

A photograph showing the lower legs and feet of several people standing on a red carpet. The people are wearing dark trousers and shoes, and one person on the right is wearing a black ruffled dress and high heels.

Italian Contemporary Screen Performers

Training, Production, Prestige

Edited by

Luca Barra · Cristina Formenti

Mariapaola Pierini · Francesco Pitassio

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F * A C T O R

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This volume offers a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered professional role of film and television actors and actresses within the contemporary Italian screen media landscape. More precisely, by focusing on a carefully thought-out selection of Italian film and television stars that have reached success from 2000 onwards, the volume underscores how the renewal that the Italian media industry has undergone starting from the late 1990s has impacted the training, recruitment, career management, promotion and PR, and validation strategies of this category of media professionals. While the generation of stars that since the postwar era had been making Italian cinema world-renowned disappeared—together with that mode of production—new cohorts of actresses and actors who required different skills and mediators came to the fore.

This edited collection is informed by the four-year-long research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, which adopted a cutting-edge methodological framework that conflates established performance studies and stardom/celebrity studies together with media production studies. The volume brings to the foreground how since 2000 the various stages of the professional life cycle of an Italian leading actor or actress have changed. To this end, the edited collection is divided into three parts that correspond to as many crucial aspects in the professional life cycle of a film and television actor or actress:

training and early career paths; career management; promotion and validation strategies. More precisely, aside from a substantive theoretical and methodological introduction, the book comprises a series of chapters, authored by specialists in Italian film and television studies based in Italy, the UK, and the US. Each chapter focuses on a well-known Italian actor, actress, or related professional, whose creative and operational abilities and career pathway best epitomize one of the peculiarities of the professional development of contemporary Italian screen stars.

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Introduction: Working Stars

*Luca Barra, Cristina Formenti, Mariapaola Pierini and
Francesco Pitassio*

CHAOS AND LIGHT: THE WORK BEHIND THE IMAGE

A few years ago, the awards ceremony of the 77th Venice International Film Festival, and notably the speech delivered by the winner of the best actor award, Pierfrancesco Favino, sparked in us some impressions. That year the COVID-19 crisis hit the whole world, and film and media practitioners were among the worst-affected workers. This situation colored Favino's speech with an even more effective tint—or rhetoric, if you like. The celebrated Italian actor, apparently moved by circumstances and the

The arguments and general structure of this introduction have been discussed together by the four editors. In more detail, Francesco Pitassio wrote the “Chaos and Light. The Work Behind the Image” paragraph; Mariapaola Pierini wrote the “Searching for talent: Training and Early Career Paths” paragraph; Luca Barra wrote the “Careers, Management, and Professional Paths” paragraph; and Cristina Formenti wrote the “Promoting and Validating Oneself? Italian Screen Performers’ Conception of Social Media, Festivals, and Awards” paragraph.

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award itself, dedicated the latter to a wide array of colleagues and partners in crime in his career. He also concluded his talk by quoting an unnamed friend, who said: “Every time a film is produced it is as if a star is born. We live on that star for months, nourishing its energy and chaos, and then leave it. Its light, however, propagates across the space, until it reaches the screens, so that somebody else can see it and keep on shining in their eyes.”¹ Favino mentioned all the people who shared his hopes, endeavors, and hard work; and, through his quote, referred to film production as a collective effort, so that in his speech the award he was collecting looked more like a collective than an individual prize. The address that he delivered and the quote he uttered could easily be adjusted to movie and media stars. The light they emanate is the outcome of collective labor. We tend to remember only the light, while this could simply not exist, unless a vast group of committed workers governed the chaos, fed its needs, and channeled its brightness. To echo Richard Dyer’s seminal reflection:

The star image is then a given, like machinery, an example of what Karl Marx calls ‘congealed labour’, something that is used with further labour (scripting, acting, directing, managing, filming, editing) to produce another commodity, a film. (2004, 5)

In fact, at the very core of our endeavor lies an assumption: dealing with media actresses/actors and celebrities should not be limited to the image they provide to their audiences. Instead, we believe that this given is the outcome of multiple agencies, activities, and gatekeepers: training

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¹ The whole ceremony is available on YouTube, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy084C7MwWA>. Where it is not otherwise specified, all translations of texts in languages other than English in the present volume are by the authors.

