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Italy weighs value of dubbing films

By Eric J. Lyman

ROME -- Is high-quality dubbing the answer to making Italian movies more attractive on the international market? That was what a recent one-day exhibition in Rome's Villa Borghese -- titled "Italian, Short, Sweet & Dubbed" -- set out to prove.

The event was sponsored by the Italian Association of Dialogue Adaptors and comprised two short films and a part of a feature, all expertly dubbed into English.

Unlike films in English, French, German or Spanish, Italian-language movies have no secondary market in a shared tongue beyond their borders. So besides the occasional international hit, Italian films mostly start and finish their runs on Italian soil.

"Italian films have to divide up a relatively small pie," says Mario Paolinelli, a dialogue coach and dubbing director who helped organize the exhibition. "Italian films gross a total of about \$250 million per year. That sounds like a lot until you remember that in the U.S. market, \$250 million would make three major blockbusters."

Paolinelli thinks the way Italian pictures could break through is by dubbing the best of them into English for international audiences.

The process of dubbing is much more than simply translating words and producing a new soundtrack. The new script also has to translate foreign concepts and communicate the unspoken meanings often conveyed in conversation.

A description of an explosion from Massimo Cappelli's short "Tutto Brilla," screened during the exhibition, was translated into the very American line, "Bang! Like the Fourth of July in Ohio!" The original was quite different, but with a similar sense, literally meaning, "Like an explosion on New Year's!"

The verdict? Judging by the response from the 100-strong audience, call it a qualified success. "It wasn't the same as watching a film that was made in English, but it's not as if you noticed it was dubbed," says Mary Rease, 18, a British student at the event.

The goal of the exhibition, according to voice actor Greg Snegoff, is to convince Italian studios and foreign distributors to approach the prospect of dubbed films with an open mind. (Representatives of U.S. studios are understood to have been invited to the exhibition, but reportedly none showed up.)

"When people think about dubbed movies, they think of the old 'Godzilla' films that were dubbed so comically bad," Snegoff says. "There seems to be resistance to this from every side -- except from viewers who actually see the work done well."

A further argument in favor of dubbing may come from an upcoming study by three universities in Italy and England to examine whether viewers prefer watching a well-dubbed film to one with subtitles.

But in the meantime, it seems the jury is out on whether revoicing in English can open new doors for Italian cinema.