

Lora Lee & Tom Ecobelli

Waiting for Chickadee to take flight

The spring of 2011 was drawing to a close when I received a message from children's book illustrator Jody Wheeler encouraging me to connect with a sibling pair by the names of Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli. I was told only that the sister and brother were natives of Ballston Spa who had co-authored a cookbook and needed guidance in securing a publisher.

Could I help? Yes, I supposed I could. But doing so would distract me from other projects and commitments at the very time when I could least afford to be pulled in yet another direction.

On top of freelance writing assignments and chipping away on this book, I was still devoting an hour each weekday morning to helping 89-year-old Village History Consultant Maurice "Christopher" Morley as well as transporting my youngest to and from extracurricular activities. With Kiersten's senior prom, high school graduation and college orientation events merging with my duties as a member of my graduating class's 40th reunion committee, the smartest thing I could do was to ask Jody to tell the Ecobellis I wished them well, but simply could not make time in my schedule to assist them at this time.

Yet something deep inside wouldn't allow me to say "No" even though on a rational level, I believed that to be the best response.

For one thing, the Ecobelli surname evoked fond memories of one of the most exciting transitions in my young life – one that would make it possible for me to graduate as a member of Ballston Spa High School's Class of 1971 as well as to represent the Rotary Club of Ballston Spa as an international exchange student.

Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to travel back in time to November 1968 when I was but 15 and a sophomore at Shaker High in Colonie. My parents had decided to uproot their 10 children — who then ranged in age from five to 19 — and move us from the outskirts of Albany to the foothills of the Adirondacks during the Thanksgiving school break.

Assured by my closest friends that we'd find ways to stay in touch, I embraced the transition from a rather modest Eisenhower-era abode in a modern suburb just off the busy Troy-Schenectady Road in Latham to a splendid Victorian-era residence on the outskirts of Saratoga Springs. I welcomed the prospect of being able to walk to and from school rather than riding buses as I had done all of my life. At last I'd be able to join clubs and participate in extracurricular activities knowing that my own two feet could get me there and back.

Laurina Film Partners Presents

CHICKADEE

Director *Sylvia Caminer*



**Sometimes the
quietest voice
shatters the silence**

"Chickadee is a hell of a brave story. What makes it even more remarkable is that it's true!" Julie Kavner

Writers *Lora Lee Ecobelli & Tom Ecobelli*



Siblings Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli with a poster for the forthcoming motion picture titled *Chickadee*. Based on the true story of their late grandmother Laurina's courageous battle for justice, the film is to be directed by the Emmy Award-winning Sylvia Caminer. At right is the cover of *Laurina's Kitchen* -- the cookbook Lora Lee and Tom co-authored in honor of their grandmother who became the beloved matriarch of Ecobelli's Tam O'Shanter Restaurant in Ballston Spa, NY.



My excitement about starting classes at the new school only heightened after learning that Al and Helen Eisenhower, two of my mother's favorite teaching associates in the village, had invited our family of 12 to dine with them at a popular Italian-American restaurant that was situated on Church Avenue – literally on the same stretch of road as our new home.

Told that Mr. Eisenhower knew just about every instructor in the district, I looked forward to quizzing him over pasta about those educators I would surely soon encounter at Ballston Spa High School. Mr. E's anecdotes about my future art teacher, Dick Sather, who I was cautioned might remove his artificial eye and roll it across a table in the classroom, and Mr. Plant, who might well bring biology lessons to life with graphic stories of his own intestinal surgeries, represent but part of the reason why the Ecobelli name was seared in my memory.

Despite the many decades that had passed since that first dining adventure in 1968, I could still recall the warm welcome our large party had received upon making our entrance into the restaurant. It transcended hometown hospitality – making me feel as if I'd entered an Old World Mediterranean abode where gourmet food just happened to be on the menu. The aromas of sauces that had been simmering for hours had made my mouth water as I observed wait staff and customers laughing and exchanging stories.

The stroll down Memory Lane that was prompted by Jody's message motivated me to get in touch with Lora Lee and Tom who had been in high chairs – or close to it – at the time their ancestors had first welcomed me to Ecobelli's Tam O'Shanter..

