



Glimpses of Fellini and flickers of hope



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The studio's general state of craziness seems a microcosm of Italy and a metaphor for how, despite themselves, Italians thrive anyway.

CINEMA PARADISO Cinecittà is Europe's fabled studio, where classics including Fellini's "Satyricon" (1969), above, were filmed. It is still stately, but in graceful decline. Below and left, photographs of the campus taken in 2009 by Gregory Crewdson.

ROME

Back from another brink, the storied Cinecittà shows off its charms

BY MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

It was a sun-kissed spring day here, warm, with swarms of camera-toting tourists congregating in the Piazza del Popolo, fruit and vegetable vendors selling puntarelle at the market stalls in the Campo de' Fiori, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi poised to go on trial for abuse of power and paying an underage girl for sex.

The usual.

At the front desk of Cinecittà, the fabled film studio, clips from "Death in

Venice" and "La Dolce Vita" flickered on a video monitor above the heads of receptionists. Coltish teenagers in Nike Frees and Marcello Mastroianni sunglasses decanted from a schoolbus outside for a tour of the studio's back lots, where the Italian version of "Big Brother" is taped.

Lately this country has become its own reality show, as Italians often lament. The situation has gotten to the point where nobody even seems to find it especially odd that the prime minister regularly phones television chat shows to rant or complain about how the host is portraying some government measure.

Not long ago Giovanni Floris, the host of "Ballarò," went so far as to refuse to take Mr. Berlusconi's call. Silvio from the Chigi Palace had already had his turn, Mr. Floris declared, and if the head of the Italian government had something more to say, he was welcome to

come onto the show in person and say it.

This now passes for gallows comedy in the land of Plautus and Boccaccio, where Mr. Berlusconi's administration, having endlessly chipped away at the national arts budget and the fund for opera, music, theater and film, pays the standard lip service to culture as the country's



pride and joy and economic engine. The second anniversary of the earthquake that devastated L'Aquila came and went this month, and, shamefully, the historic and formerly bustling center of that city still remains nearly empty. A concert hall designed by Shigeru Ban, the Japanese architect, which was to have opened there on the anniversary, has been delayed time and again by the usual money and organizational afflictions.

The conductor Riccardo Muti made news last month when, during the premiere of "Nabucco" here in Rome, he led the audience in a spontaneous encore of "Va, Pensiero." ("O, my homeland, so beautiful and lost" goes one of the relevant lyrics.) The occasion was a celebration of the 150th anniversary of Italian unity, and the encore was the crowd's protest against arts cuts and the country's general state of turmoil, Mr. Muti explained afterward, comparing the event to "something out of the Visconti film 'Senso,'" thereby confirming that for Italians life has come to imitate fiction.

Luchino Visconti and his ilk, among them Federico Fellini, Vittorio de Sica, Bernardo Bertolucci, William Wyler, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Martin Scorsese — the list goes on and on — have over the decades made Cinecittà the most storied film production center in Europe but until a couple of weeks ago it too was an Italian landmark in crisis, or so it was said. Without an incentive program to entice foreign moviemakers, the studio was even talking, if only to rouse public sympathy, about selling some of Fellini's priceless props to raise quick cash.

The government recently came through with a three-year reprieve, promising, in effect, tax breaks on 25 percent of the money that foreign producers spend on production here. This brings the studio more in line with those in Berlin, Prague, Budapest and London.

Still, a reprieve, like a movie, ends eventually. Italy today seems unable to plan well into the future, whether securing for posterity its famous filmmaking center or preserving its crumbling architectural and archaeological

heritage or consolidating this increasingly sprawling, diverse and uncontainable capital city.

That said, when I stopped in to see Maurizio Sperandini, deputy general manager of Cinecittà, he didn't seem fazed. Director of production facilities and a 22-year veteran of the complex, he has been through many ups and downs, and he told me that he and his bosses were satisfied with the three-year deal. He boasted of having doubled annual income to \$57 million since the studio went private in the mid-1990s, when it was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Founded by Mussolini to promote Italian cinema and make Fascist propaganda films, Cinecittà sits on 99 acres, about 40 hectares, of public land, uses public-owned buildings and depends on public tax breaks, but it is a private, for-profit enterprise with a list of glittery investors. They are now contemplating a \$115 million, or €80 million, expansion on vacant parts of the property, encompassing a new soundstage, offices, a hotel, a gym and a restaurant complex of the sort that Mr. Sperandini said Cinecittà's competitors offer.

Meanwhile, the 1930s campus of other buildings by Gino Peressutti, a significant work of Italian Modernist design, gracefully declines in a landscape of cypresses, palms and fiberglass trailers. Down potholed roads the Forum from the set of "Rome," the defunct HBO series, abuts the decrepit waterfront of 19th-century Lower Manhattan from "Gangs of New York." On a soundstage where Fellini shot "Satyricon" and Wes Anderson shot "The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou," a spaghetti entanglement of air-conditioning ducts dangles from silent catwalks. The other morning stylists were primping models for a fashion shoot before a fake ancient colonnade, where somebody had parked a Renault.

"I want to take you to the submarine," suggested Mr. Sperandini's assistant, Francesca Rotondo, after having failed to locate the offending Renault's owner; and like one of the supernatural characters in "The Adjust-

ment Bureau," she opened a door on the set of a 14th-century Florentine palazzo onto a weedy lot where conventioners were gathered, and the submarine from "U-571," the 2000 movie about a German U-boat, slumbered in a long, white condom-shaped tent. Nearby, the teenagers from the schoolbus flirted, texted and tried not to look bored while waiting their turns to go inside.

"We sell a mix of past and future," is how Mr. Sperandini summed up the appeal to filmmakers of working in this place, where the glamour and surreal-

ism of Fellini have not yet evaporated, and the general state of craziness — a charmed, worn and fairly somnolent variety of it — seems a microcosm of Italy and a metaphor for how, despite themselves, Italians thrive anyway.

Some variation of Cinecittà's public-private business model, for better or for worse, may ultimately turn out to be a salvation for other ailing cultural institutions here. That's clearly the hope of Mr. Berlusconi, a billionaire who owns newspapers and television stations, including ones that he sometimes calls in to. Naturally he has been arguing for more private control, perhaps as a way to excuse his inexcusable cuts to the culture budget and the incompetence of his government in administering them.

But the story of Italy, now as always, is also one of improbable fortitude and resourcefulness. Time and again the country survives its self-inflicted calamities. It's part of the endearing, incomparable beauty and appeal of the place. When I emerged from the subway back in town, hundreds of protesters were carrying placards mocking Mr. Berlusconi for his relationship with Karima el-Mahroug, the underage girl in question, who goes by the nom d'art Ruby the Heart-Stealer. They protested in the piazza in front of the Pantheon and mixed with perplexed Japanese and Chinese tourists.

It was the usual scene of chaos, merriment and complaining. A band struck up near the fountain. The sun sank, casting shadows across the square.

This was Rome. And everybody looked very happy.

Today a for-profit enterprise, it relies on tax breaks, public land and glittery investors.

