

Remembering film director Mario Monicelli (1915-2010)

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All Italian comedy is dramatic.... often tragic, but it's treated in a humorous way. But people die in it, there's no happy ending. Italian comedy, the kind I make, always has this component—Mario Monicelli

Film director Mario Monicelli, who, together with Luigi Comencini, Dino Risi and scriptwriter Stefano Vanzina, established the *commedia all'italiana* film genre in the late 1950s, took his life on November 29. The 95-year-old filmmaker leapt from the fifth floor of San Giovanni hospital in Rome where he was being treated for prostate cancer.

Monicelli, who had also recently lost his sight, did not leave a suicide note but—according to producer Aurelio de Laurentiis—was very depressed by his ill-health and “could not tolerate the idea of having to depend on someone.”

Although not as well known outside Italy as his contemporaries—Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Roberto Rosellini or Vittorio de Sica—Monicelli was one of the better comedic directors of post-World War II. His unflinching but empathetic cinematic portraits of ordinary people, along with his biting satirical observations of outdated and destructive social conventions, still resonate.

Asked in 1999, whether comedy allowed greater freedom for social criticism than conventional drama, Monicelli replied: “Certainly. True social criticism is done only with comedy because if you laugh at misery, illness, or poverty you can go deeper into it. And you accomplish more. The goal is to consider the reality around you, from the point of view of the humorist. I think you need to look deeper to make people laugh at things that aren't ridiculous or funny.”

Monicelli was prolific—some critics describe his output as “unrelenting”—but his best work towers above the insipid efforts of various contemporary “left” filmmakers. The politically ignorant and “happy-ending” style comedies dominating global movie-houses today were anathema to Monicelli who dismissed directors involved in this sort of work as “cowards”.

In a lengthy interview on his 90th birthday, Monicelli lambasted

“cute, well-made [comedies], where superficial things happen and everything always turn out well. The *commedia all'italiana* is the opposite, nothing is resolved and you're left with a bittersweet feeling.”

During his more than six-decade career he directed over 65 films, wrote 80 scripts and worked with some of Italy's greatest film actors, including Totò, Marcello Mastroianni, Vittorio Gassman, Alberto Sordi, Anna Magnani, Monica Vitti, Claudia Cardinale, Sophia Loren and many US and European stars.

Born 1915 in Viareggio, a Tuscan coastal town, Monicelli was the son of an author and journalist. After studying history and philosophy at the universities of Pisa and Milan, he wrote film reviews and made his first short film, *I ragazzi della Via Paal* (*The Paul Street Boys*), in 1934. It won a prize at the Venice Film Festival and helped the 19-year-old filmmaker to secure support for his first feature—*Pioggia d'Estate* (*Summer Rain*)—in 1937. He was hired as an assistant director for Pietro Germi and others for the next few years while writing scripts at blistering pace—40 between 1939 and 1942.

Influenced by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy, Monicelli began directing comedies and in 1949 began a lifelong collaboration with the iconic and much-loved Neapolitan comic Totò (Antonio De Curtis). *Totò cerca casa* (*Totò looks for a house*), their first film together, was co-directed by scriptwriter Steno (Stefano Vanzina) and deals with the difficulty of finding an apartment.

The then 35-year-old director followed this with *Vita da cani* (*A Dog's Life* [1950]) about the life and times of a post-WWII provincial theatre group and starring Aldo Fabrizi, Gina Lollobrigida and Marcello Mastroianni.

Unfortunately, most of Monicelli's early films are currently unavailable outside Italy. But the directors' filmography is vast and beyond the scope of this appreciation to provide a detailed overview of his work. The most artistically significant phase of his career, however, commenced after he began working with scriptwriters Agenore Incrocci and Furio Scarpelli, and developed what became known as “comedy Italian-style”, or social realistic comedy, accurately described by one critic as “a fusion of

bitterness and charm”. Movies such as *I Soliti Ignoti* (*Big Deal on Madonna Street* [1958]), *La Grande Guerra* (*The Great War* [1959]) and *I Compagni* (*The Organizer* [1963]), were not just popular in Italy but caught the eye of international audiences.

