ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE
DELLA RICERCA

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Layers of Acting: Degrees and Intermediaries of Television Performance

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Barra, L. (2021). Layers of Acting: Degrees and Intermediaries of Television Performance. THE ITALIANIST, 41(2), 271-274 [10.1080/02614340.2021.1950435].

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/857155 since: 2022-02-12

Published:

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950435

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (https://cris.unibo.it/).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

08 October 2026

Layers of Acting: Degrees and Intermediaries of Television Performance

Luca Barra

Dipartimento delle Arti, Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Italy

luca.barra@unibo.it

Luca Barra is associate professor at the Department of the Arts, Università di Bologna, where he teaches Broadcasting History, Contemporary TV Series, and Digital Media. His research mainly focuses on television production and distribution cultures, the international circulation of media products (and their national mediations), comedy and humour TV genres, and the evolution of the contemporary media landscape. He has written three books – *La sitcom* (Carocci, Roma 2020), *Palinsesto* (Laterza, Roma-Bari 2015) and *Risate in scatola* (Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2012) – along with numerous articles in journals and collections. He leads the Bologna research unit of the F-Actor project (PRIN 2017).

Layers of Acting: Degrees and Intermediaries of Television Performance

This short article focuses on television as a complex field of acting practices and actor management. Frequently relegated to a footnote in many careers, TV is actually a crucial element in the life cycle of most Italian actors. Production studies insights also show that several intermediaries are in place, with a constant dynamic interplay among actors, companies and broadcasters. Moreover, television acting appears as a stratified, multifaceted concept embracing many roles, different genres and various degrees of involvement, all constituting an appreciable portion of many TV series and shows.

Keywords: Italian actors; Italian performers; television intermediaries; television acting; media production studies.

Television's contribution to film and audiovisual media acting is growing increasingly significant, in Italy and elsewhere. Sometimes it is still downplayed, considered a mere adjunct to decisions made and techniques developed elsewhere, in the more established and 'reputable' fields of cinema and theatre. Yet it is hard to ignore the huge possibilities offered by the small screen and their significance in actors' careers. Television acting is a confused area: in some ways it seems akin to film, as the two kinds of performers appear somehow interchangeable; in other ways, the entertainers build their personas and engage with audiences using a strongly contrasting approach, as everyday personalities. An enduring interest in the many forms of celebrity and stardom that television performers are able to cultivate, both in the British and US contexts[1] and in Italy[2], has not been matched by a similarly intense analysis of television actors' specific traits and particular career paths. Too often, their training, management and recognition are neglected despite the small screen being a major part of most actors' experience. Moreover, in the last two decades, the spread of reality television has further blurred the boundaries of what is a challenging field, reducing the

gap between highly trained actors/performers and the ordinary people who increasingly take centre stage in many productions.

To better understand and attempt to map out the community of television actors in Italy, a blend of two approaches may help. First, the broad perspective of television studies, with its systemic view of the medium, transcends the rigid lines often dividing fictional, film-like products and the more current, commonplace aspects of programming. It reveals connections between the two realms and their role in building and sustaining many careers. Second, media industry studies – and especially production studies[3] – offers a standpoint that highlights the hidden presence of actors and intermediaries, the working routines that happen before, during and after production, the role of distribution, promotion and marketing, and the many factors always at play. Empirical methods as in-depth interviews and surveys, as well as industry data, can reveal tactics and strategies, failures and successes, goals and ways to reach them. This two-pronged method of studying Italian TV actors does two things: it illuminates their experience, their career- and life-cycle, their visibility or lack thereof, and their professional pathways; and it spotlights several mediators with a crucial role in the stratified network in which television actors are immersed at most stages of their working lives. This short article uses this perspective to sketch out some preliminary ideas and potential avenues for further research.

The 'forgotten' section of an acting CV

If we consider the full extent of a long career, especially for Italian performers who have achieved considerable celebrity and recognition and are also offered film roles, one thing appears clear. TV is often treated as the poor relation: the forgotten part of a longer journey, a quickly dismissed steppingstone before the real business begins. Television is afforded small recognition as a vital training ground for later roles or for

its ability to cement a fan base. Biases on the hierarchical importance of media are confirmed in many promotional discourses. A case among many is Elio Germano. Before building himself a reputation through many auteur films and mimetic roles and winning all the main acting prizes, Germano began his career in 2000 with a guest part in hit family comedy *Un medico in famiglia* (1998–2016), as a reformed drug addict with a heart of gold. He followed that with a lead role in the sitcom *Via Zanardi, 33* (2001), an Italian copy of *Friends* (1994–2004). TV fiction is a springboard for a successful career, yet it quickly takes a back seat in interviews and biographies.

Recent years have gone some way to restoring the balance, as TV drama has gained new kudos as a worthy destination for an Italian actor's career – a feted mainstream coronation with leading roles in quality premium series after well-earned box-office success.[4] One example is Alessandro Gassmann in Rai's *The Bastards of Pizzofalcone* (2017–present). Television thus reappears in Italian actors' body of work – courtesy, however, of products branded as 'cinematic', 'not current' and 'exceptional', thus once again also reinforcing classic hierarchies and tacitly diminishing all but a single part of the wide range of TV acting. Sometimes, both these phenomena can be observed in an enduring Italian actor's career. Kim Rossi Stuart, for instance, began as a child actor on both film and television, then gained recognition for his prince-charming role as Romualdo in fantasy television miniseries *Fantaghirò* (1991–93). He spent years away from the small screen, just to return with a lead role in *Maltese. Il romanzo del commissario* (2017), a quality mafia miniseries exported to numerous foreign markets.