and schools, casting directors and press agents, coaches and producers, festivals and awards, film criticism and the popular press. For this reason, this volume looks at screen performers from a manifold perspective, to render and convey the many steps leading to that image and maintaining it. To cut a long story short, we narrowed down the variety of implications our case studies epitomize to three main pillars: training and early career steps; career management; and promotion and validation strategies. These multiple foci provided the basis for the four-year-long research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*,² informed its temporary findings along the way (see, e.g., Barra and Pitassio 2021; Antoniazzi et al. 2022), and now inform the chapters within this volume. While scrutinizing prominent personalities from the Italian film and media industry, the angle each chapter picks mirrors the foundational pillars of our shared endeavor. To sum up, more than the congealed work of the image, it was the work to produce, maintain, promote, and circulate it that drew our attention. This angle was rarely taken in looking at screen performers. Yet, it always proved to be very effective in shedding light on production culture and notions of subjectivity acting engenders (Clark 1995; King 2023). Following the seminal work of media scholars such as John Thornton Caldwell and Vicki Mayer, we focused on operational procedures as a way to understand the underpinning training, production, and validation practices and culture (Caldwell 2008; Mayer et al. 2009; Banks et al. 2016). However, while we think that practitioners reflect on their practices and critical analysis, as Caldwell posits, we believe that traditions of scholarly inquiry in Europe and more precisely in Italy paid less attention than in Hollywood to access this knowledge. Accordingly, researchers do not always face the situation that Caldwell (2008, 3) described as an obstacle orientating his survey: “The higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become.” Conversely, our research project, as many chapters of this book testify, benefited hugely from the generosity of practitioners often surprised at becoming a primary source of scholarly inquiry. From

² For more information about the project, articulated in four research units (Università degli Studi di Udine, Università di Bologna, Sapienza Università di Roma, and Università degli Studi di Torino) and funded by the Ministry of University and Research with a call in 2017, see: <https://italianperformers.it/it/>.

our viewpoint, beyond gratitude, we are deeply persuaded that building bridges between sectors will enable future research to achieve a better understanding of the national and, possibly, European film and media industries, and provide them with knowledge and tools to face increasing challenges. As media scholars Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau argued, “while most empirical production studies are profoundly theoretical both in their ambition and research design, ‘Theory’ has not been the intended systematic outcome of their efforts. Rather, theorising production has often proven to be most productive where it comes in the format of *interventions*” (2013, 3). This spirit shaped our endeavor too.

But why focus on actors and stars within the contemporary Italian film and media industry at a time when such personalities seem to be much less influential than before? If *Forbes Italia* in 2022 produces a list of the 100 most influential women and you need to scroll down the page until position 42 to find an actress (Emanuela Fanelli), is our work perhaps untimely?³ Furthermore, for political, cultural, and academic reasons, we editors are not so affectionate to take the notion of “national cinema” or “national media” for granted. However, while we don’t believe that cultural products embody the essence of the nation, which they allegedly spontaneously echo and propagate, nevertheless we tend to side with the opinion of scholars such as Philip Schlesinger and Pierre Sorlin. Whereas the latter argues that national cinema “is the chain of relations and exchanges which develop in connection with films, in a territory delineated by its economic and juridical policy” (Schlesinger 2000; Sorlin 1996, 10), the former claims that media are “boundary markers.” Indeed, media products often differ from one country to another as an effect of traditional markers (e.g., language) and chains of relations determining cultural production (lines of funding, norms, laws, institutional policies, and so on). And this is possibly even more true for Europe, which brings together supranational, transnational (e.g., regional), and national modes of production. Our threefold approach focused mostly on this latter, and attempted to grasp how education and training, access to the job market, promotion and self-promotion, and exposure of actors and celebrities

³ See *Le 100 donne italiane di successo nel 2022*, at: <https://forbes.it/classifiche-forbes/best-italia/f-100-women-2022/>. The situation was not very different in the following year, although we should single out the presence of Piera Detassis, who heads the Italian Film Academy, in the list: <https://forbes.it/classifiche-forbes/best-italia/le-100-donne-italiane-di-successo-del-2023/>.

reflect the specific circumstances of contemporary Italian cinema and television.

Throughout history, Italian media industry repeatedly provided European and global audiences with original templates of stardom and acting, which have been thoroughly scrutinized and discussed. From the silent era (Dalle Vacche 2008) to cinema under Fascism (Gundle 2013), from Neorealist stardom (Gundle 2020; O’Rawe 2023; Vitella 2024) to stars in the 1960s (Reich 2004; Small 2009), Italian actors emerged as models of gender, acting style, and national, regional, or transnational identity in their own right. Major shifts within film and media industries from the late 1970s onward eclipsed this widespread relevance or reduced it to formulaic “impersoNation” (Elsaesser 2005), i.e., the incarnation of a palatable and exportable identity. It is, for instance, the case of non-professional performers as the hallmark of neorealism and ensuing Italian cinema, or gesticulation and overacting, as an alleged national demeanor, like Roberto Benigni epitomizes. In fact, when looking at a continental acknowledgment such as the European Film Awards, one realizes that this prize testifies to the eclipse of Italian performers from public acknowledgment—particularly actresses. Over the past 20 years, the award has been bestowed just three times on Italian actors: twice on a sophisticated, theatrical actor incarnating Neapolitan culture (Toni Servillo in 2008 and 2013), and once on a self-trained performer, associated with deprived neighborhoods and realism (Marcello Fonte in 2018).⁴

