

television

The Leopard is back — and it's claws

Sixty-two years after the classic film of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel, a radical TV reboot is sowing division among the author's descendants, reveals James Imam

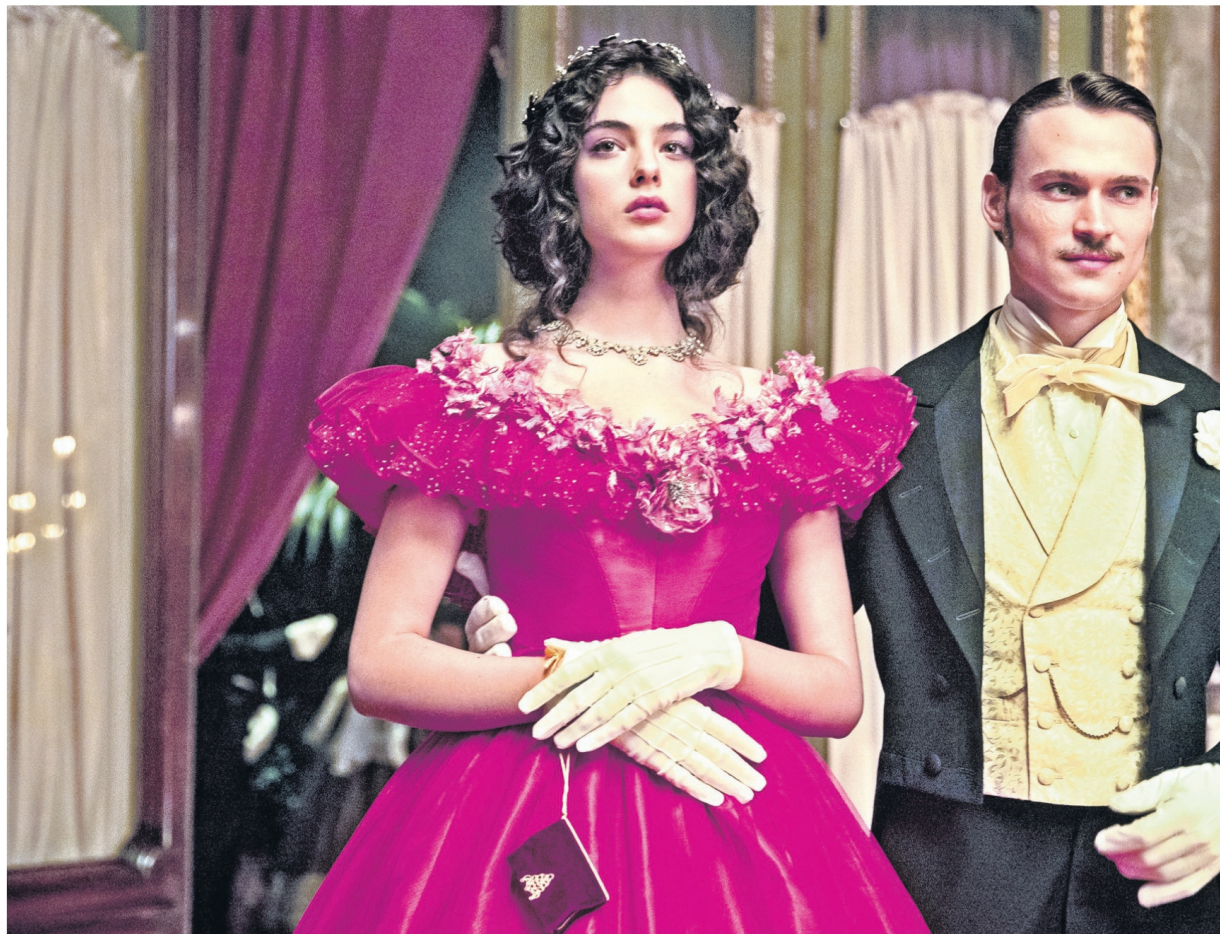
The Palazzo Lanza Tomasi in Palermo is a shrine to one of Italy's most celebrated modern literary figures. Its ballrooms sparkle with chandeliers, portraits of ancestors in cardinals' robes hang on the walls and endless rows of bookcases hold faded tomes. This was the last residence of the Sicilian noble Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, one of modern Italy's greatest writers. A display cabinet preserves the manuscript, typescript and first edition of *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), his celebrated tale of the slow decline of Sicily's aristocracy.

Published posthumously in 1958, Tomasi di Lampedusa's only novel captures the 19th-century opulence and decay of the fictional Salina dynasty, whose members attend extravagant balls, negotiate marriages with the rising bourgeoisie and fret over the revolutionary fervour of the Risorgimento unification movement. It was an instant bestseller, going through 52 editions in under six months, and in 1963 was adapted by Luchino Visconti into a blockbuster film starring Burt Lancaster.

