

The Italian Sitcom Journey: The Struggles and Failures of Italian Commercial Television's Original Productions

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Introduction

Debates on situation comedy naturally begin with the US model. For that is where the genre originated, on radio and then television; that is where it developed a long, rich, multifaceted history; and that is where it has always proved very popular, with large audiences, frequent reruns and a constant presence on digital platforms (Marc 1996; 1997; Staiger; Morreale; Mills 2005; 2009; Tueth; Dalton and Linder; Barra 2020). And yet, although they enjoy worldwide circulation – suitably adapted, dubbed and tailored, altering their value and how they are received (Barra 2012) – the US sitcom remains a genre aimed squarely at American audiences, firmly rooted in a culture, a society and a specific political and media context. Small wonder, then, that media industries and markets in other countries have gradually developed sitcom approaches of their own, sparked by a certain friction between the US model and the specific local factors (in the production models, the broadcasting patterns, the on-screen stars, and the storytelling and comedy styles). Sometimes, as in the UK, a distinctive national genre has emerged (Mills 2005; 2009). In other cases, as in many continental-European markets, the approach has been more haphazard and sporadic, with periods of tentative experimentation, often as a counterpoint to the US series' invasion of the local schedules.

In Italy, the decision to produce an original sitcom dates back to the development of the commercial networks. In a mix of fitful enthusiasm and tactical retreats over several decades, their innovative Americanised approach yielded a handful of memorable titles plus various missteps. Compared to the US model, in terms of its impact on an industrial and a cultural level, the Italian approach to the genre amounts to a failed experiment. The long-proclaimed ambitions inevitably came up against the modest production results and lukewarm audience reception (with precious few exceptions). Yet the Italian-style sitcom has its own traits that for two decades made it more than a slavish imitation of what worked elsewhere, as it became an independent, original genre. Tracing its development can illuminate the links with the US texts, always distant references in the background, and above all the dynamics internal to the national context: the relationship with Italian popular entertainment and television, the appeals to long-standing traditions, and the changes great and small that rippled the surface of the texts.

This article aims to create a detailed reconstruction of the genesis and key developments of a genre that is usually overlooked or (justly) treated as peripheral both in histories of Italian television (Grasso 2019; Menduni; Monteleone; Ortoleva) and in studies of national fiction (Buonanno 2012; Barra and Scaglioni). Its historical approach is as systemic as possible, examining not only the texts but also the production strategies, the distribution policies, the critical reception and the audience verdicts. The focus is on the Italian sitcoms produced and aired by commercial networks – the three free-to-air channels operated by Fininvest, in 1996 reorganized and rebranded as Mediaset: Canale 5, Italia 1 and

Retequattro – from the early experiments to the establishment of a specific model (shot indoors on multiple cameras with a laugh-track) and to when the creative factory effectively closed its doors. Public service broadcaster Rai has never invested properly in this genre: it arrived late, with a handful of minor, ill-starred titles at the end of the 1980s and along the 1990s; and it was unable to achieve any recognition or success, or to leave any trace in the development of writing and production processes. For this reason the few, weak Rai sitcoms are omitted here, as are the alternative forays from the mid-2000s into sketch comedy (a shorter form, often conceived as filler in the schedules) and the comedy with sophisticated language and comic themes offered mostly on pay TV (with channels as Fox Italia and Sky Atlantic). The aim is therefore to outline the full story of how the American model never really took root in Italy's textual and production landscape and thus to spotlight some of the Italian television industry's core traits (for good or ill) in the battle for a popular, mainstream audience.

It begins!

The Italian-style sitcom emerged and evolved almost entirely on commercial television, on the Fininvest (and later Mediaset) networks. It was a response to the need for original productions to flank all the acquired ready-made titles (US sitcoms included) that were flooding the schedules. The genre is also deeply rooted in neo-television (Eco): it was something to sprinkle across schedules that had expanded to cover the whole day and the entire week; it served to punctuate the line-ups of long infotainment programmes and themed afternoons that lasted for hours, especially on Sundays; and it helped to offer viewers fixed, repetitive, regular rendezvous, with a primarily phatic function, where the most important thing was more the point of contact than the story, as one way among others to pass the time. The aim, then, was for a step change, after decades when comedy and the light genres were marginalised in the public-service broadcaster's original fiction output (Buonanno 1990). It was done by attempting to make an Italian version of the genres codified in US television.

