

## Red Light Memories: The Dania Creatives Speak

Interviews conducted by Alex Marlow-Mann and Xavier Mendik

### Sergio Martino



The grandson of Gennaro Righelli, director of many classic films including Italy's first sound film (*La canzone dell'amore*, 1930), and brother of producer Luciano Martino, Sergio began his career as an assistant director in the early/mid-1960s. He made the transition to directing with *Mille peccati... nessuna virtù/ Mondo Sex* (1969), an example of the sensational 'mondo' documentaries in vogue at the time. But it was with the 'gialli' (murder-mysteries) produced by his brother and starring Edwige Fenech and George Hilton (beginning with *Lo strano vizio della Signora*

*Wardh/ The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh*, 1970) that he first affirmed his talent. An accomplished director, he produced an average of three films a year throughout the 1970s and 1980s in all genres – 'polizieschi' crime films, spaghetti westerns, sci-fi and adventure, for which he has now achieved an international cult following. But it is perhaps in comedy that he was most at home, contributing classics like *Giovannona Coscialunga disonorata nell'onore/ Giovannona Long-thigh* (1973) that have become almost mythic titles in Italy. Since the mid-1980s he has been as active in

television as in cinema, directing many hugely popular and commercially successful series.

*Q: To what extent did Italian sex cinema of the 1970s fit in with a wider European exploration of the erotic?*

I've just remembered an anecdote which I quite like. Before I directed fiction features, I went to Paris to shoot a documentary, and obviously for us Italians Paris always meant going to the Crazy Horse to see topless women. I was young and so perhaps still had the opportunity of seeing a few women like that anyway, but the first thing the production manager and several of the crew did, rather than going to the hotel to organise the schedule for the next day, was to go to the newsagent to buy *Playboy*, which you couldn't get in Italy!

So if you enter into the psychology of the times, Italy was a place where you simply didn't see certain types of image, and so the first films that got away with showing such things had a real advantage with the public.

*Q: How did this national 'psychology' affect the kinds of popular national cinema you created?*

Well, I couldn't make a film without conceding the distributor at least one scene of

a woman taking a shower or undressing slightly! But the posters also often had an element of vulgarity that wasn't really in the film, and so the critics created this cliché that this was a vulgar cinema. I once wrote to a critic who had called my film *Giovannona Long-thigh* vulgar; but in actual fact there is no vulgarity in that film. It's the same story as *Pretty Woman*, which tells the story of an industrialist who needs to do business with a politician and so he hires a beautiful prostitute to play his wife and pretend to be open to the industrialist's advances. It's the same, and was shot after my film, so I could even ask for a rights payment!

*Q: Similar yes, but reflecting different social times perhaps?*

My film was about an industrialist who has to corrupt a politician and so he asks his assistant to find a streetwalker to play the role of his wife. He doesn't go himself because my industrialist was certainly less handsome than Richard Gere! This prostitute, played wonderfully by Edwige Fenech, is beautiful but because she comes from the country, she can't speak Italian properly. So it's a funny situation where he has to teach her to speak

correctly to be believable to the politician. It's often characterised as a vulgar film, but there is nothing erotic or vulgar about it.

*Q: Perhaps it is the title and poster that create this impression of vulgarity?*

Well, the poster is actually ironic; it's also done in a comic vein. If there are grotesque elements in the film, then it is in the choice of shooting a scene of Edwige Fenech's bust with an enormous wide-angle lens to make it seem enormous. So it isn't eroticism, but it conveys the amazement of the male character played by Pippo Franco who finds himself confronted by this overstated mountain of cream!

*Q: You mentioned earlier the importance of your brother Luciano on the marketing and promotion of Giovanna Long-thigh; why was he so successful in crafting this new cycle of sex comedies?*

I think my brother's intuition to focus on genre films at a time when Italian cinema privileged only certain aspects of the *commedia all'italiana* was important. He managed to turn most of the elements of cinema into genre, because the comedies that he made which were set in the military or schools, with

doctors, and school teachers became a serial production – in Dania's catalogue there are 7 or 8 scholastic films and a many military comedies. In fact he found it very easy to produce such films because his technique was to have an Italian distributor who guaranteed the film a release and partially financed it. And so he had little personal risk apart from going to the bank and liquidating the advances from the distributor. And then you had the foreign sales, and so often we made films that were already profitable before they began. So it was an important historical moment that he was one of the first to recognise.

