oddly familiar. As I absorb my surroundings – the clutter of pots, the simple wooden table, the balcony with colourful geraniums and pots of green herbs – Di Gregorio fusses. He asks if I mind him smoking, if the nearby building work is too noisy. He is as charming and funny as his films, his fast, animated conversation punctuated

by roars of throaty laughter. In his new film *The Salt of Life*, Di Gregorio returns as a married man with a student daughter (played by his real daughter Teresa). He is still looking after his demanding mother – played once more by the formidable Valeria De Franciscis Bondoni – but she's living in a large art-filled house somewhere in Rome and Di Gregorio's main preoccupation is his increasing invisibility to women.

Di Gregorio tells me about his childhood in Trastevere. He grew up an only child in this very flat with a demanding teacher mother and an austere military father. By the age of six he would escape his bourgeois background by wandering around Trastevere, spending all day in the cinema or finding big families to eat with. He sounds like the boy in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. "Yes! No! Not quite," he says. "Trastevere was very calm then. I grew up among the working class, but I always came home at night."

Trastevere has changed almost beyond recognition since Di Gregorio's childhood. On the west bank of the Tiber, opposite the Campo de' Fiori and just south of the Vatican, Trastevere was for centuries a working-class quarter populated by immigrants. Now the same labyrinth of cobbled streets and stunning squares is peaceful by day and chaotic by night as the endless bars and restaurants fill up with excitable young Romans and tourists. Popular though Trastevere is, there remains something special about it. "It has become so commercial and touristy and yet," Di Gregorio sucks hard on his roll-up, "its heart doesn't change. Something of its spirit stays. I think it has a working-class soul. I will always

feel Trasteverino first and Romano second."

He offers to take me for a tour in his 40-year-old Fiat 500. I ask why he doesn't have a more modern car. "I do. But my wife and daughters use it," he laughs as loud as the engine. "I'm very similar to the Gianni in my films. We certainly have the same weakness in terms of allowing ourselves to be bossed around by women."

We drive up the steep hill that runs past the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola and see tourists dipping their feet in the cool blue water. "For me this is one of the most beautiful fountains in Rome. And you can see the city from here," he says, waving his hand to the right. But the better view is round the corner, at the top of the Janiculum Hill. It's not one of the original seven hills of Rome, but with its imposing statue of Garibaldi astride a horse, it's a great place to stare across the Tiber to the city. He heads for the east of Viale Trastevere, which is much quieter and less touristy, and parks outside the church of Santa Cecilia. It's a magical place with a tragic story: Cecilia was condemned to a slow, agonising death for confessing her Christian beliefs.

Inside it's empty, cool and quiet. Di Gregorio whispers incredibly loudly, which prompts a fit of giggles; there's something about him that makes you want to misbehave. He leads me to the basement to see the remains of an ancient Roman house (the singing gallery above the nave of the church is shut) and we wonder why none of the relics are protected. "It would be very easy to take a piece of history