Our overarching aim was to understand how major shifts affected acting within the Italian film and TV industry, and what has become of this and related jobs over the past two decades. We should name some key factors influencing film and TV acting that we took into account during our research: first, the permanence of solid professional know-how, which training and education do not always match consistently (Pierini 2013, 2017); second, the significance, for enhancing heterogeneous regional acting traditions, of decentralized film and TV production, which was the result of technological, political, and cultural shifts, actively supported by local film commissions (Cucco 2013; Cucco and Richeri 2013); third, the rising importance of “impersonation,” i.e., a performance aimed at transforming the actor’s basic features to embody a fictional character, over “personification,” i.e., the iteration of some basic features across

⁴ See: https://europeanfilmawards.eu/en_EN?p=1.

numerous roles (King 1991; McDonald 1998), as a result of the growing entanglement of film production and major TV broadcasters; and fourth, the unprecedented hybridity of actors between film and TV production. In addition, the importance of stardom, if reduced to its sole marketability (Carluccio and Minuz 2015; Minuz 2017), decreased, while the sole existence of “prestige stardom” endured (McDonald 2013). A recent, key issue is also the tight connection between the bills determining public funding to film production, such as the Urbani Decree (2004) and the Franceschini General Law (2016), festival and awards, and a restricted cohort of actresses and actors, whose celebrity is mostly contained within national boundaries (Bisoni 2016). We also considered the limited awareness of or the utter resistance to the function social media can play in promoting or self-promoting actresses and actors. A current trend that drew our attention is the recent understanding of professions “below-the-line” and their importance for boosting performers’ careers. A sign of such understanding is the newly created category within the David di Donatello prize, that is the award to the best casting director. Last, but certainly not least, there is the lack of debate or proactive inclusive policies with regard to age or race, as “colour-blind casting” (Pao 2010; Cook 2018).

When delivering his address, Piefrancesco Favino engaged in a controversy with the previous awardee for the best screenplay of the Orizzonti section, Pietro Castellitto. The latter is 20 years younger than Favino, is a screenplay writer, director, and actor, and is the son of celebrated and influential actor and director Sergio Castellitto. When accepting the award, Pietro Castellitto blamed unspecified traitors and backstabbers within the media industry, and later Favino minimized and rejected such statement. But, all in all, beyond individual attitudes and personality, both the awards and the polemics, hint at the liveliness of a job and its values across generations. Our volume intends to render this liveliness and values.

SEARCHING FOR TALENT: TRAINING AND EARLY CAREER PATHS

“The word that should always inspire us is ‘education’: we must always prioritise the search for the students’ talent.” With these words, the aforementioned Sergio Castellitto, in his role as the newly appointed President of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, greeted the

participants at the 2023 CILECT conference⁵ (the International Association of Film and Television Schools—Centre International de Liaison des Écoles de Cinéma et de Télévision). This was a somewhat obvious consideration, especially because it came from the president of Italy’s oldest (and for a long time only) public film school, whose acting course—currently directed by Alba Rohrwacher—has been, and continues to be, one of the most sought-after programs for those wishing to pursue a career in film and audiovisuals. However, Castellitto’s assertion is debatable: not only “as a term of art, talent—like creativity—is ambiguous” (King 2023, 50), but seeking out and identifying talent is not the exclusive task of a school. School molds talent and hones it, making it sensitive to the developments in the audiovisual landscape without doing away with technique and tradition. Furthermore, it helps those who possess that elusive quality to face their future (precarious) profession. School is therefore charged with many tasks and is not always able to fulfill them, despite Castellitto’s statements. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in Italy, acting schools—both for cinema and theatre, within an essentially hybrid system—do not always function as the initial stepping-stone in a career. In many cases, Italian actors often find themselves on set without proper training (or with different training and experiences) or achieve fame through adventurous, erratic, and occasionally serendipitous paths.

Reconstructing these paths and investigating why education and profession aren’t always consistent is not an easy task, although it is highly beneficial for critically deciphering the landscape of contemporary cinema and audiovisual actors. Moving in this direction and surveying the schools and training programs currently available in Italy, *F-ACTOR* has reaffirmed the findings of the research project *A scuola di cinema. La formazione nelle professioni dell’audiovisivo*: the survey (2009–2011) of the educational offering for audiovisual professions, including acting, presented a “fragmented and jagged situation” (Pitassio 2013, 15). More than ten years after that initial investigation, the training program offerings have indeed increased, but without achieving greater cohesion and unity. The pathways to entering the profession in Italy continue to be affected by a lack of regulation. Alongside AFAM⁶ (Higher Education in Art, Music, and Dance) institutions that award legally recognized

⁵ See: <https://cilectcongress2023.com/>.

