

Ghostwriting Autobiography Project: Umberto Fiorilla

I am a flaneur, and the city is my natural environment.

Barbering gives me the opportunity to meet people in a way that is essential.

I think of human contact as a form of currency that makes me feel like I live a life of riches.

When I meet a client for the first time, I try to see beyond their appearance.

What kind of work do they do, what are their passions and the projects they care about? And where do they see themselves in the future?

It's important also to think about the length of their hair, the shape of their face and so on, but the thing I try to see above all else is **their** style.

By following the natural style of the client I know I can do the right thing for them.

Just as you wouldn't put a tie on a person who doesn't feel comfortable wearing one, a haircut needs to feel natural. I try to follow them, not lead them.

I have to try and use my experience and understanding of psychology to interpret what they need from me.

And I've become good at reading people – all I have to do is take a few minutes to observe and listen to them, and I know what to do.

I love to learn about other people's experiences, and London is the perfect place for this learning process.

This city is a unique place to me – meeting people here is almost like being able to visit every corner of the earth. Londoners are citizens of the world and they understand and appreciate quality.

Another beautiful aspect of working as a barber is that it gives me the opportunity to work with my hands.

It's not just a trade, it's a craft.

I feel like an artisan who is able to reap the wisdom and experience sowed by past generations.

Since I started working at hairdressers' years ago in Italy, I've cut hair in a lot of different places and have come to believe that UK barbering is the best in the world.

As a school it's the most varied and creative. You have the possibility of finding people who use all the possible styles out there – from aspects of different centuries to the modern era, as well as rockabilly, pompadours and almost anything that a person can imagine.

Cutting hair is a continuous process of research, of learning, of imagination and experimentation and finding a way to bring creative ways of bringing historical cuts into the present.

In Italy salons and barbers tend to follow the fashion dictated by the market.

It's linked to big companies, and hairdressers tend to use one or two styles that are in fashion at that particular moment. There's not much space for experimentation. So having a style that's a bit different becomes problematic.

I arrived in London five years ago because I felt drawn here and I wanted to do something different.

I'd always felt quite a lot of fear about leaving Italy. Perhaps it's the language, or it could be partly because I had never really spent time abroad.

I had a conversation with my partner Valentina about how we wanted a change of scene, we wanted to live and work in a big city.

I was working as a hairdresser in Bologna. We looked at Turin and other cities. In the end we arrived at a point where we realised that Italy didn't offer us what we were looking for creatively or in terms of the complicated legalities of everyday life.

Italy is part of my roots but it has become a closed country in which, I believe, the cultivation of art and new ideas is discouraged.

We wanted to escape that reality.

I loaded everything into my car and drove to London with Valentina and our cats.

We were staying in Walworth and were basically here for a year before moving to Peckham.

I've got three sons – Ivan, Simone and Tazio.

Tazio, the youngest, has grown up in Peckham, but Ivan is the one who sounds like a South Londoner as he's spent a lot of his life here.

My second son Simone wants to start a career as a barber. It's an opportunity to teach him my profession – a chance for him to learn through observation and practise.

When I first moved to London I didn't speak much English. I went round hairdressers' with my CV to see if there were any opportunities.

I worked for a while at an Italian place but it had the same political atmosphere as being back home and it didn't suit me at all.

Eventually I ended up finding a job at a salon in Holland Park. I liked being there – it was a new experience – but I soon found myself doing exactly the same things that I'd been doing in the 80s in Italy.

It was strange – here I was twenty years later in a different city and it was the same old story and the same old styles. It seemed stifling to me.

My experience working in theatre started with an Italian avant-garde theatre company, who were putting on a production of Joan of Arc.

I wasn't just styling and cutting hair: the director wanted me onstage too, so I also took part as an actor. I cut hair onstage with a razor – I had to cut Joan of Arc's hair and I

shaved it off completely.

Further down the line I did the hair for a production of Salome that was set in the 1930s.

It was fantastic.

I got to research the styles and cuts from the era, and around that time I began to realise that I had a lot more passion for working with men's hair than women's.

There was so much creativity; working with the theatre was something that I found exciting and gave me the chance to experiment with different styles and techniques.

Sometimes I think of theatrical hairdressing as having a sculptural quality. You're working with a prime material that has a particular and unique quality and texture.

That is its nature. If you work against it you often get an unsatisfactory result.

So when I've worked on theatrical productions cutting hair and designing wigs, I've found that I need to follow the nature of the hair to make it look its best. If it's synthetic materials, I have to use a combination of scientific know-how and traditional barbering skills to tame and manipulate the hair.

For example, if I need to create Georgian style curls with synthetic hair, I'll have to not only use a hairdryer – I'll need a steamer to give it the necessary volume. It becomes a work of research and science. It takes patience and persistence but it's incredibly rewarding.

After leaving the salon in west London, I moved on to work at a major London barber shop.

I got to see some of the best barbers in the UK at work, learning by watching how they approached different styles and techniques.

I was able to put my own unique spin on things and develop my own methods. I liked being able to learn from others but also found it gratifying to have other barbers appreciate my work. It was a place that gave me a grounding in different styles and a wide range of reference points. I also made some wonderful friendships during my time there.

After some years I decided to move on.

I believe that change can always bring about something positive and have often found that to be the case.

I was incredibly lucky. I had a good following of clients after I left to work as the in-house barber at Atkinson's, a perfumier based in Mayfair.

Thanks to previous clients who have followed me across, I am able to continue with the same kind of creative work I was doing before.

I've also been fortunate to find a fantastic range of new clients who always trust me and my experience, which is a wonderful thing.

My new shop is a unique place.

It's in a Georgian style, not just architecturally, but also in the sense of having a discrete,

private barber shop in the basement – something that is far from commonplace in London.

But it's not just about the history of the organisation and its fantastic fragrances, or my experience as a barber.

My barber shop is a place of detachment from the relentless pace of the outside world.

It's a place where a customer is looked after in a manner that has been passed down through the generations.