The idea was that I'd spend an hour or so via a May 2011 teleconference sharing publishing leads with Lora Lee – whose talents are in demand in entertainment circles on the east coast and with Tom, who makes his living as an actor and producer on the west coast. At the end of the teleconference, I'd wish them well and get back to more important things in my life.

Then the unexpected happened. Lora Lee and Tom offered to send me not only a PDF of their then unpublished cookbook titled *Laurina's Kitchen*, but also a copy of the script for *Chickadee* – a decision that ultimately inspired me to pen the testimonial on the facing page about my belief in the project.

Feeling as strongly as I did about the importance of their paternal grandmother's courageous story being told in a way that could inspire audiences around the world, I didn't hesitate when asked if I'd help them try to boost awareness about *Chickadee* and the need to raise funds for the independent film.

My decision to take a leap of faith nearly five years ago has proven to be a blessing many times over. I firmly believe the funds needed for *Chickadee* to take flight will arrive at exactly the right time from the sources that are exactly right for this landmark film project. To learn more, please read my reflections on the facing page before turning to my Q & A with Emmy-winning director Sylvia Caminer and section about the cookbook near the conclusion of this chapter.

Additional coverage regarding *Chickadee* can be found on the movie's web site at <http://aquabelll.wix.com/laurinafilmpartners> or on its Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Chickadeethemovie.



As a seasoned journalist with a passion for preserving the past and present for future generations, I was initially drawn to the script for *Chickadee* because it is based upon the true story of a courageous Italian-American girl from the region in New York State where my own immigrant ancestors put down roots well over a century ago.

Wiping away tears as I turned the pages of the masterpiece woven by siblings Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli to honor the legacy of their late grandmother, Laurina, every fiber of my being ultimately applauded *Chickadee* as a bona fide triumph of the human spirit. To stop there would, however, be a grave injustice not only to Laurina and her descendents — but to all who ever were, or are, or might one day be held hostage by a family secret.

Those who take the *Chickadee* film project under their wings at this critical stage in development will be doing far more than helping to bring one of the most captivating and thought-provoking stories ever written about the abuse and exploitation of the youth of a bygone era to the big screen. They will be contributing to the education and empowerment of the silent victims of domestic violence, including sexual assaults, who walk among us today.

With acclaimed director Sylvia Caminer at the helm, *Chickadee* will surely also serve as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for healing as well as being heralded as a “must-see” for all who endeavor to aid in the prevention of the abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents.

A sad fact of modern life is that newscasts involving abductions, human trafficking and related social justice violations are now commonplace – making the need for audiences at film festivals and in movie theaters around the world to see *Chickadee* greater than ever. There has never been a more fitting time for this movie’s powerful message to take flight.

— Ann Hauprich

www.facebook.com/Chickadeethemovie

Q & A
with
Chickadee
director
Sylvia
Caminer



Under the direction of Emmy award-winning filmmaker Sylvia Caminer, *Chickadee* is expected to bring star power that includes Raoul Bova, Chris Cooper, Julie Kavner and other celebrated talents to New York's Capital Region. The independent motion picture is budgeted at \$3-million and will commence production once funding is completed. Laurina Film Partners is presently working with a number of interested investors and benefactors to make their dream a reality. The following Q & A between author Ann Hauprich and Ms. Caminer transpired in October 2015.



Chickadee's cast will include the stellar talents of actors (l. to rt.) Raoul Bova, Julie Kavner and Chris Cooper.

AH: When – and how — did you first become aware of Laurina’s story?

SC: I met Lora Lee Ecobelli’s now late husband (Leo Burmester) while working together on a film I produced titled *Aftermath*. Leo and I had a magical instant connection. He spoke with such passion and conviction about *Chickadee* that I knew I just had to read the script.

AH: At what point in reading the script by Lora Lee & Tom Ecobelli did you know with certainty that you wanted to become involved with *Chickadee*?

SC: The very opening of the film grabbed me — the love of a mother for her children and the torment of having to place them in an orphanage even though just temporarily is palpable. I was also immediately drawn to the immigrant story at the heart of the film, both of my parents immigrated to this country and with the worldwide crisis it is so relevant. Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli did a masterful job of capturing the story and building vibrant, multi-layered characters. The story is all the more powerful knowing it is based on fact — particularly in relation to the issue of sexual/physical abuse as it plays out here. This is one of those stories that really needs to be shared.

