



# Bada-bing!

## Meet Michela De Rossi

She could barely speak any English and had never been to America before – yet the Italian actress Michela De Rossi landed a scene-stealing role in the hotly anticipated Sopranos prequel. **Oliver Grady** discovers the secret to her success

If one show could be credited with ushering in the golden age of television, it would be *The Sopranos*. Over six series, from 1999 to 2007, the HBO show about an antihero mobster redefined the small screen and proved a star-making launchpad for the whole cast — not least the late, great James Gandolfini and Edie Falco, who embodied the killer teddy bear Tony Soprano and his tough-cookie wife, Carmela. Fourteen years later, the show's legacy lives on with fans new and old discovering and rediscovering it in the streaming era (thankyou,lockdown).

So beloved is it that showrunner David Chase's 2018 announcement of a prequel movie, *The Many Saints of Newark*, was understandably met with equal parts elation and trepidation. On Wednesday the eagerly awaited project finally hit UK cinemas and proved none of us had any reason to worry. The film follows a young Tony Soprano (played by Gandolfini's real-life son Michael, who perfectly captures his father's every mannerism while simultaneously making the role his own) and the man who moulded him, his uncle Dickie Moltisanti (Alessandro Nivola). The two actors are already hot favourites for next year's Oscars, but

the epic film, which unfolds against the backdrop of the 1967 Newark race riots, is an ensemble piece propelled by a stellar cast that includes Ray Liotta and Vera Farmiga. One actress who might not be so familiar, yet manages to steal every scene opposite her more established cast mates, is the Italian actress Michela De Rossi.

Virtually unknown outside her native country, the 28-year-old beat hundreds of other actresses on both sides of the Atlantic to land the pivotal role of Giuseppina, the trophy wife of Liotta's character, Aldo "Hollywood Dick" Moltisanti, who is uprooted from her homeland to start a new life with her corrupt, controlling husband in New Jersey.

"Everyone in Italy has the American dream, and I'm living it," De Rossi tells me over Zoom from her family holiday home just outside Rome, the city where she was raised and still lives today. It's sunny and she's sitting under a beautiful gazebo, her hair scraped back and her face seemingly make-up free. "I remember arriving at the table read and saying to Ray, 'I cannot believe I am next to you, reading a script and you did *Goodfellas*. OK. Wow.'"

Despite having degrees in dramatic arts and contemporary dance and working steadily in her homeland across theatre, films and television, De Rossi remembers her shock when one night in 2019 she got a call from her agent telling her she was to fly to New York the next morning to audition.

Not only had she never taken a flight alone (she's terrified of flying), but also she had never left Europe. "It was huge," she recalls. "I cried and called my parents, I was so nervous."

Arriving a whirlwind 24 hours later, De Rossi thought she had blown her chance the moment she met Chase at the audition. "Maybe it's my Italian taste but I wore this masculine-style dress and he watched me like this [she raises an eyebrow and contorts her face]. Then he goes, 'What are you? A nun?!' I ran off to change, thinking I had messed up already, but David was just joking. He has that dark humour."

As it turned out De Rossi had far from messed up. Climbing into her taxi just minutes after leaving the audition, she received a call informing her she'd got the gig. "I screamed at the driver, 'They chose me! They chose me!' and he didn't have a clue what I was talking about. It was a mix of a panic attack and pure happiness."

What followed was an intense month of preparation that involved having to learn *two* languages alongside all of her lines. "It was quite the undertaking," De Rossi says, smiling. "I didn't speak much English when I got the part, so that was really hard, but one of my skills is I can copy and memorise words easily. I also had to learn Neapolitan [the language of much of southern Italy, centred on Naples], which is like a whole other language from Italian, but luckily my best friend is from there, so I spent a lot of time on the phone to him."

Not that she could tell him, or anyone close to her, any details about the project, which was shrouded in secrecy. "I wasn't allowed to say anything about the movie or who I was playing for almost two years," De Rossi says. "My parents, my brother, my agent, everyone wanted to know!"

She also had another Herculean task of binge watching *The Sopranos* (more than 80 hours in total) to get up to speed before filming began. "Everyone in Italy knows about *The Sopranos*, but before I got the role I had never watched it," she says. "I watched the whole thing in a month and was like, 'Oh my God, why I did not see this before?' I was completely in love with it."

She's well aware that there will be those who think the prequel doesn't live up to the original, no matter how well it stands on its own merits. "All of us felt the weight of that pressure while making it," she says. "I know Michael felt the

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pressure to do his dad justice, because that's a huge thing. In the end we all thought we need to trust David because he made *The Sopranos*. It's his baby. Of course there will be people who don't like it, but when I saw the movie for the first time I felt so proud."

Is she prepared for how starring in a film of this scale might change her life? De Rossi exhales. "I really don't know," she ponders, shaking her head. "Fame, that's a big deal, but I really believe you have to find your happiness in your real life, spending the time with the people you love. This job can be..." She trails off. "I can imagine some actresses would have got this role and gone crazy, like in a bad way. But I have the best people around me and my Italian parents. They keep me down to earth."

For those who haven't rushed out to see the movie yet, De Rossi's character speaks volumes about the way many women were seen in the 1960s. Giuseppina is treated as little more than a piece of arm candy by her husband, who wants sex on demand and lets his fists do the talking when she doesn't behave how he sees fit. "Most women then, they had no power to choose or do what they wanted," De Rossi says.

There is one disturbing scene where Liotta's character physically beats her, but she fights back. "She is a revolutionary," De Rossi smiles. "She is very brave. I've never been in an abusive relationship myself, but one of things I admire about my character is that she does not back down to anyone. I can relate to her in that sense because I am used to reacting, even if I feel fear."

It's clear De Rossi has always fiercely refused to let any man get away with treating her poorly. She recalls an encounter with a renowned Italian theatre director when she was 19 and playing the lead in *Romeo and Juliet*. "We were all terrified of him and one day he turns to me and says, 'Honey, with that huge ass that you have, you are not going to be an actress.' I turned and said, 'Did you meet Juliet? Do you know if she had a big ass or not? No. So shut up.'"

She laughs, surprised yet proud of her chutzpah. She admits to having always being laser-focused on her dreams. "They tried to make me repeat the last year at school because I wasn't studying, so I pleaded with the professors, 'Please, I just want to be an actress, I don't want to go to uni or do exams.' And they were, like, 'OK, just go.' For me, I never wanted to have a plan B," she concludes with a shrug. "I don't believe in plan Bs." ■

*The Many Saints of Newark* is in cinemas now

Alessandro Treves, Alamy, courtesy of Warner Bros Pictures and New Line Cinema



Michela De Rossi in *The Many Saints of Newark*. Right The original cast of *The Sopranos*

