

Document Citation

Title	Fellini winds 'Ship;' smooth sail mused on media, arts backdrop to WWI; talking 2 Yank projects
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1983 Apr
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	5, 36
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Fellini, Federico (1920-1993), Rimini, Emilia-Romagna, Italy
Film Subjects	E la nave va (And the ship sails on), Fellini, Federico, 1983

Fellini Winds 'Ship;' Smooth Sail Mused On Media, Arts Backdrop To WWI; Talking 2 Yank Projects

By HANK WERBA

Rome, March 22.

For the last four months Federico Fellini has been on a Mediterranean cruise at Cinecitta Studios. Fellini and the luxury liner "Gloria N" — costars of the \$7,000,000 coproduction — are now back in port this week celebrating the end of shooting on schedule and within budget.

In all fairness, the noted filmmaker is more than a costar. A visit to the biggest set in his production design — the main deck of the "Gloria N" — leaves little doubt that Fellini on his latest project is the star, captain, pilot and Ancient Mariner all rolled into one.

To achieve his period reconstruction of a luxury cruise on the eve of World War I, he has commandeered nine sound stages to dissect the ship into functional sets — underpinned where necessary with a fifteen-foot electro-dynamic machine providing ebb and flow of the Mediterranean in fair weather and foul.

For the past nine months, Fellini has talked about "And The Ship Sails On" without explicitly stating what the picture is about. The reason, according to one of his more observant staffers, is his free-form approach to filmmaking. "The film is full of genres," assistant director Andrea De Carlo told *Variety*, "but the sum of them is close to a tragicomic opera."

De Carlo, a writer with two novels behind him, has been through the entire project in his mission to get the Fellini production between hard covers in fiction form. Youthful composer Gianfranco Plenizio said the score will be divided between multiple excerpts from various operas and his own original music.

"Among the cruise passengers are opera impresarios, orchestra conductors and performing artists — with a twist of ballet added. The mass scenes on deck or in the ship's salon have a familiar lyric re-creation," he said.

Swipes At Mass Media

Within the period pattern, Fellini takes a devastating look at mass communications — equally applicable to the contemporary scene. The pivotal performance among the 120-odd speaking roles is delivered by British stage and screen actor Freddie Jones to underline the film author's concern with the overdose of mass communications, numbing man's mind until the next shock headline is printed. Jones, a heavy-drinking newsman in his mid fifties, becomes the symbol of a medium allied to conscious and unconscious news manipulation.

Inspiration for the film was the unearthing of documentation in a Yugoslav monastery, formulating other reasons than the ones now part of history for the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war. Crowded into the canvas is the filmmaker's recap of cruise nostalgia — with all its variants of comedy, romance, history and adventure on the blue Med. Hopefully, De Carlo said, comedy will dominate.

Filtering through the World War I costumer is the untempered admiration of topbilled thespians, bit performers and the large group of extras for Fellini's captain of the ship role.

Daily Adrenalin Dose

"Fellini provided a daily dose of adrenalin from the first moment on the set," British actress Norma West said. "Two weeks into the film, he handed me a script but warned 'this is just the basis for change.'" She added, "One minute we thought we were acting in a silent film and several minutes later we were surrounded by sound. But it was easier to roll with Fellini than with the roll of the ship. Most of us are now wondering how we can again live with traditional theatre and picture making."

Production designer Dante Ferretti has reproduced the period in studied detail reminiscent of Luchino Visconti films. Sidekick cinematographer, Giuseppe Rotunno, has the task of turning color to black and white or sepia on command, to going with the full spectrum for maximum spotlighting.

Emerging at the head of the cast from the gallery of faces Fellini handpicked for months on end from tests and auditions are Jones, West, Barbara Jefford, Jonathan Cecil, Peter Cellier, Sarah Jane Varley, Pina Bausch and Victor Poletti.

With the end of production this week, Fellini will be under pressure from many sources to make a final print available for the Venice Film Festival late in August. The filmmaker, however, is looking beyond Venice to a long-cherished hope of directing his first film in the U.S. On this subject, Fellini is eloquent. "For me, it's an important challenge ... like being reborn and starting creatively from scratch," he confessed. "All my youth has been conditioned by America — films, books and life. During Fascism, America was the country of dreams, riches, freedom and fantasy — seen in a naive way through our eyes. The admiration remains; also the seduction and hope. America is also where movies were born. It would be a great challenge but it would have to be a film drawn from my myths and approximate impressions of America and its people."

Possibilities for this new adventure are twofold; one, a call from Sherry Lansing — "who understood what I would like to do. Now that she has become an independent producer, perhaps we can resume our dialog." And Dino De Laurentiis, "who faithfully sends me scripts and properties and encourages me to take the leap."

Detective Series

Fellini's vision is not for tomorrow. Any day now he is expected to decide which of two projects he will next tackle. One is "Fellini's Detective," a six-part series RAI-1 has been patiently waiting to put into production. The other is an untitled project neo-producer Aldo Nemni (associate producer on "And The Ship Sails On") is prepared to package — with some or all of the current coproducers — Gaumont, Franco Cristaldi of Vides Intl. and RAI.

Normally, after a long cruise the captain, crew and passengers can't wait to disembark. At Cinecitta, the sentiment was strained with nostalgia and regret. Old hands agree the maestro has completed his smoothest trip to date with "And The Ship Sails On," for Gaumont release in Italy and France and Triumph in the U.S. Pending is a deal with SACIS to give the RAI sales subsid the remaining foreign markets.