

VELOCE

ASPECTS OF ALFA ROMEO



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a car which honours the past



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without being a



a slave to it

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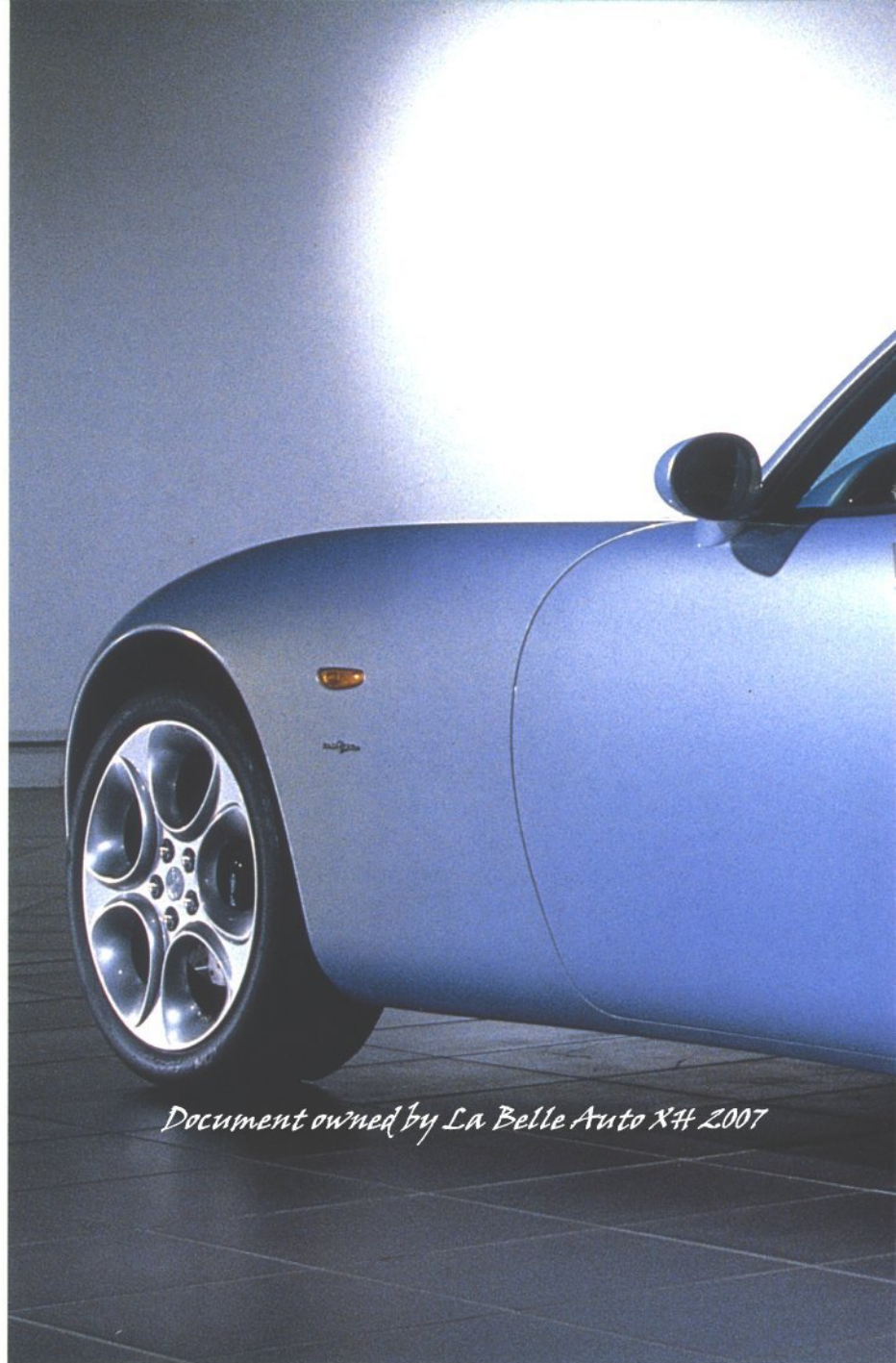
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'Tazio'

they were going to call it. It was to pay homage to the valour and virtuosity of Tazio Nuvolari, *il Mantovani volante*, the flying Mantuan, the racing driver whom all Italy lionized in the late 1920s and throughout the next two decades. Indomitable little Tazio Nuvolari, sometime fastest Grand Prix driver in the world, came from fame as a racing motorcyclist. He sold off some of his inherited estate to finance his entry into motor racing, and very quickly came to glory as defender of the honour of Italy and, as often as not, of Alfa Romeo. To what better memory could this stirring new Alfa Romeo concept-car be dedicated, than that of soul-stirring Tazio?