A cornerstone of neo-TV with his talk shows, and one of the familiar faces who had moved from the Rai to the private networks, Maurizio Costanzo was the architect of Italy's first sitcom attempt. On 1 January 1985 at 2.30 pm, as part of a New Year special, Canale 5 broadcast the first episode of *Orazio* (1985–87), a sitcom that would become a weekly staple in the newly launched *Buona domenica* (Canale 5, 1985–2008). Devised by Costanzo with Alberto Silvestri, directed by Paolo Pietrangeli, and written by all three, the sitcom ran for three seasons. The decision to put together these vignettes of family life was bound up with the need to offer settings, stories and jokes that were closer to Italian audiences' taste: "You can't always have American series. They're boring now, if you ask me. We can create stories, too, Italian stories that viewers can identify with and see themselves in. We are the first, but we just need to get started. I really hope it will go down well ...," said Costanzo (Nuara). It was an experimental project, and that was a good excuse for how they were feeling their way.

The light-hearted plot follows the everyday fortunes of a photographer, Orazio (played by Costanzo), and his family. The main character is based on and continually reflects the presenter himself, with minor variations on his public image in terms of his appearance (glasses, casual clothes, thick black beard) but little change in his personality. "Orazio is the hidden side of me that my audience identifies with. Sure, he's my alter ego of sorts: when I'm recording in the studio, I feel comfy with a beard and jeans (although I never wear them in real life). I really can't do without the glasses (which aren't real, of course); I feel as short-sighted as Orazio," he said (Giannantonio). He is surrounded by a shifting family nucleus, at the heart of the events that always resolve at episode's happy end, when the father sorts

everything out again. In season one, his wife, Anna Maria, is played by Simona Izzo, Costanzo's then other half in real life. The son, Simone, is Michael Sebasti, a youngster "discovered" in an episode of the *Maurizio Costanzo Show* (Canale 5, 1982–present) about school life. Besides some supporting roles (parents-in-law, neighbours), a recurring presence is the dog, Claretta, "a philosopher and detached, smiling observer of her owner" (Costanzo and Morandi 54), who quietly listens to Orazio's rants. Season two brought major changes. A younger daughter arrived, namely Chiara (Francesca Rinaldi), to multiply the possible storyline combinations, ostensibly returning home after a year studying in the States. Once the relationship with Izzo ended, a new actress (Emanuela Giordano) was cast as the female lead. And the third year brought further changes in the group of characters.

Despite its familiar domestic setting, the sitcom had no pretensions to realism. The acting style was farce-like and theatrical; the plot had elements of the surreal; the comedy was often slapstick (with dashing about, pratfalls and sudden sleepiness); and the jokes were unconnected to the main storyline. The production took its lead from US templates, with the initial 15-minute format stretching to 22 (and a round half hour including commercials) along with the studio settings, the laugh-track added in post-production, the standardised low-cost model, the simple sets (a lounge, two rooms), and the sponsors' involvement in crude product placement. But this embryonic standard did allow some variations, with the director's occasional metalinguistic indulgences (action replays, chroma key, backwards or repeated scenes). After *Orazio*, Costanzo moved on to *Ovidio* (Canale 5, 1989). This time, he played an actor who was opening a wine shop with his failed opera singer wife (Ingrid Schoeller), three daughters (Monica Scattini, Sabina Guzzanti and Claudia Pittelli) and three dachshunds. Its first season was also its last.

Having tested the water, commercial TV decided to take things more seriously from 1988, a year that marked a transition from individual whim to a full corporate strategy. Three fronts would open in a few short months; only one show graduated to a second season, but the production commitment was clear. "Family stories by Umberto Simonetta" read the credit before the signature tune: *I cinque del quinto piano* (Canale 5, 1988; *The Five People at the Fifth Floor*) aired every weekday evening at 6.45, with 95 30-minute episodes from 4 January to 10 May. The show was conceived and scripted by Simonetta, with direction by Guido Stagnaro. On the fifth floor of a Milan condominium, a family of five went about its daily business, with work and school, friendships and romances. The father, Edoardo (Gian Fabio Bosco, aka comedian Gian), a manager at a publisher, and the mother, Gisella (Serena Cantalupi), a clothes shop owner, were a close, loving couple, despite the odd minor tiff. The older son, Gianfilippo (Luca Sandri), was a first-year student at university, a lovable reprobate in a relationship with girlfriend Cinzia conducted exclusively over the telephone. Teenager daughter Stefania (Georgia D'Ambra) and youngest son Simone (Niccolò Della Bona) brought the trials and tribulations of youth to the mix. The programme's heartbeat was its everyday familiarity and accessibility. As Simonetta suggests: "why was it popular? Above all because of its Italianness, with the situations that typical families can relate to, with the problems that they hear about and go through for real every day. [... There are] many touchpoints for audiences to identify with. We didn't try to make them laugh at all costs. Personally, I am prepared to do without a few laughs for thirty minutes of smiles" (Speroni).

