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presents

VERSACE

PAIN & GLORY

A 52' documentary
Written and directed by Olivier Nicklaus





Pitch

At the end of the 1970s, Gianni Versace founds a small family business that will grow into a global high fashion empire in just a few years. His older brother holds the purse strings while, in a sometimes ungrateful and subordinate position, his sister Donatella toils in the shadows as artistic director. In 1997, at the height of his fame and fortune, Gianni's sudden death at the hands of a serial killer seems to be spelling doom for the house of Versace.

But, as in all Italian sagas, blood would prevail.

In the midst of painful grief, Donatella seizes her chance: she fights to take back the reins of the house and establish her legitimacy. Gianni had designated Donatella's daughter Allegra as the majority heir. But, despite her addiction to cocaine

and plastic surgery, and against his wishes, his sister would ultimately be the one keeping the textile empire going. For the Versace family keeps both glory and tragedy in the family.

Synopsis

Hailing from the modest Calabrian clan of Versace, Gianni is the first to barge into the limelight. A fashion designer, he launches his family business in 1978 in Milan, surrounding himself with his brother Santo as general manager and his sister Donatella to assist him as artistic director. But Gianni chiefly sees Donatella as a lesser, a dainty and helpless muse to his all-powerful Pygmalion: “We were eleven years apart. I was his mini-muse, he dressed me like a doll and told me what to do and what to think.” Moreover, when Donatella becomes a mother, Gianni develops a strong relationship with his niece, Allegra.

Gianni is also a real workaholic; he is known to be tyrannical with his teams. And Donatella suffers from Gianni’s bullying – as she half-heartedly admits: “working with him can be a real nightmare”. But the house of Versace’s neo-baroque and flamboyant style is quickly met with resounding success; becoming a sort of alter ego to another Italian success, that of Armani, whose austere sobriety forms a completely opposite approach of fashion.

The beginning of the 90s was Versace’s golden age: with its clever mix of sex and gilding, crosses and statues, mixed with decadent festivities, the union of Byzantium and Calabria, nails, silk, leather, as many symbols and finery that top models show off on the red carpets. The house is synonymous with ostentatious luxury, that of an Italy touting its know-how and artisans, nourished by one of the richest histories and cultures in the world, boldly and unabashedly putting oneself, and one’s riches, on full display.

Gianni’s magnetic personality attracts the biggest stars from the world over: Elton John, George Michael, Lady Di, or Madonna all wear his creations. His sister Donatella is in charge of press relations and is responsible for recruiting the supermodels of the era – such as Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista or Cindy Crawford – all of whom further contribute to his popularity.





Versace has talent to spare and orchestrates genius marketing operations such as the 1994 premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, where Elizabeth Hurley, at the arm of the film's lead Hugh Grant, appears in one of his ultra-sexy dresses with safety pins – a dress that then sold like hotcakes.

At that time, Versace's success was unparalleled; the brand was worth a billion dollars. Gianni had become an emperor with multiple palaces, such as the luxurious 5,800 m² villa on Miami Beach that he acquired in 1992. For a time, it seemed like nothing could stand in his way, not even ear cancer, which he defeated in the greatest secrecy in 1996.

But the success story would soon take a tragic turn. On July 15, 1997, at the age of 50, Gianni Versace is murdered by the serial killer Andrew Cunanan in front of his villa Casa Casuarina in Miami. And for a minute the world stopped turning.

His funeral at the Duomo Cathedral in Milan, attended by Lady Di, Sting, Elton

John, Karl Lagerfeld, Azzedine Alaïa, Naomi Campbell, Anna Wintour and Carolynne Bessett-Kennedy, is broadcast worldwide. At the dawn of the year 2000, this ceremony may as well sound the death knell of an era – that of luxury, excess and supermodels. No one is thinking for a second that the house of Versace will outlive its brilliant creator.

And yet. To everyone's surprise, Donatella, who had been toiling in her elder brother's shadow until now, steps up to take the reins. After all, who better than her to replace him, her who had always been there, behind the scenes, her who since 1989 had been in charge of the Versus line?

At first, the stock market does not take too kindly to the news, the press is worried, all predict that her appointment as head of the house of Versace will mark its downfall. "When my brother was[%] murdered, the eyes of the world were on me and 99% of them thought I wasn't going to make it. And, at first, I probably thought the same thing. My brother was the king, and my whole world had crashed around me."