*Q: Do you see Luciano's influence on more recent trends of Italian genre production?*

Unfortunately my brother died last year during a flight from Malindi to Nairobi in search of somewhere to undergo dialysis, because he had liquid in his lungs due to kidney disease. He always imagined he'd die in Kenya and in the end he managed it. Since he was also a great scriptwriter, perhaps he'd already imagined the end of his life; and despite the sadness of the event, perhaps it is what he would have wanted. Unfortunately in the last phase of his life he didn't really recognise that

his winning formula perhaps needed a few adjustments. Because he had always been a producer of that formula, he still wanted to do something related to that kind of cinema, but times had changed. I see the future of Italian cinema as fairly bleak at the moment, even if

there have been some successes. We recently won the Oscar, but it is the quantity, not the quality of a handful of films, that creates an industry.

### **Michele Massimo Tarantini**



Cousin to both Sergio and Luciano Martino, Michele Massimo became one of the most dependable directors of the Dania stable. After the obligatory apprenticeship as script supervisor and assistant director he debuted with the George Hilton action vehicle *Sette ore di violenza per una soluzione imprevista/ 7 Hours of Violence* (1973), which flopped at the box-office. After returning to assistant director duties for Sergio for a couple of years, he

returned to the director's chair for the sexy comedy *La liceale/ Under-graduate Girls* (1975), which fared much better and launched his directorial career. Although he worked in numerous genres, it is for the sexy comedy that he is best known having directed many entries in Dania's 'professional women' series, including arguably the finest of the cycle, *Taxi Girl* (1977). Since the late 1980s he has divided his time between Italy and Brazil,

becoming a highly successful and much sought after director in South America as well.

*Q: Where do you think the Italian craze for cinematic eroticism emerged from?*

It all started with Pier Paolo Pasolini and *The Decameron*. The first Decameron films we made were in a comic vein but then they gradually evolved into comedies set in modern times – but still with an erotic bent. The Decameron films, which all had an erotic element used the same actors, scriptwriters, mentality and gags, gradually changed into the contemporary comedy, but still using the same caricatures, the same ‘masks’ representing social types like the doctor, the dentist, or whatever – not the ordinary guy-next-door or girl-next-door.

*Q: How do you feel changes in Italian society feed into the structure and success of these films?*

In the 1970s women were beginning to enter the workplace, but the man still had a precise role – he was the head of the family, etc. When women entered the workplace (as in the *Poliziotta* films I made), the jealous husband or fiancé wouldn’t accept this change because it was the woman who was making her own

way. Today if we were to make a film of this type, it would be completely out of place.

Today, women have a clear role; now it’s the men who are confused and don’t know what they are supposed to do as they no longer have a fixed role. So modern comedies – and I wrote one, which will never get made, and which is a slice of social and political life in Italy, seen in a comic light obviously – reflect this new situation in which the woman knows what she has to do, but the man does not and struggles to identify his role.

*Q: This is an interesting statement, do you feel the sympathies of your comedies lie with these mobile heroines, or the confused male characters?*

Well, talking about the female roles in my films, and in particular *Taxi Girl*: at the time, I showed a woman who was just entering into the workplace, and so faced all the prejudices of the male – and particularly Latin male – who didn’t like this idea of women stealing his job. *Taxi Girl* was already different from the first *Poliziotta* film. In the first *Poliziotta*, her fiancé absolutely would not accept her becoming a policewoman, but in *Taxi Girl* you could already begin to see that women were

beginning to make a mark in their roles, so she has a more advanced position than in *La poliziotta* – she is already a woman who works. So it was already more advanced than the first women entering into the workplace.

