

A photograph showing the lower legs and feet of several people standing on a red carpet. The people are wearing dark trousers and shoes, and one person on the right is wearing a black ruffled dress and high heels.

Italian Contemporary Screen Performers

Training, Production, Prestige

Edited by

Luca Barra · Cristina Formenti

Mariapaola Pierini · Francesco Pitassio

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ISBN 978-3-031-67309-2 ISBN 978-3-031-67310-8 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67310-8>

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The volume stems from the research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*, funded by the Ministry of University and Research, Italy, Progetti di ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale-PRIN, Call 2017.

F * A C T O R

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This volume offers a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered professional role of film and television actors and actresses within the contemporary Italian screen media landscape. More precisely, by focusing on a carefully thought-out selection of Italian film and television stars that have reached success from 2000 onwards, the volume underscores how the renewal that the Italian media industry has undergone starting from the late 1990s has impacted the training, recruitment, career management, promotion and PR, and validation strategies of this category of media professionals. While the generation of stars that since the postwar era had been making Italian cinema world-renowned disappeared—together with that mode of production—new cohorts of actresses and actors who required different skills and mediators came to the fore.

This edited collection is informed by the four-year-long research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, which adopted a cutting-edge methodological framework that conflates established performance studies and stardom/celebrity studies together with media production studies. The volume brings to the foreground how since 2000 the various stages of the professional life cycle of an Italian leading actor or actress have changed. To this end, the edited collection is divided into three parts that correspond to as many crucial aspects in the professional life cycle of a film and television actor or actress:

training and early career paths; career management; promotion and validation strategies. More precisely, aside from a substantive theoretical and methodological introduction, the book comprises a series of chapters, authored by specialists in Italian film and television studies based in Italy, the UK, and the US. Each chapter focuses on a well-known Italian actor, actress, or related professional, whose creative and operational abilities and career pathway best epitomize one of the peculiarities of the professional development of contemporary Italian screen stars.

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Beppe Caschetto: How a Talent Agent Can Build a Film and Television Performer

Luca Barra

In recent years, the global media arena has seen a process of significant expansion and consolidation. Cinema and television have undergone digitization and convergence, with impacts on production and on distribution windows; the on-demand audiovisual platforms have established themselves and begun to make original content; and social media has developed an increasingly powerful presence, not least through videos showcasing influencers' and creators' ideas. The classic boundaries and distinctions between different forms of media areas seem to have blurred, resulting in a broader range of titles and spaces, an explosion of competition as well as of opportunities. These changes have challenged the screen industry in Italy too, with the consolidation of many production companies into large international groups, the proliferation of commissioners to include premium television and the national divisions of the US platforms, a general reassessment within the entire audiovisual industry as it gradually industrializes, consolidating its production processes, supply chains, and professional roles, not without compromises and corrections along the way.

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L. Barra et al. (eds.), *Italian Contemporary Screen Performers*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67310-8_20

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In this context, the digital transition brings the illusion of disintermediation, yet ends up reinforcing the roles of intermediaries who can navigate this complex, structured, changeable tableau and who can offer added-value services. A crucial adjunct to the role of actor is therefore the talent agent. These agencies guide and manage the performers, develop their careers, build their image, handle contracts and agreements, and generally look after their interests. As observed in Hollywood (Roussel 2016), agents' and agencies' growing importance is a bellwether of a progressive shift in attention in the film and audiovisual sector from creative aspects to the business and industrial side. While television has already expanded actors' profiles as a large and varied group of television personalities (Bennett 2010), talent management becomes an even more significant task in a digital media environment (Boyle 2018), shaping and steering complex life and career journeys (Chisholm 2004; Naudier 2020). Good talent management by media companies also helps to control costs and to leverage the major names to best effect while attracting, developing, and cultivating new talent and increasing its diversity (Oliver and Ohlbaum Associates 2015). Negotiating with the agents who represent their clients' interests is a key aspect.

One of Italy's most important agents over several decades has been Beppe Caschetto. His work centers on television, in a broad sense, with frequent forays into film and, latterly, the digital arena. Born in 1957, Caschetto comes from Sicily, but has always been based in Bologna. His career began in the public sector: with a background in center-left politics, he started out in the organization that runs university catering before becoming an official in the Emilia-Romagna Region. This role brought him into contact with prominent television and music producer Bibi Ballandi, who also worked in Bologna, over a public-funding application for a TV show made in Romagna. As Ballandi said:

Caschetto was a hunch of mine in the days when I still had the Bandiera Gialla disco in Rimini. That year of the algae infestation in the Adriatic, I thought it would be great to make a television programme to show there was still fun to be had on the Riviera [*Stasera mi butto, I'm Going to Jump Tonight*, 1990–1992]. Rai advised us to ask the Emilia-Romagna Region for funding. I met Beppe in the councilor's office and found him to be a very bright official. After a while, I asked him to come work with me. We set up his company together. (Zincone 2016)