Produced by Claudio M. Riccardi, *I cinque del quinto piano* seeks a difficult balance between the sitcom format, long daily series and the Italian light-theatre tradition of which Simonetta is a torchbearer and guardian. The canned laughter was removed after the first few episodes, restricting the laugh-track to the initial gag (to set the tone) and the applause at the end. There are some recurrent catchphrases – the father's "*Ci vuole una gran pazienza!*"

(You need the patience of a saint) and the name “Gianfilippo” yelled by the family members in turn – but the focus is on the pacy dialogue and eclectic comic range.

Young-oriented sitcoms

The private networks’ desire to season the diet of ready-made programmes with some original Italian productions was not confined to the flagship channel, Canale 5, and the broad, mainstream family audience. Alongside the mainstream shows, the Italia 1 channel also needed complementary titles aimed at the young and teen audiences that it had increasingly courted throughout the 1980s. They were a valuable target for advertisers, and Fininvest experimented with new kinds of cheap light entertainment, including some Italian-style sitcoms. The 40 episodes of *Zanzibar* (Italia 1, 1988) aired from September to November in that pivotal year, from Monday to Friday in a late-night slot. Vaguely inspired by *Cheers* (NBC, 1982–93), the story was set in a bar in the Milan suburbs – the Zanzibar – frequented by its crowd of regular and occasional patrons. The core characters were the two brothers who ran the bar, the cheeky, handsome Benny (Cesare Bocci) and the reliable, down-to-earth Gustavo (Gianni Palladino), plus waitress and dogsbody Maria (Angela Finocchiaro), whose attempts to escape from an unfulfilling job and love life through recurrent daydreams were intercut with scenes from various films. The regulars included a militant communist mechanic (Claudio Bisio), an ever-irate tram driver from the south (Silvio Orlando), a guy with a big mouth and no job (Antonio Catania), a Pakistani immigrant living hand to mouth (Gigio Alberti), and the beautiful gym owner who was always at the centre of attention despite already being spoken for (Karina Huff). Each episode begins with a prologue sung or spoken by David Riondino, another habitual barfly. The stories are of people on the fringe of society. The ensemble cast offers an array of comic possibilities, with wordplay, rhyming, high-flown cultural allusions (to poetry, film and literature), political comment, silly gags, physical jokes, and lurid sexual humour. These were years of short-lived, abortive attempts to capture the audience’s imagination for long enough to earn more than one or two seasons. *I Taliani* (Italia 1, 1988–90) was a sketch show in the light-theatre tradition by Neapolitan trio Trettrè (Gino Cogliandro, Edoardo Romano and Mirko Setaro). Each episode examined an aspect of everyday Italian life, from TV magicians to the housing crisis, from diets to the national health disservice. Gino & Michele’s *I vicini di casa* (Italia 1, 1991–2; *Neighbours*) was a more structured show. Two half-brothers shared an apartment in a Milan condominium called Potiomchi (a name with clear cinematic resonances). Teo Bauscia (Teo Teocoli) was a gambler and womaniser from Milan who supports AC; Orlando Bauscia (Silvio Orlando) was the illegitimate son of the same father, a cultured film buff from Naples now looking for work. Living together had its ups and downs, and the repercussions affected the neighbours, Eugenio Tortelli (Gene Gnocchi), a games inventor and fan of British rock music, and Gabriella Golia, playing herself as an unfulfilled Italia 1 TV announcer. The comic conflict played on a clash of north-south stereotypes, elevating them to a surreal, fanciful level with veiled current-affairs references: “sitcoms are a bit like science fiction: they have to construct parallel universes where a life plays out that is different but similar to our own. Different enough to be interesting, similar enough for you to recognise yourself in it [...]. Unlike classic US situation comedy, it has a contemporary twist, a knowing quality, a gentle yet highly effective reference to our everyday political happenings. To our idiosyncrasies, our political tribalism, our cult of ethnicities and dialects” (Placido). In season two, in a suitable American-style prime-time slot, *I vicini di casa* was joined by *Andy e Norman* (Italia 1, 1991), a sequel to the comedy *The Star-Spangled Girl* by Neil Simon (1966), put on in Italian theatres with Gaspare and Zuzzurro (Andrea Brambilla and Nino Formicola) as two admen. But the evening was not a success, and after just a few weeks the two titles were separated