I Soliti Ignoti brings together Totò, Mastroianni, Vittorio Gassman, Renato Salvatori, Carlo Pisacane, Tiberio Murgia and Claudia Cardinale (in her first film) and is about a group of poverty-stricken petty criminals who attempt to rob a small, state-run pawnshop. The film playfully parodied the crime film genre and its super-cool, ‘scientific’ criminals. Anything and everything that can go wrong does so in this hilarious and gritty farce, which established Mastroianni and Gassman as great comedic actors.

Various filmmakers have tried to replicate Monicelli’s movie and its wry sensibility—*Crackers* (1984) directed by Louis Malle, *Palookaville* (1996) by Alan Taylor, *Small Time Crooks* (2002) by Woody Allen and, most recently, Anthony Russo’s *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002)—in most cases, with only limited success.

A year later Monicelli directed *La Grande Guerra*, about two Italian World War I soldiers (Alberto Sordi and Vittorio Gassman) on the Austrian front. The movie cleverly combines class-conscious characterisations and black humour to expose the absurdity and violence of the conflict and its horrendous impact on soldiers and civilians alike.

Involvement in WWI was regarded by Italian authorities and official “public opinion makers” as the “heroic sacrifice”, so when word leaked out about the film, the press demanded its production be stopped. The campaign failed and the movie, despite censors banning it for under-18 year olds, was a box office success.

This classic work, as Monicelli later stated, was the “first to say that these men went to war without knowing why, that the war had nothing to do with them. They were poor devils, badly dressed, undernourished, ignorant, illiterate, who were sent to do something that had nothing in common with their lives.”

In 1962, Monicelli contributed to *Boccaccio 70*—a portmanteau collection of short films by different directors. The other Italian filmmakers were Antonioni, Fellini and Visconti.

“Renzo and Luciana”, Monicelli’s short, is an affecting and perceptive tale about two young working class lovers and featuring Germano Gilioli and Marisa Solinas. While the post-war boom is underway in Europe, and jobs are plentiful, the couple’s pay is low, employers are oppressive, and parental prying is constant and stultifying.

The next year Monicelli directed *I Compagni* (*The Organizer*), a passionate story about a socialist-minded academic’s attempts to organise a group of Turin textile workers in the late 1890s. The soul-destroying conditions of the textile workers is brilliantly recaptured in stark black-and-white cinematography by Giuseppe Rotunno and Mastroianni’s performance as the committed and self-

sacrificing professor is engaging.

Monicelli also directed historical satires—*L’armata Brancaleone* (*For Love and Gold* [1966]), with Gassman as a poor but proud knight, and the *Il Marchese del Grillo* (1981), starring Sordi, are noteworthy—as well as contemporary comedies. *Amici Miei* (*My Friends*[1975]), about four middle-aged Tuscan friends who have never really grown up, was a box office smash in Italy and generated a sequel in 1982.

In the last two decades of his life, Monicelli directed a varied range of movies—features and shorts, as well as documentaries on Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, the G8 protests in Genoa in 2001, and on the plight of the Palestinians. *Le Rose del Deserto* (*Roses of the Desert*), his last feature, which he made in 2006 aged 91, dramatised the lives of Italian soldiers involved in the occupation of Libya between 1934-43.

It is not clear to this writer whether Monicelli, a supporter of the anti-fascist resistance in the 1940s, ever joined the Stalinist Italian Communist Party. He remained to the end of his life an opponent of capitalist oppression, however, but remained trapped within the framework of official “left” politics and its dismissal of the working class as a force for progressive social change.

Monicelli regularly denounced the Berlusconi government’s assaults on the working class and lamented the rise of what he described as its “get-rich culture”, but towards the end of his life began pessimistically and falsely claiming that Italians had supported Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship and were responsible for the ongoing Berlusconi regime. Monicelli, unfortunately, appeared blind to the role played by the former Stalinists and the middle-class ex-lefts.

After Monicelli ended his life last week, director Carlo Lizzani told the Italian media that the veteran filmmaker “was someone who wanted to control his own life to the very end. His death was an act of lucidity.”

Whether this is the case or not will probably be never known, but in July this year Monicelli addressed the funeral of scriptwriter and long-time friend Suso Cecchi d’Amico (see: “A screenwriter writes with his eyes”). Her passing, he declared, had left him “very much alone”, a loneliness he no doubt felt on many levels.



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