



# Alberto Barbera: Enhancing Italian Actors and Actresses through Film Festivals

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Over the years, the artistic direction of major festivals has increasingly incorporated aspects of cultural management, communication strategy, event promotion, and marketing, going beyond the sheer selection of films. The assessment of the success of the festival therefore needs to consider both the average quality of the selected films and the balance between the function of artistic exploration and that of being a media event.

Alberto Barbera is one of the longest-serving directors of the Venice Film Festival. He has held the appointment, after the first direction from 1998 to 2001, since 2012, with three four-year terms and one special annual term. If, as Gian Piero Brunetta suggests, we can find a “Barbera style,” it comes from the ability to keep an eye on what’s new in every sector of the film industry, while not neglecting the original splendor of the festival in its golden era (Brunetta 2022, 984).

Within the framework of film festivals, acting concerns both off-screen (red carpet, interviews, construction and definition of the roles of stars and celebrities) and on-screen (more closely related to the qualitative

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evaluation of the competing films) practices and related scrutiny and discussion.

Although Barbera did not explicitly indicate Italian actors and actresses among the priorities of his editorial line, his direction certainly shaped their presence and meaning, given the complex balances on which the Italian selection within the cinematic offer of the Venice Festival rests.

Therefore, the elements enhancing actresses and actors within the festival deserve further evaluation, mainly through observation and interpretation, without solid data. Although awards cannot be considered a direct expression of the artistic vision of the director, it is worth remembering which awards Italian actors won during the period under review (2012–2022).

The Coppa Volpi for Best Actress has been awarded twice to Italian actresses, specifically Alba Rohrwacher for *Hungry Hearts* (Saverio Costanzo, 2014), and Valeria Golino for *Per amor vostro (For Your Sake)*, Giuseppe M. Gaudino, 2015). The Volpi Cup for Best Actor has also been won twice by Italian actors, namely Luca Marinelli for *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) and Pierfrancesco Favino for *Padre nostro (Our Father)*, Claudio Noce, 2020). Additionally, there is the Marcello Mastroianni Award, dedicated to an emerging actor or actress, without further gender distinction, which was won in 2012 by Fabrizio Falco for two films: *È stato il figlio (It Was the Son)*, Daniele Cipri) and *Bella addormentata (Dormant Beauty)*, Marco Bellocchio), and in 2021 by Filippo Scotti for *È stata la mano di Dio (The Hand of God)*, Paolo Sorrentino). In this case, there are two Italian victories in eleven editions. Considering that the Mastroianni Award evokes prospective talent for the future of film production, we can perhaps consider Fabrizio Falco's subsequent career less relevant than might have been hoped. This leads us to ponder how effective the “economy of prestige” (English 2005) can be, even in a cultural industry and star system revolving around it much more than in its Hollywood counterpart (McDonald 2013).

With this necessary premise, let us instead recall how many Italian films have reached the official selection between 2012 and 2022. In this case, I shift to the choice of Alberto Barbera and his selection committee.

Focusing on the official competition, the selected Italian titles (or films by Italian directors) amounted to a total of 40.<sup>1</sup>

Although international films casting Italian actors have also been selected, the percentage is so low as to be negligible for our empirical investigation. Returning to the films in competition, one can see an indisputable presence of some performers who can be associated with the national star system, such as Pierfrancesco Favino, Elio Germano, Valeria Golino, Luigi Lo Cascio, Luca Marinelli, Micaela Ramazzotti, and Alba Rohrwacher, but only the latter and Toni Servillo with more than one title (respectively three and two). The presence of Italian actors are less numerous than expected, possibly due to Alberto Barbera's choice to enhance within the official competition the role of documentaries. That being said, these presences indicate variety within the primacy of the auteur brand.

Let us now focus on the official competition juries appointed by Barbera. In this case, the presence of Italian actresses/actors thins out. Among the juries' members are Carlo Verdone, who is also an established director in Italy, in 2014; Chiara Mastroianni in 2016, although she is renowned for being a French model and actress; and one year later Jasmine Trinca, the only one we can consider for all intents and purposes an explicit representative of the profession. No other Italian actresses and actors acted in the capacity of jury members of the Venice Film Festival under the direction of Alberto Barbera.

Finally, I need to refer to the role of the "festival godmother," an actorly figure who usually engages as a hostess of a live television awards ceremony. This is when Italian celebrities come to the fore, with a few choices also stemming from the world of fashion: Kasia Smutniak (2012), Eva Riccobono (2013), Luisa Ranieri (2014), Elisa Sednaoui (2015), and Sonia Bergamasco (2016). From the mid-2010s onward, the patriarchal stereotype was questioned, and a period of "godfathers" began: Alessandro Borghi (2017) and Michele Riondino (2018), followed by more godmothers: Alessandra Mastronardi (2019), Anna Foglietta (2020), Serena Rossi (2021), and Rocío Muñoz Morales (2022, the first non-Italian to hold this role under Barbera's direction).

<sup>1</sup> Three in 2012, three in 2013, three in 2014, four in 2015, three in 2016, four in 2017, three in 2018, three in 2019, four in 2020, five in 2021, and five in 2022. Thus, the range has always been between three and five national films in competition.

The data we reported, of course, cannot fully measure the impact that the Venice Film Festival had on the Italian star system over the years. In the Italian version of *Call My Agent* (*Call My Agent Italia*, Sky, 2023–present), it is no coincidence that the narrative revolves around the David di Donatello ceremony, with the President of the Academy of the Italian Cinema (Accademia del Cinema Italiano), Piera Detassis, playing herself in a self-ironic role. The screenplay represents a faithful adaptation of the events portrayed in the French version, *Dix pour cent* (2015–present), where the César Awards evening comes to the fore as a crucial part of a complex and solid star system. Other episodes of the French series are set in Cannes during the festival, and the actors' agents find themselves under immense work pressure. For the time being, Venice is not the focus of the Italian adaptation, maybe because the national imaginary hardly identifies the major Italian festival as the best showcase for national actresses and actors.