*Q: How would you respond to claims of these sex comedies being constructed around male voyeurism?*

My technique was this: You can't laugh at yourself, you have to laugh at the idiot on the screen – but actually you're really laughing at yourself. With the keyhole shot, you laugh at the idiot Alvaro Vitali who is watching the woman undressing or having a bath through the keyhole. But actually it is you who is spying and you're laughing at yourself. A naked woman is not erotic. If there is a naked woman on the beach and a woman on the sidewalk whose dress is blown up by the wind, who do you watch? I would argue it is the woman on the sidewalk, not the woman on the

beach. Eroticism is that which you imagine, not what you see.

*Q: What do you feel is the historical significance of the Italian sex comedy?*

They were bawdy films back then, not really sex comedies. So there were already precedents to that genre of popular comedy – in black and white, representing ordinary working class people. They derived from that post-war tradition and so featured realistic characters. Then slowly we began to change these into caricatures. We were making farces really – it would be wrong to call them comedies. Why was that genre so successful? Firstly we were in a social context in which Italy was exploding economically. People wanted to enjoy themselves, not think too deeply. And so these two currents of thought became associated. Commercial cinema always reflects what is going on at the time; it's a kind of social history.

## Alvaro Vitali



Chosen by Fellini for his unusual looks and comic potential, he had small roles in several films, but was particularly memorable as Naso, one of the over-sexed adolescents in *Amarcord* (1973). This comic persona carried over perfectly into the nascent sex comedy and after being spotted in a small role in *La poliziotta* (1974, Steno), he was signed by Luciano Martino. Beginning with *L'insegnante/ The School Teacher* (1975, Nando Cicero), he became one of the most memorable faces of the Dania sex comedies, playing sexually obsessed and frustrated adolescents and under-developed males to great comic effect in numerous films, including most of the 'professional women' series. In 1981 he was cast as the naughty and clumsy child Pierino in

*Pierino contro tutti* (1981, Marino Girolami), and the success of the film (and its many sequels) meant he soon became inextricably identified with the character.

*Q: How did you get involved with Luciano Martino and Dania Films?*

Luciano saw me in a film by Steno, *La poliziotta* with Mariangela Melato, and he recognised that in that little scene the audience in the cinema were laughing like crazy. So he called me while he was preparing a film for Nando Cicero called *The School Teacher*. I did another screen test with that kid [Stefano] Amato, who had made *Malizia*, and Nando said 'You look like Laurel and Hardy, I'll take you both!' From there I began making these

*commedia all'italiana* and films with [Edwige] Fenech.

*Q: So how would you describe Martino as a producer?*

Luciano Martino – smart! Because he gave me a five-year contract with Dania Film and Medusa to make 3-4 films a year. And from there began the *Soldatesse*, *Liceali*, *Professoressa*, *Dotoressa* series and many others.

*Q: They are often called sex comedies, but it always deals with frustrated male desire – why?*

This is why they are sexy. Now if you see a film in TV, you see that they make love with a woman, and everything ends there – the viewer sees them making love, but doesn't get anything out of it. But in the films we made back then, it was worse because you saw, but you didn't see – there was more desire. That's what our cinema was like. Now with erotic films it doesn't mean anything, but back then this fact of seeing but not seeing was stimulating. This is the Italian sex comedy.

*Q: This frustration seemed to be most visually associated with your physical gags in the Italian sex comedies.*

The gag was this – I was always looking at a woman while she was taking a shower, or fixing her stockings in the car, and I tried to spy on this naked woman through the window, or through a keyhole, or with a telescope, and then I would make this expression of desire [makes face]. But I was always surprised by the woman, who would give me a slap, or by the husband or fiancé, who would also hit me. This was the recurrent gag in these films – I never managed to touch or go with this woman that I desired. The moment I got close I'd be discovered, or her fiancé would arrive.

*Q: How did Italian feminists respond the representations of women in these sex films?*

The feminists complained that we just used women, but if you look at it, women also used men in this way. But we never said anything. We made these films not to make fun of women, or to suggest that they should be our slaves. In our films we showed that the woman always triumphed over the man, so in our

films it is always the woman who wins out – we are on the side of the feminists!

*Q: Is this why these films usually have women in traditionally male occupations?*

It was a period in which it was beginning to be suggested that there should be female policemen, and soldiers. So we took this idea, and made these films before [it happened].

And we were right, because later it happened – we started this desire. I'm only upset that women hand out more traffic fines than the men did! But women are just like men, they do the same things – they can be soldiers, policewomen, they fly planes, drive trucks and tractors.