AH: How would you most like to see the production presented to audiences?

SC: The power of going to the cinema is magical. It is one of the few places left where we are forced to put away all of life’s distractions for singular focus and also have an almost communal experience of sharing a story with others. This seems particularly fitting for this story. Our goal, however, is to reach as wide an audience as possible and television/digital as of late are offering some really exciting prospects and have the ability to reach a truly diverse audience. We also acknowledge that the market for initial purely theatrical releases has really dwindled and we would definitely consider a joint release on-demand and in theaters.

AH: The fact that Chris Cooper – who was last on location in Saratoga County for the filming of some scenes for *Seabiscuit* – has attached to the project is sure to be a tremendous asset both in terms of securing production funding and at the box office. Why was it important that he be cast as Dr. Porter?

SC: Chris is an exceptional actor. The vitality and detail he would bring to this important role (are attributes) I don’t believe could be matched by any other actor. We are extremely fortunate that he and Leo were very good friends and actually started their careers together at The Actors Theatre of Louisville. Chris has been attached to the project almost from the beginning. The script also really hit home with his Italian wife who read the script first and even helped translate some of the Italian. We are very hopeful that once we finalize the budget and lock the shooting schedule we will be able to make things work with Chris’ extremely hectic schedule.



**Chickadee Principal Casting by
Carolyn Long & Concetta Di Matteo**



*“The bravery exhibited by
Laurina at the age of 13
I believe can and will
inspire girls the world
over to stand up for
their rights and speak
out about abuse.*

-- Sylvia Caminer

AH: Two other great names attached to *Chickadee* are Julie Kavner and Raoul Bova. Kindly elaborate on the main reasons they were chosen to help bring the film to life for audiences?

SC: Again two exceptional actors who bring such authenticity to their work. Pietro is a really complex role and needs a nuanced performance. I first took note of Raoul in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, he brings with him a real vulnerability and likability which will give Pietro so much more depth. Pietro can't simply be a villain. Raoul is also a huge star in Italy and we believe this film will have wide international appeal. Julie – WOW! I am just thrilled that she is attached as she is always fascinating and is truly iconic. I can't wait to explore the role of Miss Ottinger with her and watch the magic she brings.

AH: Do you have any idea yet who will star in the leading role as Laurina? If not, is there a chance there might be a national talent search – such as the one that took place when *ANNIE* first hit Broadway? Or when *Anne of Green Gables* was being cast in Canada a few decades ago?

SC: We will likely start searching in the tri-state area but we won't stop until we find the right person. This is such a pivotal character we need someone truly special.

AH: When – and where — will casting calls for other major roles take place?

SC: We are super fortunate to have Concetta Di Matteo and Carolyn Long as our casting directors and they will release a breakdown in Los Angeles and New York City for the leads and major supporting roles. We will also cast locally for as many speaking roles as possible. I absolutely love working with local talent and with our tight budget it makes a lot of sense to hire from the talented local community.

AH: What about auditions for extras?

SC: We will have open calls locally and our extra's casting director will coordinate all of this.

AH: David Amram will compose the score. His reputation precedes him, of course, but would you care to add “a note” or two re: the importance of his contribution to this project?

SC: David actually knew Laurina — and he loved her. That type of connection to a project is really rare. The fact that he is a big fan and friend of the project speaks very loud to me about the script. One of my favorite parts of making films is working with the composer, adding the score is like bringing the last main character to the story. It can either make or break it and with someone like David it takes the film to a whole other level. My gosh! David created the score for *Splendor in the Grass!*



Composer David Amram

AH: What would most you like prospective financial backers and future audiences to know about the film’s writers and producers?

SC: Lora Lee and Tom are such talented writers and are so incredibly dedicated to sharing this remarkable story of their grandmother and extended family with generations to come. You can’t help but rally behind them, I am really honored that they have entrusted me with the opportunity to help tell this very personal story. These two will simply not stop until this film is produced. That type of passion and commitment is infectious.

AH: What is the anticipated cost of producing *Chickadee*?

