Dir–Actors Cut

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But when States are acquired in a country differing in language, usages, and laws, difficulties multiply, and great good fortune, as well as address, is needed to overcome them. One of the best and most efficient methods for dealing with such a State is for the Prince who acquired it to go and live there in person since this will tend to make his tenure more secure and lasting.... For when you are on the spot, disorders are detected in the beginning and remedies can be readily applied; but when you are at a distance, they are not heard of until they have gathered strength and the case is past cure.... The people are pleased to have a ready recourse to their Prince, and have all the more reason if they are well disposed, to love him, if disaffected, to fear him. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, III)¹

“Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious by the sun of York”
(Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act I, Scene 1)

Over the last fifteen years, an increasing number of Italian American actors have chosen to become directors, and not only directors, and not necessarily directing themselves. This recurring phenomenon cannot be easily absorbed into the extensive and varied phenomenon of the actor-director in the broader North American film industry. There are not only two interdependent requirements (an actor on one side, and a director on the other), but in reality three (that is, to be Italian American). Putting aside the Italian American component, the discussion of an actor who becomes a director implies a concomitance and an unpredictable hierarchy of roles. If the actor’s function is tied to the director’s, then here is one example of a reciprocal bond. This reciprocity, however, is not always necessary. But if one takes apparently analogous examples of actors who are never, or only occasionally, the main characters in films that they have directed, then the actors enter into the category of the “director actors”

(this time without the hyphen): that is to say, the two professions do not automatically go hand in hand. Inverting the lexical polarity, in the category of “actor directors,” it is worth noting the commutative characteristics: the difference between a “director actor” and an “actor director,” without the unifying dash, becomes minimal and inconsequential. Quantitatively, this can be gathered by comparing the number of films directed with respect to those enacted, or vice versa. Qualitatively, it attains the specific weight of one against the other. Finally, if one discusses the “actor-director,” one must intend to mean the actor who also directs one of his own films, following a necessary contingent or a convenience due to the actor’s status. The act of directing becomes corollary to the actor.

Of interest here are the Italian American “director-actors.” “Dir-Actors” consists of two terms in which the conceptual assimilation and assonance become reinforced and nevertheless restrained by the hyphen. The same hyphen would be used for the word “Italian American.” In writing “Italian-American,” the dash would unify and separate “Italian” pride (poetic or cumbersome symbol of a mythic-ritualistic past) and the acquired “American” component (expression of a mundane present). They are directors who consider being an actor—well-known actors, often stars—a “pre-existing condition” of sorts that is implicit, often undeniable, but ultimately not a determining factor in the production of the film. The determining factors are, for obvious reasons, the ethnic and sociological aspects of Italian Americans. In practice, they would be called “actors director-actors,” since they usually oscillate between being “actors” on someone else’s set or stage and being cathartically self-referential as “director-actors.” The term “Dir-Actors,” rather than being equivalent to “director-actors,” is catchier, but above all, it results in being appropriate to the geographic-linguistic area to which they are held accountable. By and large, they are, or consider themselves to be, “total filmmakers.”

Here we discuss Sylvester Stallone, Danny DeVito, Stanley Tucci, John Turturro, Robert De Niro, Steve Buscemi, Al Pacino, and Vincent Gallo. Stallone’s Paradise Alley (1978), Rocky II (1979), Rocky III (1982), Staying Alive (1983), Rocky IV (1985) and Rocky Balboa (2007); DeVito’s Hoffa (1992); Turturro’s Mac (1992), Illuminata (1998), and Romance & Cigarettes (2007); De Niro’s A Bronx Tale (1993); Tucci’s Big Night (1993); Buscemi’s Trees Lounge (1996); Pacino’s Looking for Richard