Now a Netflix adaptation that will be streaming from March 5 aims to bring the story to a fresh global audience. The result is a striking, fast-paced drama. Scenes feature grubby farmhands toiling under the sun, decadent palazzi set among palm groves, dining tables filled with delicacies and epic battle sequences among iconic Palermo landmarks. "We wanted to interpret the novel in a way that will speak to a modern audience, with a visual and dramatic language that we're more used to," says the director, Tom Shankland.

But within the walls of Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, the prospect of the series has been met with horror. Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, 72, the Duchess of Palma and widow of Tomasi di Lampedusa's adoptive son, is the palazzo's present inhabitant. "It's absolutely the opposite of any idea of *The Leopard*," she says of the series between mouthfuls of fusilli pasta with wild fennel, toasted almonds and pecorino pesto. "Seeing the trailer is enough ... Literally I don't want to think about it." Netflix presents the six-part mini-series as "a dazzlingly sensuous epic," but Nicoletta dismisses it as a vacuous money-spinner. "This is not keeping alive the legacy of *The Leopard* and Gioacchino. This is just making money out of it."

So does the new version, starring Kim Rossi Stuart as Fabrizio, have what it



Deva Cassel and Saul Nanni in *The Leopard*. Below: Gioacchino and Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi in 2015. Right: Astrid Meloni and Kim Rossi Stuart in the series



takes to enthrall viewers the way Visconti and Tomasi di Lampedusa's visions have for more than 60 years?

The book centres on Don Fabrizio Corbera, the prince of Salina, who contemplates his family's fate as Garibaldi's forces disembark in Sicily in 1860. His dashing nephew, Tancredi, opportunistically fights with the revolutionaries, spurns Fabrizio's daughter Concetta and marries Angelica,

the beautiful daughter of a social climber, securing his future. Tancredi delivers the book's most famous line: "For things to remain the same, everything must change."

Tomasi di Lampedusa's personal history gave an autobiographical edge to the novel. Born into a noble Palermo family in 1896, he married the Latvian aristocrat Alexandra von Wolff-Stomersee. Although the couple did not have children, Tomasi di Lampedusa adopted Gioacchino Lanza, a distant cousin 37 years his junior, a year before his death from lung cancer. (Gioacchino then adopted the surname Lanza Tomasi.)

Tomasi di Lampedusa said that Fabrizio was based on his great-grandfather Giulio Tomasi. Over lunch at the palazzo, Nicoletta says that Tancredi was partly inspired by Gioacchino, whom she married in the 1980s. "Giuseppe was incredibly affectionate toward Gioacchino," she says. "He was really his chosen son."

Initially divisive, *The Leopard* was dismissed by left-wing intellectuals as conservative nostalgia. Yet it offers a timeless message about power amid political upheaval. The literary scholar Salvatore Nigro draws a parallel with US

civil servants adapting to the uncertainties of the Trump era.

"The novel speaks to us today because the classics never die," he says. Giovanni Capecci, a literature professor at the Università per Stranieri di Perugia, agrees: the book "addresses issues that are always current because they belong to man, wherever and whenever he lives."

The duchess considers herself the protector of this proud tradition. A former Russian interpreter and globe-trotting adventurer who grew up in Venice, Nicoletta met Gioacchino, a prominent musicologist and future head of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, at the Venice Film Festival. Together they created a listed library at the frescoed Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, salvaging Tomasi di Lampedusa's books and cataloguing letters and photos. Nicoletta, who hosts Sicilian cooking classes and group tours, plans to digitise documents and turn part of the residence into a museum.

Many visitors no doubt know the book through the 1963 movie. With its lavish costumes, rich panoramas and dusky soundtrack by Nino Rota, it unfolds

out for a controversial Italian remake

LUCIA BUONICCONTI/NETFLIX

Six foreign-language dramas to watch

An t-Eilean (Gaelic)

A tense and twisting story of lies, loss and buried secrets returning to haunt residents, set against the beautiful backdrop of the Western Isles of Scotland. Kat Crichton (Sorcha Groundsell), a police family liaison officer, is assigned to the murder investigation of a local tycoon's wife on Lewis and Harris, an island she left ten years previously, and is drawn into a web of old feuds. **BBC iPlayer**

Where's Wanda? (German)

This eight-part dark comedy tells the story of a married couple, Dedo and Carlotta Klatt, on the hunt for their missing 17-year-old daughter. Failed by the police, they enlist the help of their tech-savvy son, Ole, and pose as employees of an electrical company to bug the local area in search of clues. However, their surveillance reveals that no one living in their town appears to be what they first thought. **Apple TV+**

Squid Game 2 (Korean)

Season two of the brilliant South Korean dystopian thriller begins with last season's winner of the brutal survival games, Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), returning to the mysterious island to take part in another life-or-death competition. The creator Hwang Dong-hyuk (who won an Emmy for season one) has wisely added just enough differences to keep you guessing. No one is to be trusted. **Netflix**

La Maison (French)

This compelling drama follows two dysfunctional fashion houses vying for dominance after a racist viral video dethrones their leader (Vincent Colombe). To survive they must reinvent their brands and find ways to appeal to

slowly in art-inspired tableaux. A Marxist, Visconti cut Fabrizio's death to focus on aristocratic decline. The long ball scene is a powerful portrait of the prince coming to terms with a fading era.