⁶ See: <https://www.miur.gov.it/istituzioni-afam-riconosciute>.

diplomas, and other institutions (often connected with national theatres) that offer different types of equivalent degrees, there are hundreds of somewhat dubious schools and a vast offering of workshops and master-classes. Furthermore, the substantial absence of higher-education-level acting programs, comparable to those in other countries, further complicates the scenario. The surge in specialized training opportunities within the audiovisual sector, both in terms of quantity and geographic spread, warrants scrutiny. Evidently, it responds to the escalating demand for training among aspiring actors nationwide. Simultaneously, it endeavors to cater to the requirements of productions that have increasingly moved away from Rome in recent years, necessitating the participation of young talents, particularly in the field of serial productions.

Amid a persistently intricate and disjointed landscape, some significant changes regarding actors—both newcomers and established ones—have emerged. Particularly in the aftermath of the upheavals triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian actors—traditionally little unionized—have heightened their understanding of their roles and rights (Muggeo and Pierini 2022).

In recent years, the demands and struggles advocated by UNITA⁷ and other actor and entertainment industry worker associations have been encompassing various fronts. These include negotiations over the national collective bargaining employment contract, rights to image usage, provision of state income for intermittent employment, promotion of gender equality, and ensuring the protection of both physical and psychological well-being. These efforts often involve collaborations with actors from other countries. Conflicts and negotiations have influenced not only working conditions but also, more extensively, the perception of a profession in acting and what it actually entails. In fact, although Italian actors have established a voice and a sense of authority, the connection between education and career, apprenticeship and profession remains problematic. The initial phases of an acting career in Italy remain disparate and deeply personalized. This state of things may seem inevitable, but schools bear some responsibility for this, as they often operate in secluded environments and not always in tune with the evolving demands of actors embarking on a professional path. The pandemic emergency has disrupted the traditionally static nature of educational institutions. While the efficacy

⁷ See: <https://www.associazioneunita.it/>.

of distance digital teaching in the performing arts has been extensively discussed (Wake 2018), the distance imposed by health restrictions has compelled acting schools to update and rethink themselves. For instance, the now-widespread adoption of self-tape auditions in casting has become a necessity, prompting acting schools to incorporate this practice into their training programs from the outset.

What is taught in acting schools? Considering that “an actor’s individual technique—the presentation of body and voice—is a central factor in film’s creation of meaning” (Springer 2015, 2), it is essential to return to this technique and its gradual definition in terms of learning and refinement to understand the actor’s work in relation to the contemporary audiovisual context. In the Anglo-Saxon world, there has been a specific reflection on acting training—its roots, traditions, and different techniques and contexts (Baron and Carnicke 2008; Margolis and Tyler Renaud 2010; Zazzali, 2016; Baron and Tzioumakis 2020). In Italy, the landscape of acting education—and the issue of how much it influences, affects, and orients careers—is still only partially explored. If acting education means, above all, to build a technical foundation and provide role models, it is important to focus on what is actually taught to actors and how adaptable this knowledge is to the profession’s developments. After decades of silence and a certain preference for foreign techniques taught in schools and workshops—where the Strasberg Method clearly predominates—there has recently been a shift toward valuing indigenous teaching methods. This includes reconsidering the contributions of masters who have played and continue to play a significant (yet often unnoticed) role in shaping the training of Italian actors: from Orazio Costa, master of actors and inventor of the Mimic Method taught at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Piazza 2024), to Anna Laura Messeri, an even less well-known acting teacher for decades at the Teatro Stabile di Genova school.

Each career is unique, and it is these peculiarities—which, to be clear, are also a source of richness—that the following essays have sought to highlight. Answering the question “where did Italian actors learn to act?” means taking into account that a diploma, even a prestigious one, is not a passport guaranteeing access to the profession or a truly expendable label. Unlike in other countries (consider the prestige of the Comédie-Française, the Juilliard School, or the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), in Italy the origin or type of training of actors rarely plays a role in the promotion strategies and discussions concerning their popularity and

market value. Furthermore, examining the history of Italian cinema from the actors' perspective reveals that the type of training has not directly shaped individual careers. Hybrid career paths are both common and undervalued. The allure of the big screen has drawn many theatre-trained actors, while the growing significance of TV and serial production has offered a vital training ground, also serving as a catalyst and amplifier of celebrity (Barra 2015).

Finally, yet importantly, access to the profession still primarily occurs through paying one's dues, learning the craft directly in the field—most often on stage. Equally historically rooted and strategically renewed is the use of non-professionals. Their untrained, erratic, and often marginal presence can counterbalance the inevitably homogenizing influence of formal schools. These unexpected figures are sometimes indispensable for the more experimental and hybrid sectors of Italian productions, frequently appearing on festival red carpets and representing “a sign of resistance against an economy of global stardom” (O’Rawe 2023, 193).