SC: Approximately \$3-million, which is a sizable budget for an independent film. However, with the time period being set at the beginning of the 20th century we need to have the resources to bring this world to life. What are some of the rewards (intangible as well as tangible) supporters can expect to receive in return for their investments? This story is very universal with wide appeal. True stories if dynamic and done well are typically very successful so we have very high expectations. This is also a very inspiring women’s film and there seems to be a ground swell for these types of films as of late. The bravery exhibited by Laurina at the age of 13 I believe can and will inspire girls the world over to stand up for their rights and speak out about abuse.

AH: When and where would filming in New York’s Capital Region ideally begin?

SC: Our goal is Autumn 2016, but that is all dependent on when the financing is secured. We are ready to head right into pre-production and have many elements already in place.

AH: What do you expect to be some of the greatest challenges while filming on location in this part of the country?

SC: Whenever you film outside a main metropolis of filmmaking there are some inherent challenges — like housing, transportation, securing appropriate locations and finding talented local crew and actors. However we are approaching these potential challenges with excitement and are thrilled to have the opportunity to shoot in the region and work with the local talent. The Albany and Hudson Valley Film Commissions are extremely helpful and we are already securing some locations including one of the actual mills from the story in Troy. I have also always really enjoyed being away on location while filming because it seems to unite the team and often there is a newness and acceptability from within the community. One of my very first jobs in film was as a P.A. on Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* so it seems very fitting to be coming back to the area.

AH: What do you expect to be the most rewarding part of filming on location?

SC: Authenticity

AH: When — and where — would you most like *Chickadee* to debut?

SC: I think an international film festival like Cannes or Venice would be perfect.

AH: What do you hope audiences (vs. critics!) will say after seeing the movie for the first time?

SC: First off I would hope that Tom and Lora Lee would feel that we gave their family story life and that it lived up to and hopefully exceeded their expectations. Further I'd hope that filmgoers would be transported back to the early 1900s and could relate to this very personal story of hardship and ultimate victory. Viewing a film is so subjective, we can't expect (nor would we want) everyone to take away the same message or even be moved in the same way. We are making this film for the general public but of course if the critics connect with it that only helps our efforts in reaching a broader audience. But you never really know how the media is going to receive a film.

AH: What do you hope the film's legacy will be?

SC: Hopefully it will be a timeless film that can be shared with generations and give voice to those silently suffering. Cinema has the power to evoke conversation and I think the true measure of a film is if the story lives on with you and so I would hope that a little piece of Laurina would live on ...

www.facebook.com/Chickadeethemovie.com

Sylvia Caminer's career highlights

Chickadee director/producer Sylvia Caminer is an Emmy® Award-winning filmmaker who also has extensive credits in theatre and television. Over the past 20 years, Sylvia has filmed on five continents, working with such stars as Rita Moreno, Betty White, Tom Berenger, Tony Danza, Ben Gazzara and Neil Patrick Harris

Through her production company DolGer Films (*Aftermath, Chosen, Grace*), Sylvia is busy developing socially relevant documentaries as well as several non-fiction series. In addition to being at the helm of *Chickadee*, Sylvia is overseeing a second narrative feature inspired by a true story. The latter, *Blackout Girl*, is based on the award-winning, critically acclaimed memoir tackling the relevant topics of youth, addiction and sexual violence.

Sylvia's directorial feature debut was *An Affair of the Heart*, which chronicles the unique relationship between pop icon Rick Springfield and his intensely devoted fans exploring the impact fan adoration has on several families. That production received top awards at its first four film festivals and opened theatrically to critical acclaim in NYC in 2012 before wide release on television, VOD and DVD.

Her most recent feature-length documentary film, *Tanzania: A Journey Within*, which Sylvia directed and produced, traveled the festival circuit garnering many awards. A command performance was presented to the President of Tanzania and distinguished guests at the White House in Dar es Salaam before the film opened in theaters in the USA in Spring 2014.

Sylvia's television credits include winning the Emmy® for directing the popular Discovery/Travel Channel program *Great Hotels* — which she also produced and co-wrote. She earned a third Emmy nomination for directing *Passport to Europe* and produced and directed *Passport to Latin America* — all hosted by Samantha Brown. Sylvia has also produced various programs for TLC, WE, Lifetime & PBS. She also directed/produced several web series.