and rescheduled later at night. Some characteristics did begin to emerge, though: the casting of popular TV personalities and stars, often comedians; brand placement; metatextual references; fleeting glances at the camera; and the strong link with theatre performance.

***Casa Vianello* and the first big hit**

Sandra exercises in the lounge, but a mishap leaves her bedridden. Only then does she tell Raimondo that she has invited her friend Iolanda for dinner, and he needs to cook for her. She is in the bedroom with a bell for emergencies. Iolanda, though, has also extended the invitation to her daughter, Anna, hoping that Sandra can persuade her to dump her boyfriend, Lucio, an unreliable actor. On spying the lovely young Anna, Raimondo tries to get her alone to seduce her. But his schemes are thwarted both by Sandra, now disguised as a waitress, and by the arrival of Anna's mother and boyfriend, who intervene just in time to prevent a kiss. Cue mayhem, then cut. Now Raimondo and Sandra are in bed about to fall asleep. "How come we're the only ones nothing ever happens to?," she complains, stamping her feet under the covers amid his eloquent silence. That, in short, is the plot of the first episode ("The dinner invitation") of *Casa Vianello* (Canale 5, 1988–2004; Retequattro, 2005–7), broadcast on Sunday 17 January 1988 at 7.10 pm. Thus began the most significant and longest-lived Italian-style sitcom, a rare hit in this genre and a cultural phenomenon that several generations still remember.

Casa Vianello is the Italian version, decades on, of *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–7), both in how it interweaves the two characters' and actors' public and private lives and in how it crystallises a writing and production model for national situation comedy. Sandra Mondaini's alter ego is the lively, petulant wife brimming with ideas and always looking to change her life, a dippy-sweet woman who spends her days playing cards, gossiping with girlfriends and embarking on various adventures. Raimondo Vianello is the gruff, peevish husband, lean and sometimes harsh and misanthropic, a football follower who craves affairs with beautiful young women but gets put back in his box before the dream ever comes true. The relationship is buffeted by various storms but is never in doubt. The bickering about each other's faults is part of their way of loving; misunderstandings never last; the clashing and shouting at each episode's end peter out in the familiar catchphrase of "*Che barba, che noia, che noia, che barba!*" ("What a drag, what a pain, what a pain, what a drag!") with her stamping feet, as Raimondo reads the sports news. In the finest episodic-sitcom tradition, all is forgotten. As Vianello says, "these are short stories that leave no mark, especially on us [...]. Just think: I've been trying to cheat on my wife for 160 episodes, but I've never managed yet. Sandra has convinced herself that's how it is in real life too, and I end up believing it myself. But I'm joking of course; I'd never betray Sandra" (Caruso). There is nothing vulgar, just subtle allusions. Mondaini is aided and abetted by the nanny (Giorgia Trasselli), also a target of Vianello's barbs. Real life and the story overlap, for when the couple adopt a Filipino boy, he appears sometimes in the sitcom, as well. The series' longevity – 338 episodes over 16 seasons – has allowed it to evolve in many ways, as social sensibilities and television itself changed (and the actors gradually aged). Although the first season is a natural extension of the variety performances for which Mondaini and Vianello were already famous, references to the sitcom genre later became more manifest. The scripts were by Giambattista Avellino, Alberto Consarino, Sandro Continenza and Vianello. After the first early-evening season, the next four aired late at night on Canale 5; from the sixth, it settled into slots on Sunday afternoon and Saturday lunchtime; finally, the fifteenth and sixteenth moved to Retequattro. Meanwhile, the sitcom spawned the spin-offs *Cascina Vianello* (Canale 5, 1996), *I misteri di Cascina Vianello* (Canale 5, 1997–8) and *Crociera Vianello* (Canale 5, 2008), running at 90

minutes and with a crime thriller slant. The programme finally ended in August 2007 amid a certain acrimony.