To account for this heterogeneous landscape, the investigation into acting education and professional entry points has also focused on figures that have long been marginalized in the discussions about acting and stardom, such as acting coaches, casting directors, and agents. Given the varied career trajectories in Italy, it is clear that these mediating figures play a crucial role in shaping the careers of young actors. Acting coaches and casting directors in particular have become increasingly influential in recent years, filling gaps in training and assisting directors and producers with discovering talented people with little or no prior experience. Their contributions have been essential in casting and determining the quality of performances in many Italian productions (Pierini 2015; Renga 2020; Hartmann Trapani 2020). At the same time, agents have come to the fore, actively engaging in scouting, and partially bridging the gap between training and professional work.

In Italy today, searching for “talent” is a multifaceted task undertaken by many in diverse ways. The varied careers and diverse profiles of Italian actors suggest that the weaknesses of a system can often be turned into unique strengths, as has frequently occurred in the history of Italian cinema.

CAREERS, MANAGEMENT, AND PROFESSIONAL PATHS

Besides the formal training route and other, more informal, ways of entering the acting profession, other important issues are performers' career development pathways and their work-life balance. Accordingly, the research into Italy's contemporary acting arena by the *F-ACTOR* project has focused on the many ways in which being an actor is treated as a job, a profession, a crucial component in a production "machine," where the creative and artistic aspects interweave and juxtapose with the economic and professional side. This perspective applies tools from production cultures and media industry studies to creative figures that usually fall into the realm of performance and celebrity studies. It considers the acting profession both longitudinally, spotlighting several distinct stages in career journeys and life cycles that may last many decades, and within the broader context of inevitably collective activities, where responsibility for both decisions and outcomes is many-sided. A film and media performer's career path is very individual and specific, with both public and private facets; it can be planned and managed, yet it is also exposed to many variables that are hard to predict or control. There is a group dimension too: actors are part of networks that tie them to other performers; at times they walk their way with other professionals; they are part of collectives and associations. Their trajectories are almost never linear but meandering and contradictory. The acting profession can be seen to offer a variety of role types, including high-profile parts in starring, supporting, or guest-star roles, duly proclaimed in the opening and closing credits, as well as a host of low-key, marginal, unremembered appearances. For a body of work is also built from minor contributions, even as an extra or walk-on, while waiting for better opportunities. And, especially in markets such as the Italian one, actors have a "boundaryless career" (Vicentini and Boccardelli 2016), a journey that is often complex and convoluted, fluid and flexible, where most performers are forced to adapt. Indeed, while the entry routes are often down to lucky breaks, the subsequent development paths are also haphazard and uncertain, at least to a degree. Alongside the successes that bring recognition, popularity, and wealth, there are also—as in many creative professions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010)—the risks and flops, the misplaced hopes and thwarted ambitions. Even a successful career has its brilliant ups and its dismal downs, its disappointments, stumbles, and duds. Artistic freedom and merit are counterbalanced by the many challenges to be faced, some of which are decidedly tough. The

intimate link between actors' careers and their personal exposure has a significant effect on their well-being and their private lives as a partly public figure (Hogg and Smith 2018). As it emerges from many of this edited collection's case histories, which can all be considered successful in the Italian film and media arena, building and maintaining a career is something that is far from straightforward or immediate in the face of an ever-changing context and audience.

One of the most interesting aspects to emerge from this research on the contemporary Italian acting scene is the diversity of experiences and media spaces. Compared with previous eras, the classic hierarchy that elevated theatre and cinema above television in the prestige afforded to an acting career (including by actors themselves) is now much less apparent. Many Italian actors move freely and seamlessly between these dimensions, from touring theatre productions to movie projects to television sets for mainstream or premium series and miniseries. This change of perspective has several causes. The first is the turbulent but decisive process by which television has acquired creative legitimacy, especially with the pay channels (with Sky Italia's original titles and co-productions), the advent of digital audiovisual platforms (from Netflix and Amazon to Disney+, which develop local content with global appeal), and a general increase in the quality, quantity, and variety of the Italian and European series output (Barra and Scaglioni 2021); more titles means more roles and more opportunities for actors. Second, actors are increasingly aware of the different audiences that different media tap into. Those who have already achieved artistic legitimacy in other genres then seek to crown their careers with the broad generalist audience on free TV, while those who have gained mass popularity via a TV series pursue the different creative outlet of an independent film or live play, reaching other kinds of spectators or building a broader relationship with their fans. Third, the blurring of the hierarchies dovetails with a greater openness and audacity, among professionals and audiences alike, where acting is seen merely as a job. Thus, many performers' careers combine passion projects with bread-and-butter gigs, mixing creative fulfillment with the need to pay their mortgage. And regardless of the promotional discourses with their necessarily emphatic tones, this accepted "new normal" shows that the audiovisual arena has become essentially unified, where the demarcations between media are reduced to primarily discursive labels. Moreover, there is also a generational dimension to consider; simplifying things a bit, actors can be categorized into three broad age groups. There is a mature