Over the seasons, despite the sarcasms and doubts, Donatella will nevertheless manage to tame the fashion world and forge her own brand. She reinvents the codes of the house and brazenly moves ever forward: thus, in 2000, she makes Jennifer Lopez wear a vertiginously low-cut green dress at the Grammy Awards – an instant, iconic classic. Better still, she will have the good sense to have emerging designers work for the house from time to time, such as J.W. Anderson, Christopher Kane or Anthony Vaccarello, even giving youth a chance like recently with the singer Zayn Malik.

Finally, before other houses even think to catch on, she appropriates the feminist concept of *empowerment*, by asserting her status as one of the most powerful businesswomen in contemporary fashion.

Donatella likes to remind the media that she was a feminist all along: already at the University of Florence, where she studied literature, she participated in all of the movement's sit-ins during its golden age on campus. *"I will never accept that women are paid less than men at Versace, and I don't care if the accountants don't like it. I'd also like women to approach me, but I can already hear them saying, 'Oh, it's Donatella Versace, she can't understand the problems of real women.' That's wrong and ridiculous!"*



But success does not come without its share of new dramas. She gives the appearance of a cold, strong woman to let her voice be heard in the business world and make her brother's heavy legacy a thing of the past. But backstage, Donatella doubts terribly and sinks into an addiction to cocaine: *"In my dreams, Gianni is as real as you and me. He shouts at me: 'Donatella, what are these horrible clothes? Is this supposed to be Versace? How could you forget everything I taught you?' Then he knocks over the clothes rack."*

To protect herself, she desperately tries to model her appearance, dyes her hair so blonde it almost turns white, puts on more and more makeup, can no longer control her addiction to plastic surgery: *"The first five years after Gianni's death, I was completely lost. I felt like the whole world was looking at me with daggers in their eyes. I created a mask for myself. I wore too much makeup, but it was an armor. I did not want to be seen."*

If the fashion elite ends up lauding her undeniable success (after having violently criticized her at the beginning of her "reign"), it also starts poking more and more fun at her ghastly appearance. Elton John comes to the rescue, and sends her to rehab in Meadows, Arizona: *"Addiction has the same effects on everyone, notes Donatella Versace. What was worse than the withdrawal was the shock of reality when I got out."*



After coming out of rehab, Donatella is faced with a brutal reality. In his will (drawn up at the time of his cancer), Gianni bequeathed only 20% of the empire to Donatella, 30% to Santo, and 50% to Allegra, her own daughter, then 11 years old.

A real slap in the face for Donatella, and an overwhelming legacy for the young niece, who sinks into anorexia. Now of age, Allegra continues to flee all professional and media responsibility, and chooses to keep her distance from the house of Versace. Donatella therefore keeps the empire afloat, alone.

The 2018 fashion show, for which she invites supermodels Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford and Helena Christensen, to the music of George Michael, is a way for her to come full circle. That same year, she wins the Fashion Icon Award, a kind of *"lifetime achievement award"*.



Today, despite the trials and tribulations, and the weight of kinship, Donatella has succeeded in her challenge: the Versace family still owns 80% of the company. Despite rumors that she will be replaced by the Italian Riccardo Tisci – the head of Givenchy for twelve years – she still does not intend to end her career. *“Retirement? I will stay as long as I can in the company.”*

By taking over the reins of the family business, Donatella has deliberately taken her revenge and asserted her emancipation. She was able to overcome the fatality of the filial heritage, find her place in a legacy founded by her brother, and make it last: *“The first years, I listened to almost everyone’s opinion; until I realized that my brother had only one close confidante: me. I worked with him every day, I was so much more than his muse. For a long time, I felt the death of my brother as a trauma, but today I feel that his death has made me stronger.”*

In this story, everything is over the top, excessive, senseless. Reality never ceases to outpace fiction. This Italian saga opens up with tragedy, even mythology. Within it violence and drama not only tear apart but also galvanize families.

And it was precisely Greek mythology that inspired Gianni to choose his symbol, the jellyfish. Medusa, whose flowing, opulent hair was turned by a rival into snakes, and whose mere gaze would turn into stone anyone who dared cross her. But then, let us ponder the choice of this precise symbol. Because for Gianni, it represents beauty and power: *“It’s my idea of a woman, aggressive and fatal, capable of seducing with just one look.”* Was this how he viewed his sister?