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2 Jerry Lewis used the definition of “Dir-Actor” to title his autobiography: Jerry Lewis, The Total Filmmaker (New York: Random House, 1971).
(1996); and Gallo’s *Buffalo ’66* (1998) all possess another fundamental requirement. There is a fourth requirement, other than being an actor, director, and Italian American, which are requirements 1, 2, and 3. Rarely prolific, and for the most part independent (with the sole exceptions of Stallone and DeVito, who are the forerunners), they have made films (some but not necessarily all, as with DeVito, Tucci, Buscemi, and Gallo) concentrating explicitly on the relationship between themselves, the actors/characters, and their own or adoptive communities of origin on the margins of American society (Stallone, Tucci, Turturro, De Niro, and Buscemi). Or, they have made films in which the characters they play fall at least partially into this frame of reference (DeVito, Gallo, and Pacino). There are many other Italian Americans who could have been included in this list, such as Frank Sinatra and Ben Gazzara, followed (in chronological order) by Gary Sinise, Talia Shire, and Chazz Palminteri. (Palminteri would fall into the first category, not as a director, but as the actor playing the lead role and the author of the original play and screenwriter of *A Bronx Tale*). Specifically, they have made films that are not recognized under a strictly ethnic, and therefore technical, profile. Since the terms “ethnic” and “technical,” in addition to nearly being anagrams, end up becoming intrinsic in this respect, the films of Sinatra, Gazzara, Sinise, Shire, and Palminteri, even though they belong to different time periods, likewise they do not fall into the frame of reference of this discussion. They, therefore, do not possess the fourth fundamental requirement. We will not mention them, as we will neither examine films by these same “Dir-Actors” that are not in an Italian American setting.

For the first category of Italian American “Dir-Actors,” being behind the film camera reveals cultural features as well as salient and unmistakable themes and styles. Directing the film besides writing the screenplay, if necessary (some also write the screenplays for their own films, others do not), has a precise value and meaning for an actor who identifies the historic-genealogical Italian heritage of his predecessors, relatives, friends, or casual acquaintances as his own. However remote, this represents an ideal bond of identification and expression. It also represents a value and one or more meanings, and refers nevertheless to a strategy for

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3 For the sake of completeness, we mention that two episodes of the television series *Columbo* were directed by Gazzara (*A Friend in Deed*, 1974; *Troubled Waters*, 1975), and have as an Italian American main character the famous lieutenant played by Peter Falk (who, contrary to popular belief, was not Italian American). As if it were not enough, the first of the two episodes has a plot that traces the set-up in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1950), exactly like DeVito’s *Throw Momma from the Train*. 
existence rather than simple survival in that it bears on the paradigm of Italian American film. With this, it is understood to mean films about “Little Italy,” the anthropological-relational space of Italian immigrants (and their descendants), who arrived in their adopted country en masse beginning at the end of the 19th century. These newcomers not only arrived much later and were further behind other immigrant groups, but also arrived after the time when the United States was transforming itself from an agricultural country into an industrial giant. From the start, the Italian American community, comprised mostly of Southern Italians, found assimilation to be difficult, as it was crushed by the vice of poverty and cultural distance. Fundamentally, they were farmers by tradition who were forced to reinvent themselves as unskilled laborers especially in the building trade (one immediately thinks of *Mac*) and in industrial factories, which were concentrated in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Pittsburgh.

Nevertheless, the similarities and differences will be carefully considered, beginning with the very first “Dir-Actor.” Stallone’s experience, which he officially debuts in directing *Paradise Alley* (1978), coincides with that of his followers, beginning with DeVito, and yet it is different in many respects. DeVito, in fact, crosses over into directing with *Throw Momma from the Train* (1987) nearly ten years later, without delving into the Italian American and matriarchal matrix of his character Owen’s homicidal intolerance. In his following film, *The War of the Roses* (1989), he creates another important Italian American role for himself as the lawyer, Gavin D’Amato, but the role does not particularly characterize him in an ethnic sense. It is necessary to wait for *Hoffa*, for DeVito to “out” himself as an Italian American. It can be said that as an Italian American “Dir-Actor,” despite the age difference, he is considered more a contemporary of Turturro; they both directed their Italian American films in 1992, which was the third for DeVito and the first for Turturro.

