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ROME.

Fellini, Federico

TYPICALLY, the appointment to meet Federico Fellini was for "after 10 P.M." The site was the Safa Studio, on Rome's Palatine Hill, where in picturesque surroundings—the newly refurbished film plant is in the heart of an area rich in treasures of Ancient Rome—the highly acclaimed Italian filmmaker was shooting the first sequences of his new effort, titled "Giulietta degli Spiriti" ("Giulietta of the Spirits"). The picture is a tribute to his wife, Giulietta Masina, who is returning to films as its star after a long-time absence from the screen.

The official word was that "it was too warm to shoot during the day," but many felt this an excuse: there is something in Fellini's chemistry which keeps him essentially a night creature.

The set was a nondescript, somewhat expressionistic waiting room bared to its essentials, with arcs glaring down at it from above. In the spotlight, a white handkerchief tightly knotted around his neck, his dark glasses uselessly but traditionally forked on top of his head, the director paced the length and breadth of the set, pausing only—an amiable paterfamilias—to dispense kisses on each cheek to visitors and arriving cast members alike.

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Many familiar faces of the Fellini clan were present, some to work, many others to watch the maestro and provide the live audience which he relishes, in contrast to so many other filmmakers, an audience against which both he and his wife, prefer to perform and create.

On set, the lights glared down onto Mario Pisu, Miss Masina and a luscious, sparsely clothed young girl squirming, in closeup, on a well-upholstered divan. Fellini considers "Giulietta" his first true color effort, discounting the segment he did for "Bocaccio 70."

There was no yelling for "quiet," only some friendly instructions, sotto voce, from Fellini to his attuned crew.

"Move like a feesh—a lovely, happy feesh," the director whispered in colorful but efficient English to the girl, who responded languidly.

The director then concentrated on a closeup of Miss Masina. Patiently from memory he fed her lines, hints, suggestions of moods to which she was to react. Hidden and handicapped by a pair of dark glasses, Miss Masina overcame the difficult test, responding mimically, superbly, vividly, bringing to life the nuanced reactions he desired.

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Quiet, the picture of serenity, only at times nervously twitching his foot, Fellini mesmerized one and all with his rich, warm, soothing voice. It all seemed so easy. Despite the heat, fatigue and the late hour, there were only three takes before the print was secured, and that extra dimension hopefully achieved.

"He's changed it again!," noted a harried script girl, squatting in a corner, busily recording the evening's activities in her bulging dossier.

And of course he had. The secrecy surrounding the script—especially after the mystery which surrounded the making of "8½"—has again become a major issue, feeding hungry Roman rumor mills.

Fellini is disturbed by it, giving working methods as his honest-to-goodness reason for not disclosing the plot, for sending up smoke-screens (often with false hints) in an effort to cloak the film in mystery. Basically, what he wants to do is de-emphasize the story line and its importance.

"In a way," he'll admit, "I'm ashamed of it, of telling it in words at least. On film, it's another matter, but meanwhile, I'm upset by the reactions to its details; I'm afraid of being inhibited by them. Until it's on the screen, it's a very personal thing, and thus subject to change. No one asks a writer what he's after when he's still writing Chapter One. The author writes on the basis of an outline, I direct on the basis of a script which is in reality an outline, on which I elaborate—or not—on the spur of the moment.

"Matter of fact," he added, "back last November, when I was first ready to shoot—the film was then postponed for production reasons—I had an idea which would probably have resulted in a completely different film, though starting from the same basic thoughts. Today, I have another approach. Tomorrow, who knows?"

The basic mystery about "Giulietta degli Spiriti" therefore prevails. Fellini, misleadingly or not, has called it a blend of One Thousand and One Nights and the everyday, with the introduction of some science-fiction and the eternal dream-versus-reality puzzle.

Others call it a sort of "8½" in reverse, in that it would show a crisis in a woman's life and how she overcomes it ("a sort of poem to martyrdom," someone intriguingly calls it), while "8½" showed the crisis that affected a man.

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Still others hint that it will be—on one level at least—the tale of a highly imaginative woman who suddenly, thanks to an extra-sensory attribute, discovers and is faced with that terrifying everyday problem: betrayal by her husband and all the torment associated with this situation. It would also show, the pundits say, how she overcomes the issue by learning to live with it—or even "above" it, in a newly acquired dimension. In short, she attempts, and apparently succeeds, in escaping from this everyday "Labyrinth"—one of the original titles for the picture.