Over its first few seasons, *Casa Vianello* established a genre inspired by America but firmly rooted in the Italian light-theatre and farce tradition – as the over-the-top acting style shows. Vianello commented, “as both a writer and actor, I find it very hard to portray normal people on screen with as natural an acting style as possible while creating comic situations where we still have to be ourselves. It’s easier and more interesting for me to play eccentrics and caricatures, relying on other acting levers like tics and dialects” (Binarelli). The production machine adapted to the couple’s needs. They recorded two episodes a week: one on Monday and Tuesday, the other on Thursday and Friday. The actors had Wednesdays off, when the editing was done. The optimistic narrative style is reflected in the colourful costumes and sets. The Italian-style sitcom found its most felicitous expression here, one that reflected everyday reality and lent it universal value. Simplification and repetition became strengths, making the two characters memorable, a reassuring presence with a spiteful edge when required. “Together, they were the most faithful portrait of middle-class Italy: *Casa Vianello* is the archetypal condominium open to all, with an ending [...] that brought every domestic drama back to normal” (Berselli).

Establishing a genre

In *Casa Vianello*, the Italian-style sitcom found a prototype and a constant benchmark, with traits that became recognisable, distinctive elements (while also setting the genre apart from US originals). The irrepressible theatrical dimension to the writing and acting, the colourful, artificial, over-the-top staging, the casting of stars, and the allusions and explicit references to the relationship between make-believe and reality became defining requirements of Italian sitcoms for a broad, cross-sectional audience of families, children and the elderly. The formula was codified, and any variations were confined to the odd minor element that was discarded and the surprising flashes of inspiration added to differentiate between the products that alternated with *Casa Vianello* in the same schedule slots on Canale 5.

Casa dolce casa (Canale 5, 1991–5) revolved around Gianfranco D’Angelo, previously responsible for *Drive In* (Italia 1, 1983–8) and early editions of *Striscia la notizia* (Italia 1, 1988; Canale 5, 1989–present), and actress Alida Chelli, the face of several Rai variety shows. Its protagonists, the Bonetti family, comprised a bumbling office worker with artistic pretensions, a restless housewife, and two children. The three seasons offered a profoundly Italian take on the genre, as director Beppe Recchia notes: “I wanted to accentuate the Italianness of this series. Rather than an implausible Italian adaptation of a US situation comedy, where the habits, customs and mentality are a world away from our own, I took pains to make *Casa dolce casa* an Italian-style comedy, about how we are today” (Rota). The acting is very up front; the stories are bold vignettes that are part *avanspettacolo* and part sitcom. Similar traits, albeit with a greater sensitivity in the writing, also underpin *Nonno Felice* (Canale 5, 1993–5). It was based on idea by Umberto Simonetta and Italo Terzoli, who produced the first season before handing the reins to the writing duo of Barbara Cappi and Giorgio Vignali for the other two. Gino Bramieri concluded his long performing career by playing Felice Malinverni, a wise, patient, likeable, loving grandfather ready to solve problems large and small. Living with him in a Milan apartment were his son (Franco Oppini), an absent-minded architect, his wife Ginevra (Paola Onofri), his ten-year-old grandson and a pair of twins who spoke in unison, Eva and Morena. Upset and uproar were swiftly soothed by the grandfather’s down-to-earth wisdom. The lightweight plotlines, based around bringing up children or life as a couple, were offset by Bramieri’s acting. After three

seasons, the story continued in the spin-off *Norma e Felice* (Canale 5, 1995–6), where Bramieri had moved house and was now looked after by a housekeeper (Franca Valeri), amid miscellaneous needling and disagreements. It only lasted one season, the actors' comedic skill being not enough to paper over its narrative weaknesses.