Over the years, complaints originated in certain sectors of the Italian film industry, focusing on the way in which critics and the media dealt with national cinema during the Venice Film Festival: a lack of patriotism, widespread skepticism, and a risk of hindering the films' promotion, throwing authors and actors into a media grinder that is of little use to the subsequent commercial exploitation of the feature film and supporting the actors' brand.

Over the years, Alberto Barbera's direction thoroughly overhauled the Venice Film Festival's brand by working on the relationship with the US market and producers, acknowledging an artistic status for Hollywood products, and paving the way for including films initially destined to streaming platforms in the official selection. All these choices point to a rivalry with Cannes, given the diametrically opposed choices made by the French festival. Therefore, if Hollywood regains its prominence at the Lido, the off-screen events at the festival are magnified, too, and called for the attention from popular press.

In fact, one can track a major shift during Barbera's tenure: after criticism was raised for awarding the Golden Lion to films considered elitist, even for niche releases,<sup>2</sup> works such as *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2016), *Joker* (Todd Philips, 2018), and *Nomadland* (Chloé

<sup>2</sup> For instance, *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011); *Pietà* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012); *En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron* (*A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*, Roy Andersson, 2014); *Desde allá* (*From Afar*, Lorenzo Vigas, 2015); and

Zhao, 2020) triumphed. These awards testify, possibly, to preventive sensitization of the juries to non-strictly auteur products and non-radical aesthetics. The same goes for the emphasis placed on films chosen to open the festival such as *Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014) or *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016). All the aforementioned works were later released on the US market and, in some cases, won important awards. Therefore, Venice increasingly acted as a frontier outpost for more artistic and ambitious American cinema. Barbera's direction can be credited for such a major achievement. This latter also implied an enhancement, within the Venice Film Festival framework, of prominent US stars, such as Ryan Gosling, Michael Keaton, Frances McDormand, Joaquin Phoenix, and Emma Stone, and their association with Italy. Does this refashioning of the festival, happening under the direction of Alberto Barbera, jeopardize the increasingly fragile Italian star system?

As a matter of fact, notwithstanding the COVID-19 crisis period (see Formenti, Pitassio, and Sampietro 2022), the shift of the Venice Film Festival overlapped with the overall growth of the Italian audiovisual industry on an international scale. Therefore, the cultural and industrial legitimization of Italian cinema happens through the most important Italian film festival, too. In the era of Barbera, indeed, the Venice Film Festival faced unusual circumstances. In these years, a strong transformation of the Italian audiovisual sector happened at all levels of the supply chain, starting from production (which is experiencing a fertile period thanks to tax credits and significant investments from OTT platforms) and distribution—with the change in consumption habits.

Rather than focusing on the official competition, we should perhaps look beyond it to works not always planned for a theatrical release. The most fitting example is the premiere of *L'amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*, 2018–2020), a television series based on the successful four-volume novel by Elena Ferrante. By presenting the first two episodes of Season 1 as a preview at the 2018 edition, Barbera legitimized a product epitomizing the new national production trends and the internationalization of the Italian audiovisual industry.

On the one hand, *My Brilliant Friend* maintains the Venice Film Festival's traditional cultural policy, based on auteurs, thanks to the celebrated Elena Ferrante and Saverio Costanzo, a regular at the Venice Film Festival.

*Ang Babaeng Humayo* (*The Woman Who Left*, Lav Diaz, 2016). All these films performed badly at the box office.

In fact, a director's statement mitigates the scandal of including a TV work in the selection: "The eight episodes, of which the first two are presented in Venice, want to be part of a single narrative, yet the thematic division differentiates them in terms of film form and narrative structure, each time drawing inspiration from the changes in the body and the moods of the protagonists. The image, the staging, and the colours of the series evolve and change as the story progresses" (La Biennale di Venezia, n.d.)—all in all, a sort of poetic affirmation of the cinematic value of the product.

Moreover, *My Brilliant Friend* is relevant as regards acting in the Venice Film Festival, too. Costanzo, in the few lines included in the catalog, also states that "the acting, always in a delicate balance, is in search of a density and fullness, animated each time by the opposing and contradictory currents that animate the characters." The emphasis on acting resonates with the chronicle of the search for the two leading actresses, which the media previously covered, i.e., two girls and two young adults with little (if any) acting experience, as the international financiers also requested, to ensure authenticity. Gaia Girace and Margherita Mazzucco, the two actresses portraying the protagonists (Elena and Lila) between the ages of 16 and 23, apparently benefited from their presence at the festival, projecting them into a career that is currently closer to auteur cinema and prestige series than to popular cinema. In fact, Gaia Girace took part in a short film by Wim Wenders and another nationally oriented series with an international profile (*The Good Mothers*, Amazon Prime Video, 2023), while Margherita Mazzucco was the protagonist of the enigmatic period film *Chiara* (Susanna Nicchiarelli, 2022) in which she portrays St. Chiara d'Assisi.

To sum up, between two—i.e., countering media change by defending previous cultural policies and the status quo or overseeing this shift by empowering the role of film festivals in legitimizing new modes of film and media production—Barbera seems to choose the latter. Accordingly, his direction of the Venice Film Festival over the years consolidated Italian actresses and actors and the weak national star system. Likely, the role of Alberto Barbera in promoting and benefiting from the presence of Italian actresses and actors can be fully grasped in this nuanced action: supporting the growing and shifting national media production and blending national celebrities with up-and-coming talents.

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