Stallone’s film therefore remains an isolated case on the level of perspective. It operates within the ideological context of the Hollywood film industry during the second half of the 1970s, in which the losers and the poor are giving way to the winners in the successive decade. The first draft of the script for *Rocky* (1976), in fact, presented a much darker character that was psychically defeated. It was a sign of the times that were

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4 On this topic we limit ourselves to pointing out William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943).
changing nonetheless. In this way it was the real author—rather than the expert John G. Avildsen—the then-unknown Stallone (as both the scriptwriter and the unexpected main character), who corrected the shot that transformed its anti-hero into a partial hero, powerful in his own “glory in the defeat.” In the first film in the series, Rocky, heir to Rocky Marciano and Luchino Visconti’s melodramatic main character in *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), loses the world heavyweight championship fight to Apollo Creed (the African-American, Carl Weathers, who does not particularly represent his own community, equally disadvantaged, in that he has a bright career along the same lines as Mohammed Ali’s). But despite his disfigured face and eyes, the anonymous “Italian Stallion,” as he later became known, is proud of the miraculous opportunity to be someone in the ring for fifteen endless rounds. Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame have become boxing rounds, while in the following decade Turturro relies on the same number of houses built and sold, or of successful performances of his own play (*Mac* 1992 and *Illuminata* 1998), and Tucci on the endless series of courses for an unforgettable dinner, but one that is destined to come to an unfavorable end (*Big Night* 1986). If Tucci had debuted as a “Dir-Actor” in Stallone’s time, the two brothers who were cooks and restaurateurs would have had a second chance. Instead in the closing still shot of *Rocky*, it is well understood how the misfits of the Seventies seem to be a distant memory because this young, down-and-out, “spaghetti-eater” from Philadelphia already seems headed toward (relative) success, leveling the field for many films of various genres during those years, such as *Star Wars* by George Lucas (1977) and *Saturday Night Fever* by John Badham (1978). In the middle of the Reagan years, Stallone himself releases a predictably symptomatic sequel, *Staying Alive*, where Tony Manero (John Travolta) becomes Rocky Balboa’s clone, where the choreographer resembles a coach, and the Broadway stage resembles the triumphal boxing ring in the city of brotherly love. In *Staying Alive*, the only film that he also produced, “Dir-Actor” Stallone decided to offer this great opportunity to “his” Manero, and so he created for himself an interesting cameo appearance. Stallone plays a street hoodlum, who the tenacious dancer mistakenly bumps into while he ambitiously focuses on the show symbolically entitled “Devil’s Alley,” the illusionary opposite of *Paradise Alley*. It concerns a hand-off delivery that