Quei due sopra il varano (Canale 5, 1996–7) was Antonio Ricci's sitcom foray, for a single twenty-episode season. His authorial touch emerged in the surreal, escapist humour based on the odd couple of Enzo Iacchetti, aspiring actor, and Lello Arena, penniless agent, in an apartment over a pet shop from which strange noises emerged. *Due per tre* (Canale 5, 1997–9) was a more classic offering, devised by Vignali and Cappi. It featured Johnny Dorelli and Loretta Goggi, respectively the lawyer, more adept at solving other people's problems than his own, and the wife, an agitated yet resourceful housewife. The family also had three children. The stories were a pretext for the characters to allude to their singing, dancing and acting skills. Throughout the 1990s, the Canale 5 Italian-style sitcom was a vehicle for established Italian entertainers to crown their career. Familiar faces were preferred to fresh, original stories and dialogue. Another example was *Io e la mamma* (Canale 5, 1997–8), where forty-something Gigi (Gerry Scotti) still lived with his mother (Delia Scala), who spoiled him and invaded his privacy. Written by Cappi and Vignali, it took a social phenomenon (the “*mammoni*” – spoilt sons who fail to leave the nest) and turned it into an ensemble farce. The series ran for a single 40-episode season but bred the spin-off *Finalmente soli* (Canale 5, 1999–2005), which marked a transition from the “old guard” of celebrated performers to a new generation of stars, presenters and comedians who had grown up exclusively on commercial television. Gigi got his head together, married Alice (Maria Amelia Monti) and became a dentist; once he left home, the mum is replaced by an even pushier mother-in-law. The show ran for five seasons, following the little incidents and petty jealousies that disturb the peace of a happily married couple.

***Via Zanardi, 33* and a failed revamp**

In the 1990s, the Italian-style sitcom became primarily, but not exclusively, a genre for families, aimed at a broad cross-sectional audience. It would not be until the early 2000s that a new experiment along those lines would emerge, in an avowed dialogue with smash-hit US sitcom *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004). For on 28 January 2001, in prime time, came *Via Zanardi, 33* (Italia 1, 2001), based not on the usual nuclear family but rather in student halls. And instead of the typical location in Milan or Rome, it was set in Bologna, university city par excellence. In a shameless quasi-copy, the sitcom followed the stories of six twenty-something leads – three male and three female students living in two nearby studio flats in halls on the street from which the series took its name, in a clear reference to the comic book character drawn by Andrea Pazienza. Ivan (Elio Germano), a political sciences student and clumsy football fan, was down in the dumps because his girlfriend had left him. Mattia (Enrico Silvestrin) took life as it came, a lying braggart who always got the girl. Aspiring engineer Stefano (Dino Abbrescia) was kind and reliable, and he came out as gay after a few episodes. Fra (Alessandra Bertin), a performing-arts student at DAMS, was shiftless and always looking for shortcuts to pass her exams. Anneke (Antonia Liskova) was an inquisitive, absent-minded Swede who had come to Bologna to study Italian literature. And Bea was the model student, an idealist who in the pilot episode ended up in the shared room by mistake (when she could expect to be entitled to a single) but decided to stay nonetheless.

Written by Andrea Garello and Nicola Alvau, *Via Zanardi, 33* ran for 24 episodes without gaining the expected success, and being moved from prime time to a late-night slot. It was, however, an interesting experiment from an industrial and narrative perspective.

Modelled on *Friends*, the show titles began with “*Si fa presto a dire...*” (It’s easy to say...) followed by a keyword for the episode’s main theme (e.g. betrayal, motherhood, vendetta, pregnancy, retaliation and freedom). Multiple combinations of the characters made it possible to interweave two or three storylines in each instalment. This was a clear step forward from the linearity of many Italian family sitcoms, and the core comedy element blended with the emotion of the horizontal storytelling. The effort to attract young people led to a confident approach to drugs, intergenerational conflict and sexual matters (contraception, homosexuality, pornography, unwanted pregnancies, revenge porn and masturbation), in a language laced with youth slang.

Production-wise, the series was low cost and (aspired to be) high value, involving about ten minutes’ shooting per day and three months’ total working time, with the writing and filming optimised along the lines of the US model. Locations were kept to a minimum: the halls amounted to the three girls’ apartment, the canteen and corridors; the university itself was just a lecture room and a few offices; the city, a stretch of arcade. Plus the familiar haunt of the Garage bar (run by Mattia’s brother), evoking Central Perk in *Friends* but perhaps more along the lines of the *Zanzibar* of ten years earlier. Numerous guest stars made often gratuitous appearances in the sitcom. The theme tune was sung by Lunapop.