generation that still attributes different values to different forms—with some seen as artistic and others as commercial and compromising—at least in their public comments (e.g. Toni Servillo).⁸ Then there is a seemingly contradictory “middle” generation where an ideal hierarchy coexists with the willingness to work in multiple media, including ads and video-clips, at the start of the career (sometimes brushed under the carpet) and further on (always trumpeted). This group includes Elio Germano, Stefano Accorsi, Paola Cortellesi, Alessandro Gassman, and Pierfrancesco Favino. And there is a younger generation—witness the interviews with actors like Rebecca Coco Edogamhe, Mattia Carrano, Cecilia Bertozzi, Paola Buratto, Andrea Lattanzi, and Phaim Bhuiyan⁹—who take for granted the wealth of openings presented by a now strongly interconnected Italian media scene and use it to develop their emerging career and public image. Italian actors’ “boundaryless careers” therefore crisscross the perimeters of film, theatre, premium and mainstream television, and the digital arena in various directions. This also reflects a slow transition from mainly artisanal ways of working to an inexorable industrialization of the sector and its processes, with increasingly planned, defined, and structured pathways and (hopefully) less reliance on chance.

From this standpoint, another pivotal factor is the growing and increasingly established role of intermediaries who support actors and shape their careers, whether directly or indirectly, aiming to find the right strategies, reduce risk, and give the journey a meaningful form. A notable example is the talent agent—a manager who takes the performers onto their books, steering them toward the most suitable opportunities, carefully assessing offers, and handling contracts and the actor’s professional needs in exchange for a percentage fee. This increased role is a belated reflection, recalibrated to the Italian industry’s different scale, of what has happened in the English-speaking world (Chisholm 2004; Zafirau 2008; Roussel 2016; Naudier 2020), where agencies grow in importance as the audiovisual sector grows in size and complexity, and things are run in

⁸ See his statements at the public event to mark the 50th anniversary of the Drama, Arts and Music Studies (DAMS) program in Bologna: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zxTa1aUBY.

⁹ The in-depth interviews by Luca Antoniazzi, Luca Barra, Elisa Farinacci, Matteo Marinello and Emiliano Rossi were conducted in Bologna on May 27, 2022, November 3, 2022, and March 30, 2023, and in Rimini on June 22, 2023. A partial report of the results is available at: www.italianperformers.it.

a more precise, structured, “industrial” way. Talent agents’ burgeoning prominence can even be seen in the romanticization of their role in productions from the moderately successful French series *Dix pour cent* (*Call My Agent*, 2015–present), released in Italy on Netflix, to the subsequent Italian adaptation *Call My Agent Italia* (2023–present) produced by Sky: the latter, especially, looks nostalgically back at the daring halcyon days while showing the role’s complexities and implications in the world of today. While agencies are intermediaries working on the side of their many actor clients, there are other types of roles that impact strongly on performers’ work and careers, operating more closely with the individual film and TV production companies or serving the interests of the distributors, broadcasters, or platforms. Acting coaches help actors hone their craft according to what the film or TV series needs. Casting agents pick talent to fit the film’s requirements and what the director, the screenwriters, and the other project creatives want. Both roles are crucial in securing performers their break and in progressing or rethinking their careers. And there are also many other people who directly or indirectly mold the actors’ work, contribute to their success, and help them leverage it, with a diverse array of goals that must be negotiated and navigated within a complex industrial production chain.

In the study of acting as a profession and its management by intermediaries, the ethnographic methods from production studies are invaluable. Once the challenges of gaining access to hyper-controlled space are overcome, and a relationship of trust has been established, participant observation proves itself to be a vital tool. Researchers can conduct a field study of the interactions among the actors and with the creative and technical personnel above and below the line, highlighting how relationships fostered over time are central to performers’ work.¹⁰ Although actors and agents are very self-aware informants accustomed to talking about and promoting themselves and their work (Bruun 2016; Barra 2019), in-depth interviews with them also serve both to delineate their career paths and to focus attention on the nature of their work and its most pivotal features. Informal conversations also offer information that

¹⁰ Television series are especially suitable for their extended duration and their more industrial dimension: the *F-ACTOR* research enjoyed almost unlimited access to the sets, dressing rooms, and technical departments on the daytime soap production *Il paradiso delle signore* (2015–) at Videapolis Studios in Rome from July 4 to 6, 2022 (see Rossi 2022).

is less structured but sometimes more precise, completing the triangulation of multiple sources that is essential to understanding the subject of study effectively. These methods help in bringing out the complexities of progressing single projects and entire careers, the predictable and unforeseen aspects, and the specific skills that go into building an identity and creating value as a professional.

