



Italy Lorenzo Codelli

Silvio Berlusconi's crumbling regime has endowed us with two symmetrical 'prodigies': a major economic and political crisis, and a flood of film comedies. His own muscular production and distribution empire, Medusa, is leading this lucrative trend, which is far from new, but has never previously attained such magnitude. Among the hundred or so Italian features released in 2011, around half were comedies – mostly cheaply concocted vehicles for TV clowns, rashly assembled adaptations of fashionable sitcoms, or sequels to previous moribund ideas.



Gennaro Nunziante's *Such a Beautiful Day*

Checco Zalone, a bald, equine entertainer from Bari, whose pseudonym means 'Such-a-coarse-fellow' and was launched by Berlusconi's low-brow networks, saw his second film **Such a Beautiful Day** (*Che bella giornata*, directed by his local pal Gennaro Nunziante) speed past Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* and *Titanic* as the country's highest earning film. It attracted a staggering €43.4million. Zalone plays out his broad verbal gags through his dim-witted and out-of-touch alter-ego. In a similar vein, Neapolitan jester Alessandro Siani struggled to exploit the late, genial Massimo Troisi's absurdist humour in **The Worst Week of My Life** (*La peggior settimana della mia vita*, by Alessandro Genovesi).

Among other comedians attempting to expand their fan base through film are Claudio Bisio, Vincenzo Salemme, Massimo Boldi, Paolo Ruffini and the team of Francesco Mandelli and Fabrizio Biggio. Luciana Littizzetto, the crudest joker of the bunch, set the tone for a collection of comediennes, that include Paola Cortellesi, Nancy Brilli, Anna Foglietta, Lucia Ocone and Isabella Ragonese.

Some comedy performers have attempted to elevate the level of humour, aiming for satire. For instance, Giambattista Avellino's **Some Say No** (*C'è chi dice no*) wittily mocks the national career system, which is based on family and class connections. Francesco Patierno's biting **Things from Another World** (*Cose dell'altro mondo*) attacks the spread of racism against immigrants, showing a rich northern town from where, one stormy night, all foreigners suddenly disappear. Massimiliano Bruno's **Nobody Can Judge Me** (*Nessuno mi può giudicare*) shows how jobless girls survive by becoming sex escorts, while Antonio Albanese transferred his small screen incarnation as a corrupt politician to the large screen with **Whatsoeverly** (*Qualunque mente*, by Giulio Manfredonia). Unfortunately, like



Giambattista Avellino's *Some Say No*

some of his less ambitious colleagues, he forgets that monologues and repartées work less well in the cinema. **Boris the Movie** (*Boris il film*), by the trio of Giacomo Ciarrapico, Mattia Torre and Luca Vendruscolo, updates the Sky TV sitcom *Boris* in order to deride the Italian film industry. A ferocious, frequently funny attack on the amateurism of people who rule a once-glorious business, old sharks such as Aurelio De Laurentiis and his Christmas farces get their comeuppance.

Newcomers also have more career prospects if they choose the current 'easy to please' path. Renowned screenwriters Francesco Bruni and Ivan Cotroneo sadly followed this route with their directorial debuts. **Scialla!** and **Kryptonite in the Bag** (*La kryptonite nella borsa*) were both formulaic comedies. The same could also be said of another new director, Gianni Pacinotti, with his weak sci-fi parody **The Last Terrestrial** (*L'ultimo terrestre*).



Gianni Pacinotti's **The Last Terrestrial**

Will this mushrooming trend last or will it burn out? It is a far cry from the 'commedia all'italiana' trend of the 1960s and 1970s. These days, there is not an Ugo Tognazzi, Alberto Sordi, Marcello Mastroianni or Nino Manfredi amongst the ranks of the inferior comedians. These 'inheritors' are also urged to function simply as multiplex' fillers, for one or two weekends, rather than as stars imbued with charisma and skills as actors.

Many serious filmmakers are beginning to lose hope of seeing their projects reach the



Paolo Sorrentino's **This Must Be the Place**

screen. Following a long silence, Gianni Amelio had to emigrate to France to direct **The First Man** (*Le premier homme*), an adaptation of an Albert Camus story. International festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Toronto and Venice still help Italian auteurs in terms of recognition, even if their domestic audiences are slight. The commercial success of Paolo Sorrentino's **This Must Be the Place** is a lucky exception to that rule. Young audiences identified with the aged, stoned rock star, marvellously played by Sean Penn. This long-haired has-been is searching for a Nazi who killed his father. A journey through the US and its ghostlands, and one inside the protagonist's empty soul, are brought to the screen with dazzling style, thanks to Sorrentino's direction and Luca Bigazzi's camerawork. And they are aided in no small part by David Byrne's music. Sorrentino also published his first novel, *Everybody's Right* (*Hanno tutti ragione*), confirming his multi-hyphenate talent.

