

Lost in translation

Is Italy's long, storied dubbing industry on the verge of losing its voice?

By Eric J. Lyman

ROME -- It's a scene so memorable that President Ronald Reagan borrowed its signature line: Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" Callahan points his massive .44 Magnum at yet another bad guy, and as the nervous thug tries to decide whether he should shoot or run, Eastwood does his patented squint and says, "Go ahead." Instead of uttering the famous "Make my day," though, Eastwood growls, "Make me happy."

At least that's what Italian moviegoers heard -- albeit in the colloquial "Vai avanti, rendimi felice" -- when they saw 1983's "Sudden Impact," the fourth installment in the Dirty Harry franchise.

Dubbing has a long history in Italy, dating to the beginning of dialogue in film and including all of cinema's most celebrated lines since then.

Literally translated, many memorable lines have lost -- and gained -- something: "May the force be with you" became "That the force is among you" to Italians, and "Here's looking at you, kid" became "Good luck, baby."

While dubbing is common in most of the world's primary non-English-speaking markets, it is difficult to imagine another market in which it is as prominent as it is in Italy. According to Italian cinema monitoring company Cinetel, English-language films grossed about \$2.3 billion in Italy from Jan. 1, 2003, through June 30 of this year. How much of that revenue came from films screened in their original languages, with or without subtitles? Less than \$1.5 million, or a paltry 0.065%.

"It's just an ingrained part of the culture," says Orio Caldiron, a history professor and cinema critic at Rome's La Sapienza University. "For the vast majority of Italian filmgoers, it never occurs to them to seek out a film that isn't dubbed."

Nor does it -- with the exception of a few enclaves with large expatriate populations -- occur to theater owners to screen nondubbed films, or even to many distributors to release them on Italian soil.

Although films were dubbed in Italy between the two World Wars, the practice began in earnest during the late 1940s, when U.S. movies banned under Italian fascism started flooding past the nation's borders. Few Italians spoke additional languages at the time, and a large minority of the nation's residents remained illiterate.

"Dubbing was the only option, and Italians took the job seriously," says Peter Brunette, a film history professor and Italian cinema specialist at Wake Forest University.

With a strong theater tradition and a flair for the creative, Italians soon became masters of the trade. The process was so ingrained that until recent years, even Italian films were dubbed, granting local directors increased flexibility with their sound mixes.

"Sounds like barking dogs or airplanes passing overhead were irrelevant, and directors could even shout instructions to the actors during a take," Brunette says. "It also allowed (director Roberto) Rossellini to cast beautiful women who couldn't act well, or for (Federico) Fellini to film people with unusual or grotesque faces. Foreign actors could also play in Italian films, like Burt Lancaster in (Luchino Visconti's 1963 historical drama) 'Il Gattopardo,' all because the voices could be added later."

Certain voices became as important to the Italian careers of foreign actors as their faces. Jimmy Stewart's nasal intonations gave way to Gualtiero De Angelis' deeper, warmer, rounder tones, for example, and Greta Garbo's measured Scandinavian cadence was translated conceptually but not mimicked by Tina Lattanzi.

But the best-known Italian dubber might have been the late Ferruccio Amendola, who was so good at bringing foreign lines to life that he interpreted many of the greatest screen actors from the late 1960s through the late '90s, including Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino. (When two of Amendola's actors were in the same film, he would pick one. Thus, he was Pacino in 1974's "The Godfather: Part II" and De Niro in 1995's "Heat.")

A star in his own right, Amendola made headlines for two days when he died in 2001. Pacino offered his respects then in an interview with the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera: "Ferruccio Amendola was an

artist. The work he did on the three 'Godfather' films was perfect. He worked for a long time on it, asking me for advice, putting great thought into each word. I learned from him."

Sergio Fiorentini, another of Italy's great dubbers who has worked with a range of actors as diverse as the late John Gielgud and the late Benny Hill but is best known as the Italian voice of Gene Hackman, notes that Amendola's level of effort used to be the norm.

"The key to dubbing is not necessarily having a similar voice to the actor," says Fiorentini, who has dubbed more than 200 films and countless television programs since 1968. "It's more important to understand the character. I always pay attention to the rhythm with which the character breathes. I move when he moves; I mimic his expressions -- it all makes it more believable. A dubber doesn't create, but he brings to life what the actor created."

Mario Paolinelli, an Italian dialogue coach and dubbing director, believes that type of effort is essential.

"The work has to be so good that you don't notice," he says. "If the viewer watches the film and says, 'But John Wayne can't speak Italian,' then the story is lost."

These days, though, the primary reasons old films were dubbed in Italy are no longer valid. The nation's literacy levels are on par with those in the rest of Western Europe, and Italians born during the 1960s or later are increasingly multilingual. In addition, more Italians now travel and see original-language programming elsewhere.

Paolinelli notes that the rate at which films and TV programs are released in various formats -- including cinemas, straight to DVD, online and on local networks -- makes it next to impossible for Italian dubbers to keep up.

"The volume of programming has two effects: First, it means it's easier for viewers to become accustomed to nondubbed programming, and second, it makes the dubbing process a commodity where quality is less important than cost and speed," he says. "We used to have a month or six weeks to dub a film; now, it's only 10 days."

What does the future hold for dubbing in Italy? Some experts say it's here to stay, simply out of habit. Others, meanwhile, lament that changing habits and a more international Italian population might make dubbing fade away during the next generation or so.

Then there are those looking to expand dubbing's base.

Paolinelli is part of a group bent on demonstrating the value of well-dubbed films, and he hopes to help Italian films find a market in English-speaking nations.

In addition, a leading dubbing group is set to host the Italian: Short, Sweet & Dubbed festival Sept. 15 in Rome, featuring a lineup of Italian short films dubbed into English. The intent is to illustrate to doubtful viewers that dubbed films can be enjoyable.

"The Italian market for Italian films is small, worth maybe \$250 million or \$300 million per year -- that's the budget of four or five decent-sized American films," Paolinelli says. "For Italian films to compete against big-budget films from other countries, our market has to grow -- and dubbing Italian films for other markets is one way to do that."

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