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ALL THE MORON'S MEN

(TUTTI GLI UOMINI DEL DEFICIENTE)

(ITALY)

A Medusa Film release (in Italy) of a Palomar production, in association with Medusa Film, of a Gialappa's Band film. Produced by Carlo Degli Esposti. Medusa producer, Antonino Antonucci.

Directed by Paolo Costella. Screenplay, Gialappa's Band, Andrea Salvatore, Enzo Santin, Costella. Camera (Cinecitta color), Fabrizio Luce; editor, Esmeralda Calabria; music, Elio & Le Storie Tese; production designer, Luigi Marchione; art director, Michele Franco; costume designer, Paola Bonucci; sound (Dolby Digital), Amedeo Casati; videogame sequences, Golem Arts, Federico Romanazzo, Lino Grandi; visual effects, Digitalia Grafics, Paola Trisoglio, Stefano Marioni, Luis Russel, Luciano Igino, Carlo Scaduto; assistant directors, Elisabetta Tratteur, Enzo Santin; casting, Lilia Trapani. Reviewed at Fiamma Cinema, Rome, Dec. 13, 1999. Running time: 109 MIN.

With: Claudia Gerini, Paolo Hendel, Marina Massironi, Giovanni Esposito, Gigio Alberti, Fabio De Luigi, Maurizio Crozza, Ugo Dighero, Andrea Brambilla, Arnoldo Foa.

Narrators: Gialappa's Band.

By DAVID ROONEY

The most ambitious, high-concept attempt yet to cross over from Italo TV to film, "All the Moron's Men" is the latest in a string of features from alumni of popular Mediaset alternative comedy show "Never Say Goal." Key talent is the three-man Gialappa's Band, who have worked

up a crafty ruse to continue their signature approach, corralling a Who's Who cast of cutting-edge comedians that should provide a leg up at national wickets. But despite its rambunctious energy, pic is only intermittently funny, making its export potential appear slim.

In their tube work, Gialappa's Band (Carlo Taranto, Giorgio Gherarducci, Marco Santin) never appear on camera, instead supplying wry commentary on sports matches and trash-TV footage. The trio here figure as narrators, which allows them to be part of the story without showing their faces, in a complex skill test to find an heir to a videogame fortune.

The test is concocted by eccentric ex-hippie Leone Stella (Arnoldo Foa), the aging president of Totem Arts. (Pic's original Italian title is a play on "All the President's Men.") Stella's company is a phenomenally successful videogame empire built around his virtual alter ego, Leo Star. Structured as a real-life race that par-

allels the videogame — based on Stella's colorful youth in '60s California — the contest is open only to entrants whose name are variants on Star/Stella's.

These include a schoolteacher (Claudia Gerini), a professional hit man (Gigio Alberti), a priest (Giovanni Esposito), a New Age stripper (Marina Massironi), a deejay (Maurizio Crozza) and an impostor (Fabio De Luigi) planted by a Japanese multinational intent on swallowing up Totem Arts.

Directed to the Tuscan town of La California, they face challenges that include smuggling grass across the Swiss border, spending a night in prison, kissing the first person they encounter on release and, finally, defusing a bomb.

The action is followed not only by Stella from his video console as he negotiates the virtual equivalent of the contestants' adventures, but also over the Web by friends and spectators, and from Totem Arts HQ where Gialappa's Band communicate with the entrants via personal monitors.

First-time feature director Paolo Costella, who also co-scripted, keeps events careening along, and editor Esmeralda Calabria's fast cutting and the plot's race-against-the-clock dynamic both take their cue from "Run Lola Run."

But despite the zippy pace and frenetic narrative, the uneven script too often seems conceived along the lines of sketch-based TV comedy.

Gialappa's Band have acknowledged the comedies of John Landis as their inspiration. But a debt also owed to "Zelig" and "Forrest Gump" in the rapid recap of Leone Stella's youth, showing his brushes with celebrated Beat poets and counterculture gurus, and to the "Austin Powers" pics in the psychedelic art direction and costumes.

By far the biggest laughs come from national superstars Aldo, Giovanni & Giacomo, who appear unbilled as kowtowing henchmen of the Japanese multinational boss. Paolo Hendel also scores as the abandoned husband of Gerini's schoolteacher, tirelessly angling to win her back.

But the casting of around 20 familiar TV comedians seems justified less by the narrative than by marketing concerns, ultimately making the pic feel cluttered. Quirky score is by popular dementia-rockers Elio & Le Storie Tese.