Banal? Perhaps, but the tale is in the telling. "Perhaps Federico is right in keeping quiet until the film is finished," a friend said here last week. "Can you imagine what people would have thought if he'd tried to describe '8½' while he was shooting it?"

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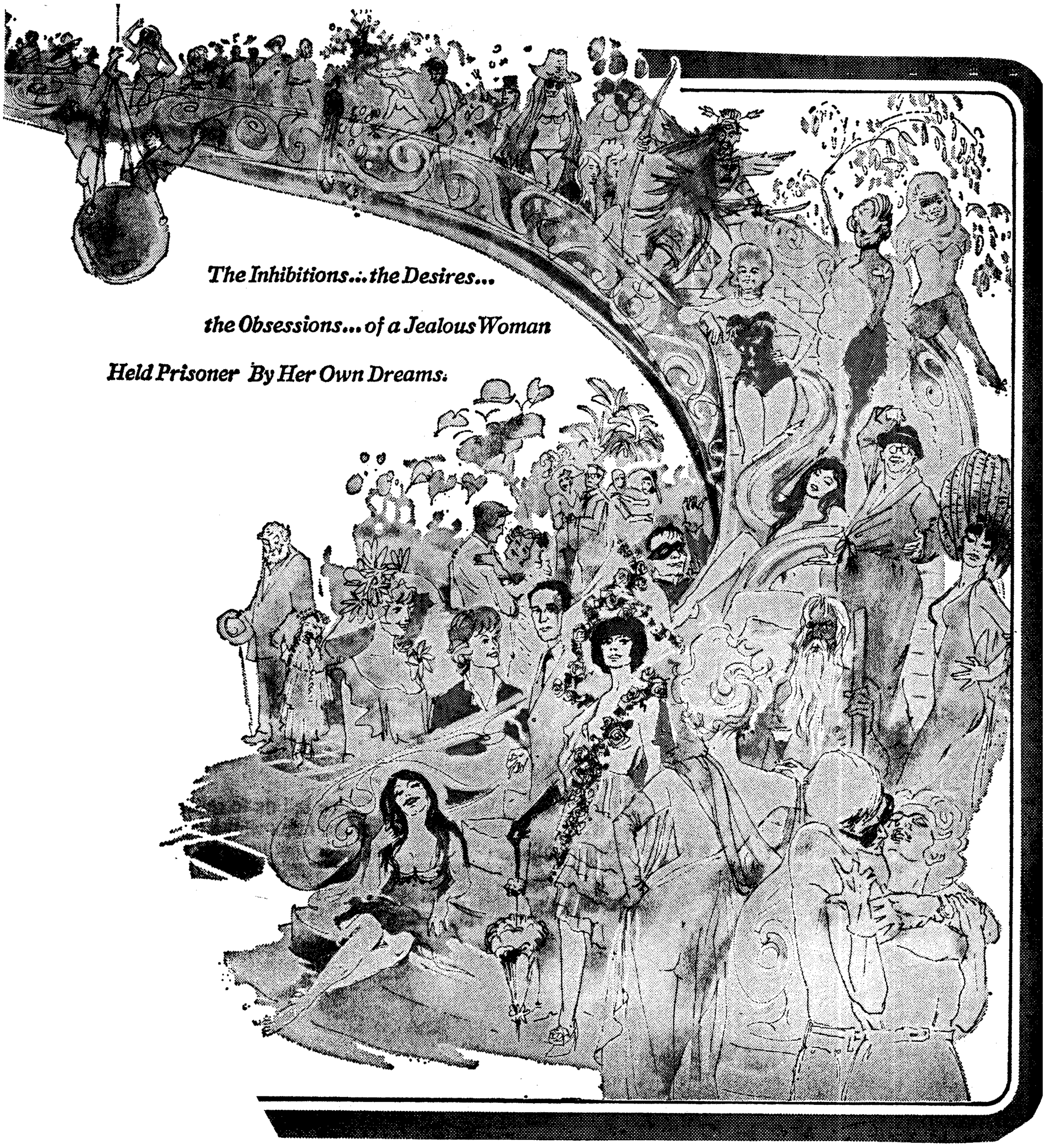

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