*Q: So the films anticipated reality?*

We anticipated almost everything! I remember that in *A Policewoman in New York* we were the first to include two black characters, one of whom played the newscaster. We made this film and after that in Italy they started to allow black people to work as well. We anticipated everything in these films.

*Q: Talking of A Policewoman in New York makes me think of the homosexual characters, who recur so frequently in these films.*

I played these two roles, Tarallo, and this American who was gay. But, just as there is now equality with women, I think it is now the same for gays. It doesn't matter if you are a woman, or gay, or a man, there is no difference.

*Q: You often played adolescent or infantile characters. Why?*

When you play these roles, clearly an infantile character views women very different from an adult, so I tried to put myself in their shoes. My characters were always trying to see their breasts, just like a 7 or 8 year-old child. But there is no malice there, so I don't think we were trying to mock them. There's only one thing, which in Italy will never change, and which I don't like. When an actor plays a particular type of character in many films, a producer cannot imagine him in any different role, which is something I always wanted – and still want. You see my grey hair? I grew it deliberately in the hope that I would play an adult character. Now I could even play a

killer! But this is Italy – and it’s something I don’t like and I fought against.

### Edwige Fenech



French-born to Maltese and Italian parents, Edwige Fenech got her start in beauty contests before being cast in a number of Italian and German films at the tail end of the 1960s. Her encounter with Luciano Martino proved a turning point in her career, resulting in a multi-film contract and later a long-lasting romantic relationship. The *gialli* she made for Luciano Martino (as producer) and Sergio Martino (as director) – *Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh/ The Strange Vice of Mrs Wardh*, 1970; *Tutti i colori del buio/ All the Colours of the Dark*, 1972; and *Il tuo vizio è una stanza chiusa e solo io ne ho la chiave/ Your Vice Is a*

*Locked Room and Only I have the Key*, 1972 – revealed her considerable acting talents and later assured her cult status internationally. But it was with the sex comedies *Quel gran pezzo dell’Ubalda tutta nuda tutta calda/ Ubalda, All Naked and Warm* (1972) and *Giovannona Coscialunga disonorata nell’onore/ Giovannona Long-thigh* (1974) that she really became a star in Italy and Europe. Not only did these films reveal her extraordinary comic gifts – confirmed in numerous films over the following decade – but they also made her the erotic icon of the decade. In the late-1980s, after additional success on television, she

more-or-less retired from acting to turn her hand to production founding the company Immagine e Cinema. In this guise she produced some of the most successful Italian TV series of the 1990s, such as *Commesse* (1999), as well as acting as the Italian co-producer on big international productions like the Al Pacino vehicle *The Merchant of Venice* (2004, Michael Radford). In 2007 she made a welcome cameo return for cult film fan Eli Roth in *Hostel: Part II*.

*Q: You were the leading star of Dania's films throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. How did you first meet Luciano Martino and become involved with Dania?*

It was a brief meeting when I was shooting a film at the very start of my career – I was 18 or 19 – and the German producer introduced me to Luciano, who was the Italian co-producer. We said hello and that was that. A month later Luciano called me to the office and proposed *giallo*, *The Strange Vice of Mrs Wardh*. The first time we went to dinner together was in Sitges during the shooting of this film and I discovered a really special person – intelligent, passionate about his job. He had this 'sacred focus' that young people have when they want

to achieve something extraordinary in their life. I must admit I was fascinated by this man who was 17 years older than me. I saw him as the classic producer, a man who was already established and who had already made films; but actually he was still young for a producer. The film was a great success for all of us – me, Sergio, Luciano, George Hilton. I was supposed to be in his next film, *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail*, but I became pregnant.

*Q: How did this affect your career? And what was it like being a single mother in Italy in the early Seventies?*

That's not something that a young girl did back then; it wasn't seen positively. Thank God these are taboos that have now been overcome. The fact that I had this child meant a lot to me, although it did involve sacrifices. There was even a lawsuit from someone who was supposed to make a film with me – I think it's the first time someone lost a lawsuit because they became pregnant, but it happened to me. I went back to France because I wasn't well and had a difficult pregnancy. Luciano came to France and saved me from a mild depression, because I had the whole world against me because I chose to have this child.