Somebody had second thoughts. Did not some people know Nuvolari as Nivola? It is not a word to be found in Italian dictionaries, though it has snowy overtones which might have been inspired by the silvery hair of his later years; more probably it was a regional corruption of *nuvola*, which means cloud. Again there are overtones, so we have to be careful. It can imply having one's head in the clouds, for instance: Nuvolari was an idealist, but a businesslike and practical man when it came to pursuing his ideals. The word can also suggest absent-mindedness, but that was almost certainly something from which the racing driver never suffered.

What about the idea of a cloud of smoke, though? If you dropped a starting flag in front of Nuvolari, he would



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disappear like a cloud of smoke; that was Tazio, all right.

When it comes to naming a car, a manufacturer has to be very prudent. Alfa Romeo has done better than that: it has been very ingenious. Naming this eloquent car – which looks back to the past and forward to the future with equal conviction, which could well go into production, and which is in any case as much a demonstration of a new technique as of an old persuasion – demanded something not too definite, something perhaps almost spiritual. Nuvola clouds the issue perfectly, while identifying the inspiration. Clever, that.

So is the car. It has a chassis made of box sections formed by spot-welding high-strength steel sheet. The technique is one that ensures robustness and dependability, but its further attraction is the most significant: it allows enormous flexibility of design and economies of scale in production, while demanding surprisingly little investment in plant and machinery. Small runs, big runs,



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the chic of it

LJK Setright on Nuvola, the car, the concept, the name



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modifications during development and variations during production are all made easy and affordable by this system, which allows the manufacturer to respond very quickly to market requirements. The Nuvola is just one of many possibilities.

Others have already been seen. The same boxed-steel frame technology lay hidden beneath the skin of the Fiat Multipla, a possible successor to the 600 Multipla which ended a 14-year production run in 1969. People who go on about modern MPVs as some sort of saviour for the present and pointer to the future ought to be reminded of that one, which preceded them all: unlike all those of today, it was bigger inside than outside. Or do I digress? It would not be the first time.

The Multipla, to which the Nuvola is related, is a modern device, first shown less than a year ago. In a sense, the Multipla represents the mainstream of evolution and development, while the Nuvola is the first experimental use of the technology to see what else can be done with it. It has been



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This eloquent car looks back to the past and forward to the future with equal conviction

a remarkably freewheeling experiment, and also a reassuringly successful one: everybody loves the result.

The fact that it all began with a chassis was enough to revive memories of how Alfa Romeo used to do things in its earliest days. The vintage Alfa Romeo issued from the factory as a chassis, on to which one of the established coachbuilders – Zagato, Touring, Pinin Farina in Italy, Franay, James Young or Van den Plas beyond – grafted a body designed to meet the demands of a particular clientele or even a singular and very particular customer. It was only in late 1930 that an in-house bodywork department began to offer standardised designs, most of them vast and terribly capacious and terribly ugly saloons for which there was a substantial demand in the marketplace but no enthusiasm whatever

among the *carrozzerie*, the coachbuilding fraternity. Really it was only with the 1900 in 1951 that Alfa Romeo became a car manufacturer as the expression is now understood.

So the Nuvola started with a chassis frame. The Alfa Romeo Styling Centre, at Arese, then took up the challenge to create the car of its dreams. Almost anywhere else, such total freedom would have led to total anarchy; here, however, it was seen as the opportunity to create something inspired by the stylistic canons of cars typifying the traditions of Alfa Romeo, but interpreted (which, after all, is likewise



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typical of Alfa Romeo) for present-day tastes and needs.