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5 This phrase was coined by John Ford and Peter Bogdanovich. See, Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Movie Magazine Limited, 1967).
occurs through the symbol of continuity, although the original Paradise Alley had already presented the same scheme. So did the first Rocky, albeit on a more bitter note with a redeeming victory, that on the positive side only suggested the reunion of three Italian American brothers in the rundown New York neighborhood of Hell’s Kitchen (precisely the polar opposites of Mac and Big Night). During those times, Cosmo, played by Stallone, was neither a fighter nor a mighty athlete, but rather the shortest brother. He did not have, by his own admission, the stature to fight in the ring. In four years’ time with Staying Alive, the situation in Stallone’s second directing attempt repeats itself, or more precisely, in the first of five sequels of Rocky, with Rocky II. The amateur, yet driven boxer from Philadelphia’s Italian American underworld, is offered the chance to become a real winner and no longer simply a moral victor in the culture clash between those who are marginalized and those who are winners—between Italians and Americans. (We would also add between bit players and Hollywood stars.) It is 1979, but as it is easy to predict, the film “arrives” in the following decade and celebrates the limelight it had foreshadowed. Then however, having reached the top, Stallone must stay in the game and reaffirm this winning typology by increasing his investment in Rocky III. In Rocky IV, he transforms the boxer from humble Italian origins into a symbol of American political foreign policy still reflected along the lines of the Cold War versus the other empire, the Soviet Union. These are the rules for success, those of “the show must go on” (also articulated in Staying Alive), filmed during the period between Rocky III and Rocky IV. These are the rules that Stallone consistently embraces with Italian American enthusiasm and self-confidence that battles for survival, even contradicting himself, but firmly resolved to never give up. The spectrum is that of impending poverty, marginalization, and anonymity that has already been experienced. He has transformed himself from an “Italian-American” into an “Italian American” (the die is cast, and the hyphen is cast off). Or, he even becomes an “American” symbol: a hawk. He is the same person who, more or less at the same time, both acts in and co-writes the scripts for First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1983), Rambo: First Blood Part II (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), and Rambo III (Peter MacDonald, 1988). The wars, to be fought in a “galaxy far, far away” return in arrogance to examine this planet, and to be propagandized as fair, even those that are wrong, blundered, or distorted during the Sixties and Seventies. Stallone’s parable does not stop. In this
way it arrives on the threshold of the nineties. But the enthusiasm of the
previous decade is no more. *Rocky V* (1990) is directed from the start by
Avildsen in order to recover the austere spirit of the series’ prototype.
Stallone, however, reserves the sixth round, *Rocky Balboa*, for himself.
(The numeration has disappeared; perhaps the saga and the hero have
reached the end of the line). Why yet another *Rocky*? And why go back to
direct it? Perhaps there were no seasoned directors who would agree to it.
However, these films should be examined; they are for Stallone truly
labored and sweaty “rounds.” The film titles flash like cards indicating
the rounds of a boxing match. For as tired and as tested as the first Italian
American “Dir-Actor” is, he continues relentlessly onward, pervading the
character and the setting that he created.

This is the precise time period that ushers in the second generation of
“Dir-Actors.” A wall seems to separate them from Stallone, except for one
of his films, which concerns them all. *Paradise Alley* is set in 1946, but the
action is predated, beginning with the Sixties and Seventies, but also with
Shakespearean times, the early twentieth century, and the Fifties. This
shows that the trend of storytelling through the use of flashbacks was
present from the very beginning and that Stallone confidently relied on it.
It reflects on a world perceived as distant in time, memory, and con-
sciousness. Being, living, or even only considering oneself to be Italian
within an American framework that confuses, marginalizes, and validates,
remains with the spirit; it is no longer a real, present condition but rather
an ineffective emotional state. From Stallone to Gallo, following the chro-
nological order of their directorial debuts, they are all assimilated Ameri-
cans or Italian Americans, that is to say, no longer “Italian-Americans.”
The geographical and cultural distance can only surface in the form of
internal malaise. Cinematically, this becomes a look back, a nostalgic and
melancholy retrospective. Nor should we forget that 1946 is also the year
when Stallone was born. Having reached the trinity of screenwriter, actor,
and director with *Paradise Alley*, he declares between the lines of “being
born,” and of completely realizing himself both creatively and profes-
sionally. The author’s personal details are allusively present in his style,
and this most likely holds true for DeVito, Turturro, De Niro, and Tucci
as well. If there are no misunderstandings about Stallone, imagine if there
are any about Gallo, who titled his debut film with the place and birth
year of his main character and alter ego, Billy Brown: *Buffalo ‘66*. It is
another unequivocal way for Gallo to say “I,” since he was born in Buffa-
lo, New York, albeit five years earlier. Perhaps his film does not directly deal with Italian Americans, but Billy’s tragic and oppressive family ties and the ritual of meals consumed with his parents are based on an Italian food act as a link with several other films such as *A Bronx Tale*, *Mac*, and *Big Night*. Moreover, who are Billy’s parents? His father is played by Ben Gazzara who sings like Sinatra, and his mother is Angelica Huston who is reminiscent of the Italian character in *Prizzi’s Honor* (John Huston, 1985).

