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MOVIES

Big Deal on Monicelli Street

COMEDY, MONICELLI STYLE

At the Pacific Film Archive, through March 28

By Kelly Vance

Big Night was one of the most refreshing entertainments of the past year, not just for its appetizing platters of Italian food but because of the bittersweet Italian mood directors Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott created in it. For all its indie-Hollywood low-gloss lustre, *Big Night* looked and felt a lot like a Cinecittá comedy from the '60s, beautiful losers and all.

But now the Pacific Film Archive has booked the real thing, a nine-film mini-retrospective of the work of one of Italy's most significant—and funniest—filmmakers, Mario Monicelli. It comes highly recommended for those who admired *Big Night* and want to see some of the films that inspired it, or indeed for anyone curious about the golden age of Italian film, despite the fact that it's more of a quickie peek at Monicelli (who directed some 45 films and wrote more than twenty for other directors) than a full retrospective. Beginning tonight with *The Organizer* (1963), the series runs through March 28 at the PFA. If nothing else, Monicelli's films will cure any lingering misconception that Italian comedies are subtle.

Big Deal on Madonna Street

Mario Monicelli's films will cure any lingering misconception that Italian comedies are subtle.

Variously described as a populist and a satirist, the 81-year-old writer-director has always exulted in stories of common folks struggling to get by in a cruel world. Crooks, soldiers, factory workers, petty bureaucrats, actors—these are Monicelli's people. Like his contemporaries Federico Fellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Dino Risi, he came away from the Depression, the Mussolini period, and World War II with a profound skepticism about life, but in his case despair is typically tinged with the flavor of *commedia dell' arte*, in which even the most pathetic situation can become ridiculous. Monicelli was once quoted as saying: "All I know about the cinema, and about life, I learned from farce." He would probably be offended if someone accused him of social crusading.

The whimsical, slightly grotesque, cartoon-faced comic actor Totó became one of Monicelli's regulars in the late '40s. Through him, the director made fun of the same human foibles that a De Sica (in *The Bicycle Thief*, for instance) would exploit for tear-jerking sentiment, or a Fellini, for his brand of sidewalk surrealism.

In a Monicelli movie, someone is always quietly starving. We recall the little old man, one of a gang of inept burglars in Monicelli's masterpiece, *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), who, during every scene he's in, is constantly searching for a stray scrap of food. The punchline in that film is that the thieves, unable to break into a pawnshop, let alone crack the safe, settle for a pot of *pasta e ceci* in the apartment next door instead. It's better than nothing. In Monicelli's *The Great War*, World War I soldiers Alberto Sordi and Vittorio Gassman spend most of their time, when they're not cowering in foxholes and grumbling about their officers, trying to steal food from farmyards. Marcello Mastroianni's professorial labor organizer in *The Organizer* is also hungry. In one fetching scene (of many) during that film, Mastroianni's character spies a sandwich left behind after a workers' rally. He approaches it warily, as if it were about to get up and run away, and just as he takes it in his hand, the sandwich's owner reappears in the doorway to ask if anyone has found it. The two men exchange poignant glances, then *il professore* slowly, with an infinite amount of care, folds the sandwich up in its paper wrapper and hands it back to the worker. Monicelli's films are filled to the brim with moments like these, but his humor tends more to the slapstick than the wistful.

The Organizer (the Italian title, *I compagni*—"Comrades"—sounds better) which plays tonight, isn't a comedy at all, unless we count the lusty, brawling antics of its cast of textile workers in Torino, circa 1890, as a broad burlesque. Men, women, and children rise before dawn and put in fourteen-hour days at the mill, and when fatigue inevitably leads to a serious injury, the workers angrily but clumsily try to call a work action to demand better conditions. Mastroianni's bespectacled labor organizer Giuseppe Sinigallia makes his comic entrance on a train, then proceeds to charm each and every one of the local working class (including a prostitute played by Annie Girardot) with his dedication as well as his oratory. Monicelli stocks the film with brutal realistic detail, but it's the poignant grace notes that linger in the mind, such as when Il Africano (as the Northern workers derisively call a Sicilian worker) makes his decision to become a scab. Only rarely shown in this coun-

try, *The Organizer* rates as a must-see for Mastroianni's performance, and for Monicelli's relatively straightforward, documentary-style storytelling.

Big Deal on Madonna Street (I soliti ignoti), Monicelli's biggest international hit, carries its proletarian antics to absurd lengths. It's been remade several times—as a bad movie by Louis Malle and as a failed Broadway musical by Bob Fosse—but only Monicelli's original has the right ingredients, which leads us to believe that it's the director, not the story or characters, that give this classic heist farce its panache. A gang of nincompoops—Mastroianni, Gassman, tough guy Renato Salvatori, a very young Claudia Cardinale, and the elfish Totó—lurch around Rome bragging loudly about the job they're going to pull off. In one scene, Totó conducts a safe-cracking class for the gang on a rooftop amid clothes drying on lines. Every few minutes, one of the kids below yells up that the police are coming—just for a joke—so that when the cops finally do come up to the roof, we're amazed and relieved to see that these clowns of crime have covered up the evidence with billowing bedsheets. Scene for scene, *I soliti ignoti* is probably Monicelli's funniest film. It has an air of danger mixed with oafishness that's unique among the Neo-Realists from which Monicelli emerged. Also strongly recommended on the PFA program is *Cops and Robbers* (*Guardie e ladri*), a 1951 comedy with Totó as a pickpocket stealing from tourists at the Roman Forum, and his run-in with cop Aldo Fabrizi. It features terrific chase scenes that seem to never end.

Actor Alberto Sordi has seemingly played every possible type of character in Italian movies; no wonder he's the best-known comic actor of his generation. The PFA series features two Sordi-Monicelli collaborations: *The Great War* (1959), with Sordi as a cowardly but sympathetic infantryman doing his best to avoid being killed in battle, and one of Sordi's most compelling performances, as noodnik bureaucrat-turned-psychopath Giovanni Vivaldi in *An Average Little Man* (*Un borghese piccolo piccolo*). The film takes a startling twist in the middle that I don't want to reveal, even though the film was produced twenty years ago. It's enough to say that Sordi plays a mild-mannered, self-absorbed minor government official with a long-suffering wife (Shelley Winters, effectively restrained) and a dullard son whom he hopes to promote into the same bootlicking job he has. And then something happens. Monicelli outdoes himself with some of the images in this film. The dandruff-head supervisor and the cemetery warehouse are true sledgehammer satire, even by Monicelli standards. And yet *Un borghese*, with Sordi undergoing a transformation of the soul that we've seen many times in such films as *Falling Down* and the *Death Wish* series, brings an extra dimension to his character the other films skip over in their haste to get to the violence.

Monicelli is explaining to us—not with the gentle heartache of, say, Kurosawa's *Ikiru* but also without the simple bloodletting of a pulp revenge actioner—the nature of a little man's inner anguish. He shows it at first with devastating humor and later with succinct dabs of shock, and the effect is unnerving. Of course, Monicelli maintains the same ironic tone through the entire film, as if this little man, whose meager life comes to pieces in his hands through a completely unremarkable set of coincidences, were a mime on a stage in a provincial town, a fool contrived to make us laugh at the monstrousness of life. Now that's Italian.