Director's note

Much has been said about the relationship between Donatella and Gianni, and I intend to use this documentary to shed light on the complex relationship between brother and sister, keeping in mind the old adage that it is dangerous to work with family.

In the spotlight since 1978, when the house of Versace was founded, there have been a plethora of films about and interviews of Gianni and Donatella, all across the world – these plentiful archives will enable me to give substance to and carry this story.

Such a high level of drama (Gianni's cancer and murder, Donatella's addiction to cocaine and plastic surgery, Allegra's eating disorders) could reduce this work to that of a crass, vulgar tabloid. But, on the contrary, I believe that it should be elevated and celebrated as the saga it truly is.

An outspoken homosexual in a very Catholic Italy, a fashion pope at the head of a multinational empire estimated to be worth over a billion dollars, Gianni Versace is already an archetypal figure in his own right. His violent murder, one of the most infamous events of the late 20th century, made him a legend.

The fact that his own younger sister, with her tormented personality and powerful addictions, kept the empire afloat despite their complicated relationship, and even made it grow against all odds, gives this story the allure of modern mythology.

It is the lyrical vision, the epic breadth of this family story that I wish to convey, as it goes beyond the mere fashion dynasty: a tale of rags speaking to the universal.

And I have experimented with this in several of my documentaries (*Warren Beatty, a Hollywood Obsession, Vadim, Mister Cool*), so I have come to understand that an all-archival narrative, carried by a voice-over that brings a novelistic dimension, is the most organic form of storytelling.

For this, I would love to have an Italian actress like Valeria Golino tell the tale – a choice we can discuss. Indeed, to invite Donatella Versace herself would mean taking the risk of months of negotiations (she is famous for fiercely protecting her image), which would run us off schedule (due in the spring of 2023), and would only result in a bland and boring interview. I want to trust the intrinsic narrative strength of this story.

Olivier Nicklaus.

Production note

If there ever was a powerful sibling story in the world of fashion that could perfectly find its place in Arte's "Summer of Brothers and Sisters" lineup, it is the one that links the genius designer Gianni Versace and his sister and collaborator Donatella.

Their "bigger than life" story was adapted into the hit Netflix series "*American Crime Story*", but we believe that fiction will never have the weight archives have.

The fashion world by itself already puts on a show that it would be a shame to artificially recreate. The runways, the fashion shows, the workshops, the parties, the weddings and funerals. Everything in the life of the Versaces has been documented. These images, along with contextual archives, allow us to tell the story of their tortuous relationship, of decadent Italy, but more broadly of the fashion ecosystem, a theatrical medium at its core, which generates spectacular drama.

Through his past experiences as a documentary filmmaker, and more particularly thanks to the *Arte Fashion!* series, Olivier Nicklaus already has a deep knowledge of the existing archives and scenes displaying the siblings. This upstream work will allow him to deliver a solid and consistent documentary for spring 2023.

I fully trust that he will be able to skilfully organize all this material to extract the quintessence of an epic and exciting saga, to craft a documentary with international potential that should seduce a wide audience.

It is in this perspective that we wish to quickly discuss with RTBF and Raï for pre-purchases, but also with an international distributor who will allow us to make this film, we hope, with the greatest possible scope and ambition.

Camille Plouin.



incognita | doc

Created in 2021 by Camille Plouin & Édouard de Vésinne, the INCOGNITA DOC label's ambition is to explore and imagine new codes of documentary writing and narration for historical channels as well as for platforms and cinema.

Relying on a solid network of talents and partners around the world, INCOGNITA DOC creates innovative, committed and multigenerational content, anchored in themes as varied as society, culture, history and discovery.

A documentary producer and director, Camille Plouin has worked with National Geographic, Capa Presse, BBC, Troisième Oeil and M6 before developing and producing more recently at Imagissime (Mediawan group) some thirty films for Arte, MyCanal, RMC Découverte, Netflix and France Télévisions.

Édouard de Vésinne has produced more than ten feature films, including the recent documentaries *Et les mistrales gagnants* by Anne-Dauphine Julliand (250,000 tickets in France) and *Haut les filles* by François Armanet, selected for the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

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