Even DeVito is an example unto himself. Although chronologically he fits into the group of “Dir-Actors” from the nineties, from the point of view of his work, he is inside the system and not outside, just as Stallone. Yet from the start Stallone, as does Turturro, De Niro, Tucci, Buscemi, Pacino, and Gallo focuses on Italian Americans, while DeVito waits for the appropriate time to do so. He camouflages himself within the folds of the biography of the controversial union organizer, who is in collusion with the mafia and pursued by Robert Kennedy. Why another film about Jimmy Hoffa? The prospect of another movie, more edifying than ambiguous, recalls *F.I.S.T.* (1978) directed by Norman Jewison but written by and starring Stallone. (Homage was paid to Stallone by selecting Armand Assante for the role of mafia boss D’Alessandro; Assante had already played the main character in *Paradise Alley*.) Compared to Stallone, DeVito adds a deep level of cynicism that leads him to choose Hoffa over Kennedy. But Hoffa, who is played by Jack Nicholson, and who is ever-mindful of the mafia killer in *Prizzi’s Honor*, is so favorable to the “Dir-Actor” to the point that DeVito invents for himself the character of Bobby Charo, ᵆ Hoffa’s right hand man. The film, therefore, is conceived in a thoroughly Machiavellian point of view. The imaginary character played by DeVito tells the story through flashbacks, and it offers the mafia and therefore all Italian American criminals (wherein lies DeVito’s embarrassment of his origins), the last move. It is up to the rest of them to continue the dirty game. But first, Charo reconciles being Italian American, and allusively, even through intermediaries, he is an author. The following is taken from an exchange of jokes with Hoffa, to whom Charo is a sort of double, and to whom he has sworn loyalty:⁷

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⁶ Translator’s Note: The character referred to in Mancino’s text is named Charo. However, further research reveals that the character’s name is in fact spelled Ciaro.

HOFFA: You fuckin’ wops. You people. You cocksucker, why you wanna be born into a race like that?
CHARO: Bad judgment.
HOFFA: Fuckin’ A. Well told. You go sit, look out the roadhouse, huh? The booth the meeting’s supposed to be. Call the motherfucker. Tell me. Thing is, I’m not sitting here all day.
CHARO: I’ll call him.
HOFFA: Leave me the piece.
CHARO: I’m gonna go naked?
HOFFA: You got the one at the roadhouse. What are you worried about? Get outta here. Do something for a living.

Hoffa’s apparent contempt, as a product of DeVito’s ruthlessly realistic direction and his fascination with those who are pure, brilliant, and unlucky as much as repulsive, superhuman, or subhuman characters, is mitigated by Charo’s excessive desire to please, and from his complicity as a subordinate character reflected through DeVito the actor. The following exchange supports this:

HOFFA: Long time. You’ve been with me a long time, Bobby.
CHARO: What the fuck else am I gonna do?

What happened to the new generation of Italian American “Dir-Actors?” In the nineties, without sacrificing their eccentricity and mass appeal, they return to reflect on the defeats while freeing themselves from Stallone’s relativism. From DeVito onwards it is no longer time for heroes. The obsessive and meticulous reconstruction of ethnic belonging, as much as it is supposed or accepted as true, counts more than the eventual redemption. What matters is the eloquence of the characters who failed, those who are idlers, neurotic, power-hungry, hyperactive, unfair, and unfaithful. Their endless conversations continue sideways nonstop, without a head or tail, but rich in dialect and cultural details. These details are not even standard Italian but regional, Southern Italian: Sicilians constitute the majority, but there are also the Abruzzesi and Neapolitans in Big Night. Moreover, the culinary, musical, theatrical, and cinematic repertoires are what matter. But above all, what counts is the idea of total control that “Dir-Actors,” heirs to the Commedia dell’Arte and the romantic and nineteenth-century ideals of directing, exert over their (almost always) small films. Therefore what matters is the art of staging, which is conservative in an anthropological sense, and at times conserva-
tive in an ideological sense. Families, crews, casts, permanent theater companies or traveling theater troupes, patrons, clans, teams of professionals, groups of workers and staff members composed of friends and relatives (the Stallones and Turturros) are autocratic models of aggregation, collaboration, and organization. They consider what will or will not work, act, or perform inside the well-defined and self-managed perimeters, whether they are boxing rings, stages, domestic interiors, construction sites, Catholic churches, kitchens, public spaces, buses, ice cream trucks, or prisons. Through film, it is possible to define these areas and halt the centrifugal pull, power struggles, competition, team rivalries, marital crises, relationship issues, and everything that inevitably produces fission in the community of reference.