PROMOTING AND VALIDATING ONESELF? ITALIAN SCREEN PERFORMERS' CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA, FESTIVALS, AND AWARDS

To fully understand contemporary acting as a profession in Italy, it is important to also consider how screen performers exploit paratextual materials to build their persona and how they choose to promote themselves and their work. Generally speaking, like all media personalities, actors, and actresses are “the product of social discourses” that different intermediaries, such as press agents, journalists, film critics, and institutions like film festivals and awards help generate (Pitassio 2021). And, based on their engagement with media and intermediaries, Italian screen performers have been theorized as “anti-stardom” (Carluccio and Minuz 2015), “elusive” (Pitassio 2021, 281), and “reluctant” (O’Rawe 2021). Yet, is this actually the case? To test these theories, during our research project we have also conducted semi-structured interviews with actors and actresses aimed at understanding their choices regarding the communication of their work and promotion of their image, as well as the role that prizes and festivals played in their careers. Both long-established performers such as A-list stars Barbara Bobulova, Neri Marcoré, Valerio Mastandrea, and Maya Sansa as well as emerging actors and actresses, including Francesco Centorame, Giampiero De Concilio, Ginevra Francesconi and Luigi Fedele, have been interviewed. And if we combine what was said during these interviews by our sample of actors and actresses with a study of the websites and social media profiles of screen performers, it emerges that very different views relating to the need for press agents are in place, even among those Italian professionals who would be recognized as “prestige” screen performers. Indeed, on the one hand, we can find an actor like Stefano Accorsi who not only has a personal press agent (Saverio Ferragina) but also avails himself of the services of EB, an international management agency specializing in

connecting “talents” (which is how screen performers are referred to in showbusiness jargon) with luxury and lifestyle brands to support him with digital advertising.¹¹ On the other hand, we can instead find an A-lister like Valerio Mastandrea who refuses to have a press agent and personally oversees the promotion of his image, in collaboration with the press agents of the film or television projects in which he takes part. We can then also find in-between cases such as that of actress Maya Sansa, who, after having long done without a personal press agent, decided to avail herself of one so as to be able to delegate the aspects concerning communication and promotion following the birth of her daughter Talitha and the greater recognizability that being part of the popular TV series *Tutto può succedere* (*Anything Can Happen*, 2015–2018) brought her. Yet, having long been accustomed to dealing personally with the promotion of her image, she declared that at times the presence of a personal press agent might feel like a “hassle” rather than a “help,” even if she is happy overall with the chosen professional.¹²

However, this range of approaches is not peculiar just to A-list stars. We can also identify it among younger and emerging screen performers. Indeed, for instance, actress Ginevra Francesconi declared that she chose to hire the press agency Amendola-Corallo Comunicazione because, due to her shyness, she felt she could not properly handle press and social media and felt reassured at the idea of having a professional do it for her (see Francesconi in Vacirca 2022d). Actor Luigi Fedele, not unlike Valerio Mastandrea, might rely for a specific project on the press office of that set production, but prefers to personally handle matters concerning the promotion of his image as well as social media (see Fedele in Vacirca 2022c). However, when it comes more specifically to social media, the approaches and views tend to be more shared. Indeed, the substantial absence of Italian actresses from the digital world highlighted by Mariagrazia Fanchi in 2017 seems to have been overcome (see Fanchi 2017). Certainly, among the Italian screen performers who have the highest number of followers on Instagram—which to date constitutes the

¹¹ We can find the various intermediaries of which Accorsi avails himself to help him build and promote his image listed and tagged in the bio section of his Instagram profile (see <https://www.instagram.com/stefano.accorsi?igsh=Znc5bWUyamNkNnll>).

¹² Maya Sansa made these declarations during an unpublished interview conducted by phone by Cristina Formenti in August 2021.

go-to social media platform for promotional purposes as far as this category of professionals is concerned (see Belardinelli 2023)—we still find many actors, including Michele Morrone, Luca Argentero, and Salvatore Esposito, who currently have 15.5, 2.3, and 1.5 million followers respectively. However, we can also find actresses such as Monica Bellucci, Alice Pagani, and Benedetta Porcaroli, who can boast 5.4, 2, and 1.4 million followers respectively. In fact, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed an increasing engagement of stars with social media, even among actresses. For instance, Paola Cortellesi became quite active on her Instagram profile both in terms of posts and stories created, yet always keeping the content work-related and offering no window into her personal life. However, most Italian screen performers' Instagram accounts are still far from even reaching the million-followers mark. To give an example, Cortellesi's Instagram profile has only 389,000 followers, even if her most recent feature film *C'è ancora domani* (*There's Still Tomorrow*, Paola Cortellesi, 2023) sold over 5 million tickets in Italy alone. More generally, if this is the case, it is because, despite recognizing that social media profiles have business value, many screen performers tend to personally manage them and often engage with them in a “playful” rather than professional way—that is, in most cases, they might occasionally also promote their work, but they neither deal with them mainly for this reason nor constantly add new content as the medium would instead require. There are obviously exceptions to this approach, such as Stefano Accorsi, whose profile is curated, also thanks to the above-mentioned support of professionals. In addition, we can find cases of screen performers who exploit Instagram as a source of further income by posting pictures in which they advertise (fashion industry-related) products. This is the case for Monica Bellucci's Instagram profile, where it is possible to find posts promoting high-scale products by labels such as Dior Beauty, the jeweler Cartier, or the French fashion house Yves Saint Laurent.