Via Zanardi, 33, then, was an ambitious if not entirely successful attempt. It was close enough to *Friends* to seem like a rip-off yet too far away in terms of the writing, and it failed to eschew the Italian-style sitcom’s mores (facile cracks, theatrical delivery, a cast of famous faces). The model had been adapted only in part: “the fundamental misapprehension [...] is that it does not tell the stories of students grappling with romantic and educational problems; rather, it supposes that our students are like the people in *Friends*” (Grasso 2001). The canned laughter of various kinds (of varying volume, with other reactions) is often too much for the rather thin plot lines, with misunderstandings and happy endings based almost entirely on the six main characters and their emotions.

From genre to mannerism

In the early 2000s, Mediaset appointed Fatma Ruffini, long-time head of the important international-formats division, to further develop its Italian-style sitcoms. Once again, the sitcoms were distanced from fiction production and positioned as an entertainment genre. Ruffini threw herself into the task, spending time in the States and recommending further investment. “I accepted. And here I was in Los Angeles [...] to understand how things worked and how long they took. And to launch the process of capturing and developing ideas that had been my *modus operandi* for some time [...]. When I returned, I adapted a Mediaset studio, no. 14, to this new way of working. My intention was to shoot sitcoms in front of a live studio audience, as they do in America. And to try to make the show more spectacular. But I had to give up when the actors refused” (Ruffini 106–7). Once again, the imported model was applied only in part, thus eroding the realistic effect.

Casa Vianello kept going; *Via Zanardi, 33* tried another approach; and the family sitcoms shifted from long-established entertainment stars to the faces of commercial TV. Ruffini forged ahead, bringing the trend to full fruition as the number of production titles mushroomed. The proven model, with dialogue tailored for already famous stars and simple, skeletal storylines, was retained, although the continual repetition gave it a mannered quality. *Don Luca* (Canale 5, 2001–4) featured Luca Laurenti as a young priest in a parish near Milan. After two seasons, the spin-off *Don Luca c’è* (Italia 1, 2008) continued the story as he moved to the city. *Ugo* (Canale 5, 2002–3) brought hosts Marco Columbro and Barbara D’Urso to

the sitcom world: he as an entomologist and documentary-maker, she as his wife, surrounded by friends and family. The acting was over the top; the situations, mere vehicles. *Condominio* (Canale 5, 2004–5), with Laura Freddi as the condominium administrator, pitted the *Grande fratello* (Canale 5, 2000–present; *Big Brother*) contestants against other as condominium residents. *Il mammo* (Canale 5, 2004–6) told the story of a soap diva (Natalia Estrada) and her cartoonist neighbour (Enzo Iacchetti), a single parent of three, who slowly fell in love with her. *Il supermercato* (Canale 5, 2005) turned a shop into a conflict zone between the owner husband (Enrico Bertolino) and the wife who lent a hand (Angela Finocchiaro). On one hand, a dedicated industrial approach was established, with screenwriters, actors and production companies (like Grundy or Aran, later Aran Endemol) working to advance a still recent tradition. On the other, despite their efforts, the results were too formulaic and increasingly out of step with audience expectations, as the sudden axings and schedule shifts from Sunday to the less prestigious Saturday slots made clear.

Some innovations came through in the direct adaptation of US models, with Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* (*La strana coppia*, Italia 1, 2007) reworked by Luca & Paolo, with the forced cohabitation between a hopelessly disorganised sports journalist (Luca Bizzarri) and an obsessively tidy photographer (Paolo Kessisoglu). But above all, alongside the traditional sitcom that proved resistant to reinvention, other approaches did bear fruit: a cross-fertilisation with candid camera and improvisation, both increasingly in light-entertainment vein; sketch comedies with a fixed camera, shorter episodes, and mechanisms often adapted from international formats, with titles like *Camera Café* (Italia 1, 2003–12; Raidue, 2017), *Love Bugs* (Italia 1, 2004–7) and *Così fan tutte* (Italia 1, 2009–12); and even the social dimension, with *Belli dentro* (Canale 5, 2005–6; Italia 1, 2007–12), where a group of prisoners from Milan's San Vittore jail collaborated on the writing to tell the stories of inmates in a male and in a female cell. The classic Italian-style sitcom attempted to refresh itself with outside input but drifted ever further away from what audiences wanted or cared about and eventually petered out. *Medici miei* (Italia 1, 2008), modelled on *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001–8; ABC, 2009–10), cast comedians Enzo Iacchetti and Giobbe Covatta as two doctors. The comedy was weak, was shelved, and a violent clash ensued between Iacchetti and the channel manager. *SMS – Squadra Molto Speciale* (Italia 1, 2010) with Enzo Salvi was an action sitcom featuring chases and shootouts. And finally, *All Stars* (Italia 1, 2010), with a large cast including several generations of comedians centred on Fabio De Luigi, Diego Abatantuono and Ambra Angiolini, was set in the world of five-a-side football. It forwent the laugh track and was influenced by the humour based on embarrassment and discomfort typical of many US comedies. But it failed to find an audience, ending after seven episodes. That year, partly due to the looming economic crisis that struck TV companies too, Mediaset's twenty-year-long Italian sitcom factory closed its doors.