In *Looking for Richard*, Pacino, smiling, menacing, exuberant, governs the actors who he gathers around him and his disturbing character, giving voice to all—the critic, scholar, and historian as well as the interpreters who must decipher, re-read, and take ownership of the original Shakespearean play. The objective is to return the most performed Shakespearean tragedy to ordinary people: Pacino is an Italian American and, therefore, he cannot exclude himself being interviewed, among the others, as a member of his community. It is necessary to examine the participatory essence of written text with respect to actors, as well as its theatrical and contemporary dimensions, circumscribed by the physical space of The Globe Theatre. In the process, the American actors may very well overcome their inferiority complex with respect to the British actors (disparities which lead to those between majority and minority, and also between an American macro society and an Italian American micro society). Fundamentally, the Duke of Gloucester, future King Richard III, and the Duke of Buckingham behave like gangsters. Like a reigning king, the “Dir-Actor” in turn must be able to hold everyone together, although fate reserves death for them both (a recurring theme of the films discussed here). He must be able to severely control everything and everyone. He must command the subjects-actors and dominate them. The “Dir-Actor” must be a demiurge; the actor in his turn must take back the stage, capable as no one else is to inhabit this vital and performative space, to understand his audience, to painstakingly prevent the dissolution of the group’s identity, claiming the theme of fidelity—both a cross and a de-

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8 References to Shakespeare’s *Richard III* are found in both *Throw Momma from the Train* and *The War of the Roses* by DeVito.
light—between the couple, marriage, family, even in the mafia sense. Following this reasoning, it means building houses in a certain way (Mac), ensuring that an African-American girlfriend knows how to make tomato sauce (A Bronx Tale), and in general rigorously and extensively cooking Italian cuisine (Big Night)—and staying as far away as possible from compromising with the adoptive country becomes an absolute principle. Possible failure is part of the danger in undertaking this ancient and noble profession. Not having a job, remaining alone without a companion and without children is the unfortunate fate of the immature main character Tommy Basilio in Trees Lounge, on which Buscemi (1996) personally chose to work. This failure from Long Island is the quintessential indolent Italian American who has stopped believing in a bright future, who does not know how to have an emotional attachment and can neither procreate nor pass down the secrets of his trade or wisdom gained during his dull existence; his existence as a drifting loafer offers no escape. Tommy allows himself to descend into being a regular customer at a bar, who is neither witty nor tragic, and where the only thing possible is to age slowly; once his sex drive falls off and the bar banter ends, all that is left is to become ill and sooner or later die. The present offers very few reassurances to Italian Americans. Buscemi is the most pessimistic of the “Dir-Actors” and in Trees Lounge, he mercilessly outlines the obstacles. Once the boundaries have been marked, leaving these small, unchanging worlds is an undertaking that is no longer worth the effort. The energy is lacking and everything is missing to take control of the situation and to begin to believe in the future again, and as it was in Stallone’s first movie. The drive which once characterized Turturro has also declined. In Mac, the film is narrated through flashbacks, and in the penultimate scene told in the first person, Turturro stresses the particularly Italian American trait of exercising power over the things they have made themselves; whether it is a house, a son, or a film makes no difference. While leaving tangible traces of his “savoir faire,” he is resigned to cement everything around him without being able to strengthen his family: having his two brothers quit is the price to be paid for having total control. In this case, the character also expresses the view of director-screenwriter:

MAC: I have to check up on everything. Everything. I have to do everything. Every last thing I have to do. All of it. All of it. I have to do everything. Everything I have to do. All me. I have to do everything. All of it. Everything.
In the final sequence, the essence of handcraftsmanship is lauded, as well as the artistic and creative aspects of being a master mason and the sole proprietor of a family business. In the form of wisdom handed down from father to son, it also deals implicitly with a poetic statement typical of an Italian American “Dir-Actor”:

