

Film

## A Plan to Revive Hollywood on the Tiber

- A theme park and hotel may be in the cards for Rome's Cinecittà
- "The professional level is very high, but sadly so are the costs"

A half-century ago, Rome's **Cinecittà Studios** merited the nickname "Hollywood on the Tiber." Audrey Hepburn rode a Vespa scooter in *Roman Holiday*. Charlton Heston learned to pilot a chariot for *Ben-Hur*. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton hooked up while making *Cleopatra*. All were shot at Cinecittà.

These days the magic—along with most of the business—is gone as filmmakers have moved on to lower-cost locales such as Budapest and Bucharest. To get back on track, Cinecittà plans to spend €675 million (\$934 million) on a new hotel and amusement park to help fund upgrades at the studio and make it more competitive with rivals abroad. "I'd

love to just make movies, but that's not happening," says Lamberto Mancini, Cinecittà's general manager. "We need to broaden our scope."

Unions representing actors and crew say the plan won't boost employment in the industry and that the money should be spent on updated technology and better moviemaking facilities. "It sounds a lot like real estate speculation to me," says Umberto Carretti, head of Italy's film crew union.

Producers and directors say filming in Eastern Europe costs 15 percent to 25 percent less than at Cinecittà. Last year, Italian filmmakers spent 71 percent of their total budgets abroad, according to the Italian Actors' Union, costing Italy some €38 million in lost salaries, fees, and tax revenue. "The professional level [at Cinecittà] is very high, but sadly so are the costs," says director Isotta Toso, who shot small parts of her debut film, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, at Cinecittà.

In the 1950s and '60s, Italy was the country with competitive prices, and American directors flocked to Cinecittà. The glamor of visiting Hollywood stars inspired Federico Fellini's 1960 film, *La Dolce Vita*. The movie, which captured the decadence of Rome's cafe society, was shot at Cinecittà's Studio 5. Cinecittà "is where American and Ital-

ian cinema met, creating a kind of magic," says Riccardo Tozzi, producer of the 1999 Judi Dench film, *Tea With Mussolini*, and dozens of other movies.

The number of productions at Cinecittà has fallen by about two-thirds since the 1960s, to roughly 90 movies and TV shows in the past two years, studio boss Mancini says. One of the last major films was Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* in 2002. The sets depicting the brownstones and storefronts of 19th century Manhattan still stand on the wind-swept lot like an urban ghost town.

Cinecittà has seen hard times before. Founded by Mussolini in 1937, the area was bombed during World War II and then used to house refugees in the late 1940s. After several fires in the 1980s destroyed sets, the state-owned enterprise nearly collapsed. In 1997 a group of seven Italian companies bought it for \$35 million and shifted the focus to low-budget TV shows, music videos, and commercials. Today, Cinecittà employs some 250 people, and about 5,000 more find occasional work on productions there, half the level of employment in the 1960s, the unions say.

Mancini is spending €175 million on offices, equipment, new post-production facilities, and a hotel at the main studio. In 2014 a €500 million theme park called Cinecittà World is scheduled to open on land the studio owns south of Rome. The project includes roller coasters and rides based on *Ben-Hur* and Fellini films.

Unions fret the plans will morph into real estate developments. They point to the 1982 sale of studio land that was supposed to be home to an auditorium and multimedia center but ended up as a shopping mall called Cinecittà 2. The studio, though, is relatively far from central Rome and the land it sits on isn't particularly valuable, says Mario Breglia, chairman of real estate research firm Scenari Immobiliari. "They'd be better off developing cinema-related activities," he says. "I'd avoid playing the amateur developer." **■** —Alessandra Migliaccio and Flavia Rotondi

Un progetto per far rivivere la Hollywood sul Tevere (pds)