This, I see, creates an overdue opportunity for another Setright digression. In a poem appended to his sonata for alto horn and piano, Paul Hindemith wrote 'The old is good not just because it's past; the new is not supreme because we live with it.' The truth of this sentiment may be verified as readily by a study of car design as by the examination of any other aspect of modern times. The motor industry has more or less abandoned the concentration of stresses in a chassis which was insufficiently three-dimensional to be stiff, in favour of a diffusion of stresses in a shell-like hull which has to have too many holes in it for it to be strong. It has forsworn the cabin which was an ergonomic disaster, in favour of a cabin which is a material (and, especially, textural) desert. It does not follow from these things that we can or may stop learning from the experience gathered in the past.

If the Nuvola has a chassis, it is nevertheless a chassis

braced by members of considerable depth so as to afford it ample structural stiffness. If it has a cabin which, with its polished metals and classic trim, is redolent of the heartbreakers of 30 or even 60 years ago, then that cabin is furnished and fitted in ways calculated to ensure that it should never emulate the shinbreakers and headbreakers of any time in the past.

This is no pipedream, this Nuvola: everything has been checked not only for habitability but also for compliance with all the regulations which, whether or not they are good for the consumer, make life utterly ghastly for the manufacturer. Furthermore, if that long bonnet and close-tailored tail recall the Alfa Romeo sports-racers of distant days, a driver new to the experience may well find delight in the sense of location and balance which enable such a car to be driven fast with such precision.

Clearly, beautifully clearly – indeed, sheer beauty is one of the most immediate impressions made by the car – the Nuvola is a car which honours the past without being a



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An old-time Alfa Romeo engineer would be impressed, even amazed; but I doubt if he would be surprised

slave to it. It is not simply a retrospective car, for that would be a needless indulgence, but it does revive numerous Alfa Romeo elements. The only edge in the contours, most noticeable at the waistline behind the doors, is a reminder of the Bertone-styled GT; the low backlight recalls the Giulietta Sprint.

Between the moustache-like air intakes at the nose is the classic shield shaped 'radiator' intake, a styling marker that is reserved by Alfa Romeo for its more sporting models. All three apertures are honeycombed by a metal mesh that was terribly chic 40 years ago.

Look behind those lustrous screens and all sense of *déjà vu* fades. It is not for nothing, certainly not for the sake of mere fashion, that those carefully-stressed light-alloy wheels are shod with broad, low-profile tyres of modern design and formidable abilities. All four wheels are driven, sharing (for the sake of balanced control and uninhibited traction) the power output of a 2.5-litre engine boosted by twin turbochargers. This engine, a V6, is derived from the 3-litre V6 to be found in the Alfa Romeo 164; like all the other machinery installed beneath that timeless exterior, it is emphatically up-to-date.

And yet.... Look at the twin camshafts above each cylinder head. Look at the fluent porting leading to and from the combustion chambers. Look again, at the judicious inclination of the ranks of inlet and exhaust valves banked above each cylinder, at the stiff cylinder-block casting, at the proud parade-ground finish. All these are in an Alfa Romeo tradition that goes back through a lifetime. If you can imagine one of those old-time engineers inspecting this powerhouse, you may well suppose that he would be impressed, even amazed; but I doubt if he would be surprised.

The thing by which any old-timer, and for that matter any current Alfa Romeo enthusiast, might be surprised would be the colour of the Nuvola. The reason is very simple, and

utterly compelling: during the preparation of the car, Paolo Cantarella (President of the Group) told the Arese team 'Choose whatever colour you like, so long as it is not red.'

Who said that to paint an Alfa any colour but red is heresy? It is nothing of the sort: painting an Alfa red is merely habit. The racecourses of the world have seen the company's honour defended and the cars' virtues asserted by

specimens that were white, sometimes green, quite often sky-blue. Ah, sky-blue – with a cloud of fine metallic particles diffused in to give a polychromatic sparkle in the ever-changing light of the exhibition stand: how appropriate for a car called Nuvola!

It might never have happened, had they stuck to calling it Tazio. ■