Conclusions

The sitcom story ended, then, in impasse. The experiment of importing US narrative templates and industrial models largely failed, barring a few hits carried by a worthy cast (*Casa Vianello*). For a lack of skill and courage, and for structural reasons linked to a television market with much lesser resources and audiences than its US counterpart, the traditional family sitcom foundered on its approaches and its faults, becoming an easy target for criticism before vanishing from the screen. The innovative, youthful thrust that should have aligned Italian sitcoms with the freshest US models always came to nought.

From a production standpoint, Italian sitcoms fall within a broader attempt to industrialise the audiovisual sector, and television fiction in particular, on a quest for high-

return products at relatively low cost. While that effort has born considerable fruit with soap operas, in the comedy it has been harder to establish continuity in a production machine that has always been based on handcrafting, unable to achieve a US-style standardisation of writing, set design and shooting. A small yet telling clue is the canned laughter, borrowed from the US original but virtually never made by a real studio audience in Italy. Added in postproduction, it changed the flavour altogether and became merely a tiresome frill. The Italian-style comedy is different in narrative terms, too. It is universally considered a natural extension of the entertainment genre, akin to variety, rather than an expressive development of fiction. Hence its lesser prestige and the major imbalance between the importance afforded to the performers and the gags and that given to the storylines, which are often mere vehicles. On one hand, this gives sitcoms a more playful, ever-jocular slant, full of asides, with “the function of a ‘comic interlude’ rather than the intention to steer the narrative structure towards a conclusive consideration” or a moral of some kind (Grignaffini, Bernardelli 38). On the other, it makes the genre star-driven, propelled only by already popular actors and presenters playing themselves rather than a proper role, resulting in a theatrical, unrealistic caricature: “the characters are often portrayed by very popular TV personalities with no acting experience [...], for added appeal and a ratings boost” (Cardini 161). Existing fame and, sometimes, a major career count much more than the actual plot, the narrative coherence, and the structure of the episodes and seasons, which go beyond a mere collection of numbers, sketches and monologues. This does not encourage investment in the production model or help to give it a large enough audience to work with.

During the years of peak endeavour, Italian-style sitcoms followed a twofold path, often courting a generalist mainstream audience, sometimes looking to younger viewers. It found a central, quite stable place in the schedules. It focused on building simple, functional narrative dynamics around well-known faces. And it produced some enduring hits. But it never managed to shake off the “second-rate” tag, the impression of being a minor form that could ultimately be sacrificed, the endless quest for continually rehashed promotional labels destined to last only as long as a single product, all to avoid having to openly nail its colours to the sitcom mast. These core elements formed the basis, over time, for hybrids and revivals, copies and new interpretations, format adaptations and fresh journeys. For good or ill, the Italian approach to the genre slowly blurred at the edges. Whereas in the United States sitcoms are a crucial genre that does not shy from a dialogue with the wider cultural, social and political scene, in Italy it never really caught on. It became bogged down in a continual repetition of variety and cabaret tropes, unable to find a way to mature – with only few exceptions mainly driven by already accomplished writers and performers. Italy’s problem with serial comedy, then, may be an inability to use it to understand and interpret what happens in the world outside, a constant undervaluing of a genre considered inferior and unimportant, unworthy of a careful, attentive approach, resulting in a detachment from the reality and truthfulness that should underlie any comic story.

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