And he very kindly and generously offered me a contract for three films in a year, and he was ready to write me a cheque if I accepted. For me it was a salvation.

*Q: You subsequently became romantically involved with Luciano Martino. What was it like living and working alongside the same man?*

After the birth we made *All the Colours of the Dark* in London and that's when my love affair with Luciano began. It lasted for a decade and was a wonderful adventure, because we weren't only united by a passionate love but also by a passion for our work. I remember evenings when we waited anxiously outside important cinemas that were showing our films to see how they had fared. We made good films and mediocre films – but we also experimented. This is something very courageous on the part of both the producer and the director. We passed from the *giallo* to the comedy, beginning with *Giovannona Long-thigh* and then then the *Poliziotta* and the *Insegnante* series.

*Q: You mentioned the way in which being a single mother was frowned upon at the time. I*

*wonder if you could say more about your experience of gender roles in these turbulent years, both as a woman and an actress.*

My experience of this period was a funny one. When you have chosen to have a baby on your own in the seventies, I think you are automatically the most feminist of the feminists. Nevertheless people reproached me for making films in which I took showers or appeared nude and accused me of being anti-feminist. I just laughed; it didn't bother me at all. I detest clichés and so, feminist or anti-feminist, I am what I am. I made a particular life choice, taking on the sole responsibility of having a family, and it wasn't an easy one.

And if I chose to undress in the service of the film or the story – as did most of the actresses of the time, I should add – I don't think there was anything extraordinary in that. There are people who tell me I'm a real feminist, and those who tell me I am not because I appeared in nude scenes. I am what I am and that's that.

*Q: What was it like acting in sex comedies like Giovannona Long-thigh?*

I remember that one day the production told me I had to go to be measured. I didn't know what for, but I said, 'ok'. It turns out that they

wanted to fit me with a fake plastic behind because Giovannona couldn't be a woman of normal measurements – she had to be very prosperous both in the front and behind! And so I performed every day with this specially constructed plastic behind – it was terrible. It was winter, but at least my nether-regions were never cold! I also remember wearing a red dress with this feather boa, which was so incredibly kitsch, but it perfectly captured the character of Giovannona.

*Q: You became one of the defining sex symbols in Italy in the Seventies; an entire generation of Italians grew up dreaming about you. How do you feel about that now?*

It's flattering, but it's also funny, because when I meet people they aren't even ashamed to tell me! They say, 'I'm a bit embarrassed but...'

*Q: How do you feel about the way these films were marketed to the public?*

This was one thing that I was angry with Luciano about at the time. We made very nice films but I was very angry about the titles that he gave them, like *Giovannona Coscialunga*,

*disonorata nell'onore* [*Giovannona Longhigh*] and *Quel gran pezzo dell'Ubalda tutta nuda tutta calda* [*Ubalda, All Naked and Warm*]. I felt offended in my femininity to have these heavy titles on my shoulders. But now they have become mythic titles, so he was undoubtedly right.

*Q: In the mid-1980s you more or less abandoned acting and became a very successful TV and television producer. Was it easy for an actress to make this transition?*

My love for production developed quickly because while I was an actress I was also defending the production's interests, because they were those of my partner. I felt engaged in my role and I would have liked to try my hand at producing too, which is not something that men at the time would let an actress do. So I thought, ok, one day I'll do it myself – and so I did. In 1988 I created a production company and started making little documentaries – it wasn't easy. The TV always said 'no' to me, but then a couple of years later I'd see programmes that were very similar to the ideas I'd brought them. Then one day I took Mediaset a treatment and to my surprise they said yes. It was a series called

*Alta società*, written by [Laura] Toscano and [Franco] Numerotta, who were very successful screenwriters. That was the start of my career as a producer. Then I made *Delitti privati* with Sergio [Martino] – again written by Toscano and Marotta – and *Commesse*, which was very successful and was even remade in other countries. But I never had much help; despite these successes people didn't say 'Ah, Fenech, let's make another film together'; there was always someone in front of me and I always had to struggle to find a space.