Sylvia Caminer's Most Recent Awards

An Affair of the Heart:

Nashville Film Festival - Gibson Impact of Music Award

Florida Film Festival - Special Jury Award - Outstanding Direction

Tanzania A Journey Within:

Best Documentary - Albuquerque Film Festival

Best Documentary - SoHo International Film Festival,

Best World Showcase (Best of Fest) SoHo International Film Festival, Best Documentary -

Long Island International Film Expo

Laurina's Kitchen key ingredient in film's backstory

It was an honor to be among those in attendance at a 2012 book launch that doubled as a celebration of the life and legacy of Laurina Inzinna Ecobelli, the late matriarch of Ecobelli's Tam O'Shanter Restaurant in Ballston Spa, NY.

Hosted by Laurina's grandchildren Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli, the August event provided a rare opportunity to tour the once thriving Italian-American dining destination that was owned and operated by their ancestors for more than four decades.

Professional actors, screenwriters and producers, Lora Lee and Tom had co-authored *Laurina's Kitchen* as a companion piece for *Chickadee*, the forthcoming film based on an inspiring story that was recorded in their grandmother's journal nearly a century ago.

While *Chickadee* captures Laurina's courage as well as her pain, *Laurina's Kitchen* is a light-hearted and heart-warming 108-page collection of many previously secret family recipes as well as a treasure trove of previously unpublished memories.

Peppered throughout the 8.5" x 11" literary treasure published by Square Circle Press are images of the Ecobellis and their extended 'family' around the restaurant and at home as well as special memories contributed by staff, patrons and friends who were all a part of the restaurant's devoted community.

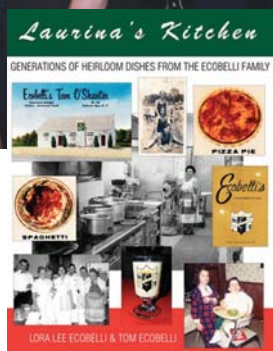
Publisher Richard Vang first heard about *Laurina's Kitchen* from Schenectady's city and county historian Don Rittner – who is also a Schenectady film commissioner. “Don and I were in contact about a forthcoming book of his in late December 2011 when he mentioned the cookbook in the context of the film project *Chickadee* – which was inspired by an Italian immigrant girl who grew up to be the matriarch of Ecobelli family,” said Vang.

He added that the cookbook — which includes dozens of Laurina's favorite recipes — was a natural fit for Square Circle Press because the company's primary catalogue focus is on the history and culture of upstate New York.

“As a publisher, I am interested in any genre that fits this focus. For some time, I have been wondering what type of cookbook might fit into our catalogue, but I knew it had to be special. Given the relationship to such an upstate institution as Ecobelli's, I would have seriously considered such a cookbook on its own merit.



The presence of award-winning composer David Amram (far right), creator of the score for *Chickadee*, and his talented daughters, Alana and Adira, great-granddaughters of Laurina Inzinna Ecobelli, proved to be a special treat at the August 2012 book launch. Please visit *Chickadee's* Facebook site to enjoy a slide show of the occasion that was crafted by Mary Hauprich-Reilly. The YouTube in question also features other members of the Ecobelli family who joined publisher Richard Vang (far left) and the authors in welcoming guests to the party during which photographs and memorabilia were displayed.



The richly illustrated cookbook titled *Laurina's Kitchen* has been described by Square Circle Press publisher Richard Vang as “a colorful and eclectic mix of ephemera, such as menus, postcards and newspaper articles” that collectively bring “The Tam” back to life. To learn more about *Laurina's Kitchen*, please visit www.squarecirclepress.com.

But given the background of Laurina Ecobelli’s early life and the connection of the cookbook to the movie *Chickadee*, I immediately knew that this was something extra special,” said Vang. “I am a foodie, and I love our unique Upstate bars and restaurants. I never had the pleasure of visiting Ecobelli’s Tam O’Shanter, but when I saw Tom Ecobelli’s Facebook page and the comments from former patrons, I recognized that Ecobelli’s was part of the fabric of many people’s lives.”

Five years after being approached by Jody Wheeler about the possibility of assisting Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli in their quest to find a publisher for *Laurina's Kitchen*, there’s no doubt in my mind that its creation was a key ingredient in one of God’s Never Fail Recipes.