Many 'hidden' intermediaries

There is another reason why television acting is a complex, stratified field: numerous mediators and a complex web of factors affect both individual acting jobs and actors' mid- and long-term career development. Every process is a constant triangulation

among three kinds of players. First, the actors and their management: the talent agencies that support them with their career choices, oversee their contracts, and provide them with roles and auditions; the PR professionals and press offices that build their public image; the teams that manage or supervise their websites and social-media presence, their 'direct' communication with the fans. Second, the various production-related functions, provided directly by production companies: the acting coaches; the casting directors who select the performers and assign the right roles; the people in charge of choosing and managing the studio audience on live or recorded shows; the specialist companies always looking for contestants, for '*pubblico parlante*' ('speaking audience') and for other acting functions to be fulfilled. The third set of players, with an even lower profile despite their crucial role in the television arena, are the broadcasting/commissioning executives and managers, who are vital in shaping every project from the outset, in setting budgets and goals, in supervising the production, and in overseeing promotion and distribution. Each of the three affects the others in a constant negotiation. Many acting hits or flops are (also) down to this combination.

The many faces of television acting

A third opening question could be: what do we mean when we speak of television acting? The answer adds additional layers of complexity. One way to map all the possibilities is to look across the television genres. It is quite common when thinking of actors in scripted fictional products to place them on a ladder with premium-quality drama at the top, followed by miniseries, then soaps, sitcoms, sketch comedies, etc. Contemporary Italian drama, both premium and mainstream, is a pool for new talent as well as an arena for established and end-career stars.[5] Performers can, however, be used in several other ways, in unscripted entertainment forms. For not only do the most famous actors give promotional interviews on talk and variety shows, but they also

appear in television commercials, in scripted-reality shows, in true-crime and factual programming, as extras in court shows (e.g. *Forum*, 1985–present), and even as the beautiful people gracing the front rows of a studio audience, in the background.

The boundaries between media and genres may be clear, yet performers' careers often transcend them to desirable effect – as 'gaining knowledge, skills, and experiences across different but related industries may produce positive performance implications for new projects'[6] – as well as undesirably, when this constant switching leads to insecurities or an undervaluing of actors' abilities. Also, TV acting has many layers and levels, from lead roles to recurring parts and from background roles to day players in a series; then there are extras, '*figuranti*', stooges and paid audiences across all entertainment genres. Every form has its own status, obligations, required skills and, of course, remuneration.

Conclusions

This quick overview clearly shows how stratified television acting is, in terms of its definition and complexity, its performers' self-evaluation, and its interrelation with other intermediary entities in management, production and distribution. As in most creative sectors, TV actors' career paths have 'high levels of casualization', leading to 'a very strong sense of ambivalence for many workers' with a mix of freedom and anxiety.[7] This is especially true for the lesser-known, below-the-line people who inhabit TV drama and comedy sets and TV show studios. The limited consideration (and even self-consideration) afforded to television acting, compared with film, further complicates the situation. And the current Covid-19 crisis, while offering new digital platforms for the leading figures to increasingly engage directly with their audiences online, has also worsened the economic struggles of the emerging actors and other low-profile performers. For after many years of growth, Italian fiction production ground to

a halt for months and is only now slowly restarting with limits on the number of (minor) actors involved; the studios are echoing with the absence of paid audiences and most of the *figuranti*; and the entire sector will suffer long term from the shrinkage in budgets and advertising. Once again, the many possibilities of television acting will take a new shape, with reconfigured power structures – to be studied as they evolve – and major changes in the opportunities for performers and intermediaries.

---

1 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); James Bennett, *Television Personalities. Stardom and the Small Screen* (London: Routledge, 2011).

2 See Peppino Ortoleva, 'Divismo televisivo', in *Enciclopedia italiana. Aggiornamenti 2000* (Rome: Treccani, 2000), pp. 851–852.

3 On media production studies and production cultures, see John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture. Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). On the European context: Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau (eds.), *Behind the Screen. Inside European Production Cultures* (London: Palgrave, 2013). On Italy: Luca Barra, Tiziano Bonini and Sergio Splendore (eds.), *Backstage. Studi sulla produzione dei media in Italia* (Milan: Unicopli, 2016).

4 On the growth of Italian (and European) premium television fiction, see Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (eds.), *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (London: Routledge, 2021).

5 See, for instance, Luca Barra, 'Star a ripetizione. Modelli di celebrità nella fiction italiana contemporanea', in *Bianco e Nero*, 581 (2015), pp. 32–42.

6 Francesca Vicentini and Paolo Boccardelli, 'Career Diversity and Project Performance in the Italian Television Industry', *Journal of Business Research*, 69 (2016), p. 2386.

7 David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, '"A Very Complicated Version of Freedom": Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries', *Poetics*, 38 (2010), p. 18.