Interestingly, however, even among young screen performers, an idea that is somewhat antithetical to the concept itself of social media seems to be rooted, namely that of an actor's personal life having to be shrouded in “mystery” (see Di Napoli in Vacirca 2021, De Concilio in Vacirca 2022a, Centorame in Vacirca 2022b). Indeed, even the younger actors tend to explain as such the choice of either not having a social media profile or engaging with these platforms in a sparse and more “playful” way, thus suggesting that having a social media presence is still seen by

screen performers more as an option rather than an essential component of their profession. For example, even the 28-year-old actor of African descent Haroun Fall, who does engage with social media, meaningfully declared: “I do not work to have more followers. I believe that the growth of an actor’s image in Italy works through the projects undertaken. They are what determine your artistic value” (Fall in Vacirca 2022e). So, extending what Catherine O’Rawe (2021, 277) wrote in relation to Alessandro Borghi, we could say that “reluctance” rather than “anti-stardom” or elusiveness is perhaps the best way to describe the approach of many contemporary Italian screen performers to social media.

More generally, the interviews conducted as part of our research project show that whereas Italian screen performers envision presenting a film at a festival as part of their professional duties, they do not see in such events or winning a prize as something game-changing in terms of image building or career development. They highlighted how, unquestionably, having their work presented or even recognized with an award might bring a sense of (personal) fulfilment or better offer an “occasion for celebrating” that set film (Mastandrea in Formenti 2021).¹³ Yet, they do not see festivals and awards as a “professional opportunity” or a career booster (Mastandrea in Formenti 2021).¹⁴ This doesn’t mean that there aren’t actors who perceive the victory of one of the main Italian awards as professionally consolidating at a national level. For instance, during an interview with the magazine *Vanity Fair* in December 2023, Fall declared: “I need to consolidate myself, win a David” (Fall in Verdelli 2023). However, based on the answers that we received during our interviews and considering the correlation between awards won by Italian A-listers and the national funding received by the productions in which they are hired that scholar Claudio Bioni (2016) has highlighted, it seems that the “circuit of prizes and nominations” is more “game-changing” for the production companies for which the nominated or prized screen performer worked than they are for the latter’s careers.

Through looking at screen performers’ promotion and validation from a set of different perspectives, the chapters in the third section of the present volume similarly revisit existing readings of Italian screen

¹³ Similar answers were also provided, for instance, by Sansa in August 2021, during the already mentioned unpublished interview conducted by Formenti.

¹⁴ For instance, Bobulova and Sansa also expressed the same opinion regarding awards during unpublished interviews conducted by Formenti that took place in August 2021.

performers and/or open up new possible paths of inquiry in relation to them.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the three parts of this volume is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered professional role of film and television actors and actresses within the contemporary Italian screen media landscape. By focusing on a carefully considered selection of Italian film and television stars who have achieved success from 2000 onwards, the chapters that follow underscore how the renewal that the Italian media industry has undergone, starting in the late 1990s, has impacted the training, recruitment, career management, promotion and PR, and validation strategies of this category of media professionals. The chapters investigate their case histories from different angles and with a varied set of methods, thus providing a balanced “playground” to analyze the multilayered figures of contemporary actors and actresses. The overarching idea is to scrutinize the film and media industry by looking at its most visible and celebrated function, i.e. actresses and actors.

In 2023, Netflix produced and released a TV series portraying one of Italian media industry’s most controversial personalities: porn star Rocco Siffredi. The show, titled *Supersex* (2023), has been designed by screenplay writer Francesca Manieri, who contributed to consolidating the career of a new generation of director-producers, such as Sidney Sibilia or Matteo Rovere, the latter acting as both producer and director of *Supersex*. The series casts three performers in the main roles with entirely different backgrounds: on the one hand, Alessandro Borghi, who started as a stuntman, and Jasmine Trinca, at the time a non-professional, who was given her debut role by Nanni Moretti in *La stanza del figlio* (*The Son’s Room*, 2001), work together with the older Adriano Giannini, son of renowned actor Giancarlo Giannini, who has a background as a cinematographer and underwent traditional theatrical training. Alongside them are younger actors from underprivileged neighborhoods in Naples, who were offered a chance to find their way in theatre labs (Vincenzo Nemolato), former sportswomen of Albanian descent, then educated actresses at the Rome Film Academy (Eva Cela), former top models, then performers (Linda Hardy). All in all, any closer inspection of most media products through the performers’ lens provides researchers with a unique opportunity: by looking at their diversity, tracing their educational

background and career path, and focusing on their acknowledgment, recognition, and consecration sheds light on how media industries work. And on how the stars within and above it themselves work.

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