After this encounter and the resulting collaboration, Caschetto began managing his first talent, showgirl and TV presenter Alba Parietti, in 1993; his management agency, ITC2000, opened that year. Based in both Bologna and Milan, it continues to serve public figures working primarily in television but also in film, theatre, journalism and publishing, positioning itself at the cultural high end in a vague echo of its founder's progressive political views. The agency's roster currently includes actors working across cinema, series, and entertainment TV, such as Sabrina Ferilli, Luciana Littizzetto, Neri Marcoré, Pif (Pierfrancesco Diliberto), Virginia Raffaele, Maurizio Lastrico, Miriam Leone, Fabio Volo, and Luca & Paolo (Luca Bizzarri and Paolo Kessisoglu); Caschetto represents them on all their projects or just for their television work. The stable is completed by comedians like Maurizio Crozza and Geppi Cucciari, television journalists like Lilli Gruber, Giovanni Floris, Corrado Formigli, Massimo Gramellini, and Ilaria D'Amico, and presenters from Fabio Fazio and Alessia Marcuzzi to Caterina Balivo and Stefano de Martino. The agency's website bears a statement of intent that stresses its "desire to achieve a core goal: to provide its clients with a consistently attractive offering; this is ITC2000's underlying philosophy and mission ... ITC2000's extensive artistic portfolio boasts actors, journalists and authors of note who are famed, renowned and appreciated for their originality and individuality."¹

The general public is largely unaware of Caschetto and the role of ITC2000, as is often the case with even the most important intermediaries. However, for the industry professionals, this invisibility is the confirmation of his great power as one of the *éminence grises* on the Italian media scene. This is apparent in his brilliant ability to look after his clients' interests—as can be seen at the box office, in the TV schedules, and in his frequent battles with similarly powerful counterparts like Lucio Presta, head of the Arcobaleno Tre agency, essentially Caschetto's direct rival. Beppe Caschetto prefers to keep a low profile, operating below the line in a very different way from many other backstage movers in the audiovisual sector, thus strengthening his image as a man apart, a legendary figure with considerable power. Indeed, in his three-decade-long career, he has only ever given three interviews to the press, leaving only rumors and behind-the-scenes hearsay to piece together an idea of

¹ "ITC2000, Chi siamo." <https://www.itc2000.it/chi-siamo-itc/>.

who he is, one fragment at a time. Even these interviews are constructed on willful understatement: “I have become a mythical figure with a quite overstated power, which irritates me ... It is not the agent who changes things; it is not the agent who determines an artist’s or a presenter’s success. I can influence certain things” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). This reticence, this downplaying of his work’s importance, also reflects his view of himself as a protagonist pulling the strings in the wings, who has actual power even though it is not put on display—precisely because it has no need to be seen.

On the one hand, an agency’s role is to endow its actors with a specialist skillset to help them make the right choices for their careers and their economic and creative goals. Every agent has a “reputational capital” built, maintained, and cultivated over time (Zafirau 2008) that underpins their ability to reach agreements with producers and commissioners, ensuring that the offers are good and the contracts are watertight, while promoting and protecting their talent. Every agent has a wide network of contacts and connections in the business, and a wealth of internal and often reserved information about projects in the pipeline and future opportunities to pursue. Every agent is well-versed in the strategies and techniques to use—or they outsource to trusted specialists for specific aspects (such as actor image management, media relations, and social media management). On the other hand, this practical and operational dimension also interweaves with a warmer, human aspect: more or less intentionally and more or less knowingly, talent agents end up forging emotional bonds with their clients. Although distinct, the professional and personal spheres overlap, especially in long-term relationships or with less savvy entrants to the profession. In his (very few) interviews, Beppe Caschetto highlights some specific traits that define his approach in dealing with individual clients. First, he stresses, a crucial factor is an insistence on professionalism: in a sector littered with slapdash dilettantes, rigor is the difference. This applies right from the outset, when a new artist is selected to join the stable, where diligence is the foundation of a relationship that can hopefully prove enduring: “The first interview lasts a good three hours. I want to know their fears, their foibles and passions, their relationship with their family. I’m a great listener ... I have to esteem them and steer them, not be their friend. I have to convey a sense of duty and ethics about the work; I have to earn them longevity” (Caschetto, in Comazzi 2008). And this is all the more pivotal in the

moment when pen is put to paper on a contract governing the relationship with the individual artist, the fruit of a long negotiating effort: “Rules are important ... Rules protect the weak ... Contracts, agreements, are sacred. I negotiate like a demon for my clients’ pay, for even the most trivial details. But once signed, that contract must then be honoured” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Second, he underlines the combination of an attention to detail with an overall vision in a systematic method that is the only way to get past the individual actor’s flawed self-image. On any given project, it is important to present the proposal to best effect, to strengthen the performer’s image and their bargaining power: “There’s a secret to everything: it’s all in the presentation” (Caschetto, in Serra 2023). Over the course of a career, an objective eye is vital to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, even changing approach when required and with perfect timing:

My skill consists in assessing the individuals’ qualities and understanding when is the moment to act or to change course. That way, I can extend my client’s career. I have a clear idea. There’s something I always say to my clients: you must not become the person of the moment, because if you do, you’re the person of *that* moment. And that moment, even as you’re enjoying it, has already gone. (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014)

The individual stories of many of the talents that Caschetto has long represented contain some brave decisions—moving into cinema, changing network or media group, breaking out of an ensemble into a solo role—and these also spring from a meticulous, honest analysis of the client’s potential in a given context. Third and finally, it is essential to have a foundation of trust. This is tied in part, of course, to Caschetto’s standing in the Italian media arena, but it is earned in the field as well, in the individual relationship where the talent relies on someone else to look after their interests:

They have to trust me. But it’s up to me to challenge them with something from leftfield. When they ask me a question, all the answers are already out there. Even the right one. So I have to give them an even better answer that they haven’t yet found. Otherwise, what am I there for ...? Many of them are fragile, sensitive, and exposed to the constant judgment of others. They don’t necessarily know what is best for them. And that’s when my role becomes important. (Caschetto, in Comazzi 2008)

Beyond the individual dimension of each given talent, a management agency also thinks in collective terms. They have many clients, so inevitably one may find themselves competing with another for a particular role; an overall vision is therefore required, with the aim of giving the artists continuity without overexposure, while identifying the best available candidates on a case-by-case basis to recommend or send to castings. Trust is crucial here too, as is the ability to anticipate what those on the other side of the fence are likely to want. Thus, it is important to have long-term relationships founded on credibility and symbiosis with directors and casting directors, to maintain contact with production companies and effective links with commissioners at the broadcasters and digital platforms. Mediating the interests of individuals and the team in a varied, highly competitive context, talent agents serve the stakeholders' requirements in a collaborative role, making connections and matching up needs and availability in the best collective interest (Redvall 2015).

What makes Caschetto and some similar agents special is their “package” approach—trying to link up the journeys and destinies of several talents, some emerging, others well-established, to do the best for them all, creating new opportunities and facilitating the interest of the enterprise in the round. It is not about twisting arms, even if it might sometimes seem so: *“I’ll give you that artist, but you must take this one too* is a no–no. Anyway, it would be stupid and counterproductive for someone in my position: you’d become your client’s client. You’d be weak. And you’d tie all your artists’ careers to that of the leading one” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Yet, in a subtler, more sophisticated way, it is about negotiating on several inevitably if indirectly linked fronts and acting unapologetically in different clients’ interests: “I am a relentless negotiator and a faithful cultivator of talent” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Sometimes preferential relations develop with some interlocutors, especially in television, hinging on certain A-list talents, but opening up avenues for other stablemates too; on other occasions, casting “lesser” talents can also open the way for high-profile figures later seeking a different kind of project and positioning.

One final and important piece in the mosaic is the second company that Caschetto set up—IBC Movie, a film production house that operates independently, but often becomes the natural place for some of the agency’s long-established talents to break into cinema. ITC2000 thus handles contracts for films as well (with Luca & Paolo or Sabrina Ferilli, for instance; Serra 2023) or where the big screen is seen as a way to

extend and consolidate a TV career. Significantly, IBC Movie's first film production was *E allora mambo!* (*Let's Mambo!*, Lucio Pellegrini, 1999), Luca & Paolo's debut, also featuring Littizzetto; the subsequent years brought feature-length comedies with Littizzetto, Fabio Volo, Ficarra & Picone, Enrico Bertolino, and the Il Terzo Segreto di Satira collective. In parallel, the company also produced authorial titles like *Paz!* (Renato de Maria, 2002), *Non pensarci* (*Don't Think About It*, Gianni Zanasi, 2007), and *Fiore* (Claudio Giovannesi, 2016), along with Marco Bellocchio's recent films such as *Fai bei sogni* (*Sweet Dreams*, 2014), *Il traditore* (*The Traitor*, 2019) and *Rapito* (*Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara*, 2023), not forgetting *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) and *Lacci* (*The Ties*, Daniele Luchetti, 2020). These are independent lines of work, the latter concerned with cultural legitimacy (without sacrificing commercial success) and the former with serving the talent agency business. Regardless of how it is set up, it is essentially another way to grow the power, influence and overall vision of the agent Beppe Caschetto. This power may not be wielded overtly on the Italian media scene, but it is formidable nonetheless.

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