Initially met with cool



Top: Squid Game 2. Above: An t-Eilean. Left: Where's Wanda?

do this while continuing to squabble among themselves? A show with both style and substance. **Apple TV+**

Midnight Family (Spanish)

Inspired by a 2019 documentary, this drama is centred on Marigaby Tamayo (Renata Vaca), a second-year medical student who works nights for her family's unlicensed private ambulance company in Mexico City. A morally complex series about a collapsing city filled with grit, gore and politics alongside an emotional family story. **Apple TV+**

Ar y Ffin (Welsh)

The title of this twisty legal drama translates as "on the border" and it takes as its setting Newport in south Wales. Erin Richards stars as the magistrate Claire Lewis Jones, who is compromised when her daughter's friend faces charges, and a criminal from her past resurfaces, causing trouble. A well-crafted study of family, loyalties and deceit in a refreshingly different setting. **BBC iPlayer**
Tim Glanfield

American reviews, the film won the Palme d'Or and is now considered a pillar of cinematic history. Nigro believes it even eclipsed the book. "The great, merited success of Visconti's masterpiece means that everyone in Italy reads *The Leopard* through the cinematic adaptation," he says.

According to Nicoletta, Visconti grasped Tomasi di Lampedusa's vision like few others. The director, too, was



Claudia Cardinale and Alain Delon in Luchino Visconti's 1963 film version

from an illustrious noble family. "Visconti was the perfect person to understand *The Leopard*," she says. "He was the same generation as Giuseppe, the same education, same background, same social class ... They lived in the same way."

Still, the creators of the new series stress that their adaptation is of the book, not the film. "You read that book and you think about the gorgeousness of it: the heat, the dust, the sensuality and the languor," says Richard Warlow, the British scriptwriter whose credits include *Ripper Street* and *The Serpent*. "As a writer, you think, what an opportunity."

Approached about the project in 2018, amid Brexit turmoil, Warlow saw

'If there is interest, it's welcome. I need a lot of money to maintain the palazzo'

contemporary resonance. "There were lots of conversations about what it means to be in the European Union, to be separate from the union, to live on an island," he recalls. "That idea about everything having to change felt very relevant to that moment ... If that felt apt and poignant, then it feels ten times so today."

Warlow and his team conducted meticulous research into Sicilian life, including sulphur mines, the local lemon trade, ice-making in the mountains and the kinds of jelly the Salinas might have eaten. He claims that Gioacchino was "behind us" and "interested", adding, "It was good to have the family egging us on." However, Nicoletta says that Gioacchino, while initially engaged, withdrew from the project years ago after disagreements with the series' creators.

Some characters have undergone significant transformations. Rather than the world-weary and reflective Gattopardo of the book, the new Don Fabrizio is a Hollywood bad boy with a despotic streak. Concetta, a relatively anonymous character until late in the novel, becomes key to prising open themes of loss and betrayal. "She is the one who suffers and loses the most,"

Warlow says. Benedetta Porcaroli, who plays Concetta, describes her as a product of a "feminist" reinterpretation. The 26-year-old actress believes the series could "relaunch the book and film", which she says "risks being forgotten" by her generation. The cast also features Deva Cassel, the French-Italian model and actress, as Angelica, the woman who sweeps Tancredi off his feet. The daughter of Monica Bellucci and Vincent Cassel, she will inevitably be compared to Claudia Cardinale, whose unforgettable performance in Visconti's film marked her cinematic coming of age. Yet Cassel seems to have had no trouble getting into the role — since filming began, she has sparked a real-life romance with Saul Nanni, who plays Tancredi.

Facing the "unforgiving" demands of spinning a multihour TV series, Warlow has tried to "climb inside" Tomasi's world and "open it all out". Fabrizio and Tancredi meet the knight Chevalley, a Piedmontese official, in Turin rather than Sicily, allowing for scenes at the historic senate and a performance of Verdi's opera *Nabucco* with its adoptive Risorgimento anthem *Va, pensiero*. Sedara, the nouveau riche landowner, has a mafioso feel with more than a few nods to Silvio Berlusconi, the three-time prime minister who faced numerous legal trials for alleged criminal connections.

While UK audiences are used to adaptations of classics, Warlow acknowledges that Italian devotees may be "up in arms" about some changes. But he is unapologetic. "If you have to adapt something that has already been adapted, you need to do something different and bold," he says. Nigro applauds the Netflix project, arguing that the story "needs to be reinterpreted". The film critic Antonio La Torre Giordano tells me he can't wait for the series, but predicts that "we're going to be divided on the outcome, just as we were divided on Visconti".

Nicoletta hopes the adaptation will at least boost book sales and income from royalties. "*The Leopard* is a long seller," she says. "If there is a new interest, it is welcome. I need a lot of money to maintain the palazzo."

The Leopard is on Netflix from Wed