Habemus Papam, Nanni Moretti's first work since *The Caiman*, is a bittersweet fairy-tale set during the election of a Pope. Michel



Nanni Moretti's **Habemus Papam**

Piccoli plays a French cardinal who has doubts at being elected Pontiff. Moretti plays a frustrated, atheist psychoanalyst who has been brought in to help convince him to accept the position. Opening as a lampoon of Vatican pompousness, *Habemus Papam* ascends to a sceptical depiction of any form of human leadership: moral, religious or political.



Gianni Di Gregorio's *The Salt of Life*

In *The Salt of Life* (*Gianni e le donne*), Gianni Di Gregorio's sequel to his brilliant *Mid-August Lunch*, he once again plays his cinematic alter-ego, a sixty-something Roman *bon vivant*, who clashes with modern times. This time his problems are with modern women; so approachable and unpredictable, particularly in comparison with his profligate nonagenarian mother (Valeria De Franciscis). Inspired by Jacques Tati, Blake Edwards and Aldo Fabrizi, Di Gregorio's light touch and elegant mood elicit rare pleasures.

Pupi Avati has frequently revisited his large family's legendary past, and many of his films are realisations of his late mother's tales. In *The Big Heart of the Girls* (*Il cuore grande delle ragazze*), the saga becomes grotesque. During the Fascist era, in a village peopled by ugly, pungent freaks and sex maniacs, a young Casanova (singer Cesare Cremonini playing Avati's grandfather) falls in love with a neurotic blonde (Micaela Ramazzotti). But on the night of their marriage, he elopes with a hotel maid. The bizarre romance ends well many years later, but in the meantime Avati has constructed a mirror for our times. The

repulsion of characters and the betrayal they commit, lacking any whiff of nostalgia that permeated his previous work, is a hard, but riveting tonic.

Andrea Segre, an acclaimed documentary maker from Venice, directed his first feature film, *Li and the Poet* (*Io sono Li*). Luca Bigazzi's rainy chiaroscuros and expressionist fogs confer a breathtaking look on the Venetian lagoon. A Chinese barmaid (Zhao Tao) has a 'brief encounter' with a desperate Yugoslav fisherman (Rade Serbedzija). The film is one of several – of varying quality – which look at the immigrant experience. In Ermanno Olmi's *The Cardboard Village* (*Il villaggio di cartone*), his protagonists come from a very different world. Immigrants enter a church, looking for refuge from the cops. There they meet a priest (Michael Lonsdale), himself a symbol of an archaic, idealistic Catholicism. Olmi's biblical parable encourages us to accept our African guests, but also to encourage them to remain what they are, and hopefully to return to their continent, making it flourish like Paradise, since ours appears to be beyond salvation. The philosophical dialogue is reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini.



Ermanno Olmi's *The Cardboard Village*

Applauded at Cannes' 'Directors' Fortnight', *Heavenly Body* (*Corpo celeste*) by Alice Rohrwacher (sister of award-winning actress Alba Rohrwacher) is a coming-of-age story set around a small church in Calabria. A young girl faces a crisis of conscious as she approaches her confirmation. Conscious echoes of other

representations of 'religious repressions', from Fellini's to Bergman's, do not mar this ambitious debut.

Submitted to the Academy Awards, Emanuele Crialesi's **Terraferma** offers a further look at the immigrant experience. This time from a tiny Sicilian island a few miles off the North African coast. A family of fishermen give refuge to some illegal immigrants, but later decide to report them to the authorities. Crialesi aims at blending social criticism with satire. But an excess of picturesque imagery, along with overly mannered performances, tarnish a well-intentioned effort.



Emanuele Crialesi's **Terraferma**

Cristina Comencini adapts her latest bestselling novel in **When the Night** (*Quando la notte*). It is a snow-set melodrama about a mother who might be beating her baby and who is pursued by a gruff mountain guide. Despite wooden performances by Claudia Pandolfi and Filippo Timi, Comencini still draws some thrills from her story.

The Jewel (*Il gioiellino*), Andrea Molaioli's second opus following his 2006 mega-hit *The Girl by the Lake*, is a bold exposé based on the Parmalat industry's scandalous crash. Remo Girone and Toni Servillo perfectly embody the CEO and the main accountant of a dairy company, which for a long time was on the brink of collapse, aided by amoral politicians and unscrupulous bankers. This unflinching, if occasionally arid, dissection of corporate malfeasance offers a fascinating microcosm of our troubled times.



Andrea Segre's **Li and the Poet**

The year's best films

This Must Be the Place (Paolo Sorrentino)
Habemus Papam (Nanni Moretti)
The Salt of Life (Gianni Di Gregorio)
The Big Heart of the Girls (Pupi Avati)
Li and the Poet (Andrea Segre)

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