

# New Jersey

## MONTHLY

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## How Sculptor Vincenzo Amato Carved Out Two Successful Careers

The Italian-born artist/actor says his first visit to New Jersey changed everything.

By [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#) | August 15, 2019 | Appears in the [August 2019](#) issue



Actor/sculptor Vincenzo Amato has lately taken to working in wood in his Maplewood barn, creating pieces like a carving of his own hands (lower right). Photos by Chad Hunt

Vincenzo Amato has appeared in more than 20 films, earning a best-actor nomination in his native Italy's equivalent of the Oscars. Angelina Jolie directed him in the hit film *Unbroken*. His TV credits include *Instinct*, *Madame Secretary*, *The Blacklist*, *Elementary*, *The Good Wife* and *Boardwalk*

*Empire*. He also has a career as a sculptor, working in metal and wood. Yet for all those accomplishments, the 53-year-old Maplewood resident says “the most beautiful day” in his life was marked by his first visit to New Jersey.

It was 1993, and Amato had yet to start his acting career, when he first rode through the Holland Tunnel on a trip to Irvington. A self-taught ironworker back home in Italy, he couldn’t help but admire the steel trusses of the Pulaski Skyway.

Amato, then 26, had come to the States from Rome to attend the wedding of a friend. He had made a metal sculpture as a gift, but the piece had been damaged in transit. Amato needed to find a shop where he could make some repairs.

As luck would have it, an American friend, the painter John Benton (son of *Kramer vs. Kramer* director Robert Benton), happened to be helping a metalwork artist move some of his pieces out of his shop in Irvington. Benton and the artist, Norman Campbell, picked up Amato in New York and off they went to Campbell’s forge—giving Amato his first look at the Garden State.

The day opened up a new opportunity for Amato. Campbell invited Amato to work with him on a commission he was hoping to get. Just like that, Amato said, “*Arrivederci Roma*,” and opted to try life in America. Campbell didn’t get the commission, but Amato stuck around anyway, working 10-hour days as a shop boy, honing his welding skills and polishing his English. “During those long days, he taught me everything about America,” Amato says of Campbell.

At the time, Amato was staying in a Lower East Side apartment building, where he’d taken to hanging out in the hallway whenever he felt like a cigarette. He began a friendship with an NYU film student and part-time waiter from Rome who lived across the hall. One day, the film student asked Amato his opinion of a script he’d written, *Once We Were Strangers*. Amato, the son of an Italian actress, read the script and told his friend he liked it.

“Good,” answered the friend, “because I want you to play the lead.”

Although unschooled in acting, Amato smoothly stepped into the part of an upbeat, undocumented Sicilian cook who charms a pretty American stranger into spending a day (and night) with him in Atlantic City after he loses his job. Nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998, the film launched the writing and directing career of Amato’s friend, Emanuele Crialese. It also launched Amato’s acting career.

In 2002, Crialese cast Amato as a Sicilian fisherman in his film *Respiro* opposite the actress Valeria Golino (who played Susanna in *Rain Man*). Four years later, Amato earned a David di Donatello best-actor nomination for his performance as an impoverished Sicilian who immigrates to America

in Crialesse's *Nuovomondo* (released in English-speaking markets as *Golden Door*). The awards are Italy's equivalent of the Oscars.

Between film projects, Amato continued to pursue his own American dream, working on figurative sculptures in iron and steel. He set up a studio in a former lavatory in an abandoned elementary school on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "For 10 years I slept there," he says, "until I met my wife and moved to a normal apartment."

Married since 2008, Amato and his wife, Alexandra Vazquez, a Miami-born professor of performance studies at NYU, have two daughters, Lucia, 8, and Manuela, 6.

"Coming to America," says Amato, "is probably the most important thing that happened to me, along with having children." The family moved to a three-bedroom Colonial in Maplewood three years ago.

Amato has proven adept at juggling careers. "Every single day, I work as a sculptor and use my hands," he says. "Every now and then, there is a beautiful film project or a little job. Then I close the shop and go act."

His best-known film—the one that American audiences are most likely to have seen—is the Angelina Jolie-directed *Unbroken* (2014). Amato played the Italian-born father of the main character, Louis Zamperini. The role is minor, but Amato infused his scenes with grace and authenticity. He reprised the role in a 2018 sequel, *Unbroken: Path to Redemption*.

Amato's other credits include star turns as an Italian who drives a Parisian tour bus in the romantic comedy *Girl on a Bicycle* (2013) and as a shy clerk whose life is transformed after he takes his first sip of wine in the Italian-made thriller *Vinodentro (ReWined)*.

It's no surprise that Italian films have offered Amato his biggest roles. "In America, the problem for me is I'm considered an ethnic actor," says Amato. "It makes me laugh. In Italy, I'm just Vincenzo; here, I am the Italian stereotype."

Though Amato still has the Manhattan studio where he sculpts in metal, he's totally smitten with the 1820 barn behind his family's Maplewood home. Here, he has turned to yet another art form: woodworking. In the barn, he turns ash trees felled by last year's storms into elegant walking sticks, interpretations of sailing ships and other figures. The barn has no electricity, so Amato works only with hand tools at his shaving horse, a combination vise and workbench.

Amato also puts his hands to work restoring his acre of land to its native state. When he bought the property, invasive English ivy and Asian vines had engulfed its tulip trees. "It took me two years to clear it up by myself with a machete," he says. He has planted willow, maple, beech, bee balm,

pawpaw, milkweed, New Jersey tea and 10 American chestnuts.

“I’m a total native-plant nerd,” he says. Pointing to snakeroot—*Ageratina*, he’ll have you know—he explains how Abraham Lincoln’s mother died after drinking milk from cows that had grazed on it.

Amato was drawn to Maplewood after a visit with his wife to one of her colleagues. He was intrigued to learn there was a Lenape trail nearby and Manhattan was visible in the distance. “I fell in love with the place,” he says. “Now that I moved to Maplewood, I don’t like being in the city anymore. I’m very happy here because I love nature. Even if it’s an ugly day, here it’s beautiful.”



**Amato uses his shaving horse to create walking sticks and other wooden objects from ash trees felled in his yard by storms.**

Photo by Chad Hunt

In the solitude of his barn, Amato muses on the moments that have sculpted his career: “The Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes said, ‘Life is the art of encounter.’ We have to embrace it.” He pronounces the poet’s name expertly in Portuguese, the syllables wafting from his lips as naturally as the smoke from the cigarettes he hand rolls.

The unusual trajectory of Amato’s life is particularly interesting to Teresa Fiore, endowed chair in Italian and Italian-American Studies at Montclair State University.

“The fact that he started in such a serendipitous way with Crialese and has continued to work with major directors speaks to his ability to adapt, to enjoy acting at its fullest while remaining devoted to his art as sculptor and a family life,” says Fiore. “Hollywood can certainly leverage his experience and personality in more creative ways.”

Amato is more blasé about his Hollywood possibilities. “In the end, making a film is just a job, and some rare times, an artistic adventure,” he says. “What are you going to do? I have an accent.”

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