MAC: Do you see the finish?
SON: Yes.
MAC: That’s care. It’s someone who does not walk away. You can see that they took their time with it. I made that myself. We made it together, me and my brothers, from the ground up. In the past, when craftsmen were around, this is the way you had to be. Not like today. Today it’s who ... knows how to talk who is respected. But before, it was who knew how to do. Instead of chitchatting. You needed to know how to do. And that person was respected. Beauty is knowing how to do. And doing it. Once you reach your goal, it’s beautiful, it’s nice. But what counts is doing.

These are “pearls” of elementary and cultural wisdom that echo those imparted to him by his deceased father, who returns to address his three sons again. Mac and his brothers should always bear the following in mind:

FATHER: From a person’s work you understand the person. Did they build Rome in a day? There are only two ways to do things: my way and the right way. And both of them are the same exact thing.

The poetic for Turturro, who in *Illuminata* even imagines directing a gossip orchestra in the theater’s foyer, is also politics. The politics of the “Dir-Actors” to be (often) present in their own films is crucial. Their presence on the set or in the neighborhood is everything. It is the mafia boss Sonny, played by Palminteri in *A Bronx Tale*, who declares it as a reminder addressed to a young apprentice. Palminteri is the author *in pectore* of this Scorsese-esque film, as opposed to De Niro who is the official “Dir-Actor.” The dual direction also affects the plot of the film, which shows the opposition between the high-ranking mafioso Sonny/Palminteri and the blue-collar bus driver Lorenzo/De Niro. Both characters claim the right and the duty to steer Calogero in the right direction and therefore to teach him important life lessons. Lorenzo is his true father, while Sonny is a father-figure. They each give the boy different names: Lorenzo calls him Calogero (which is Palminteri’s real
name; Chazz is the diminutive form), while Sonny, in keeping with following the shortest route offered by illegal means, rebaptizes him as “C.” But it is also Sonny who articulates the basic principles of political realism, directly quoting Machiavelli. Machiavelli and Shakespeare both embody the sixteenth century, the period in which the conception of power becomes pragmatic, ruthless, and realistic. The sixteenth century also produces and spreads the *Commedia dell’Arte.* Sonny correctly paraphrases Machiavelli, but only in reference to his own territory in the neighborhood. But as it is already clear, in films by Italian American “Dir-Actors,” this territorial control coincides with the territorial control of the production.9

CALOGERO/C: You are always right. You’re always right!
SONNY: Eh, maybe. If I was, I wouldn’t have done ten years in the joint.
CALOGERO/C: What did you do every day?
SONNY: There’s only three things to do in the joint, kid: lift weights, play cards, or get into trouble.
CALOGERO/C: What did you do?
SONNY: Me? I read.
CALOGERO/C: What did you read?
SONNY: Ever hear of Machiavelli?
CALOGERO/C: Who?
SONNY: Machiavelli. He’s a famous writer from 500 years ago. Availability. That’s what he always said.
CALOGERO/C: Availability? SONNY: That’s right. Listen to me. You know why I live in this neighborhood? Availability. I want to stay close to everything ... because being on the spot, I can see trouble immediately. Trouble is like a cancer. You got to get it early. Otherwise it gets big and kills you. You got to cut it out. You’re worried about Louie Dumps? Nobody cares. Worry about yourself, your family, the people that are important to you.

The political discourse continues:

SONNY: That’s what it comes down to: availability. The people that see me every day, that are on my side ... they feel safe because they know I’m close. That gives them more reason to love me. The people that

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want to do otherwise, they think twice ... because they know I’m close.
That gives them more reason to fear me.

CALOGERO/C: Is it better to be loved or feared?
SONNY: That’s a good question. It’s nice to be both, but it’s difficult. But
if I had my choice ... I would rather be feared. Fear lasts longer than
love. Friendships bought with money mean nothing. You see how it is.
I make a joke, everybody laughs. I’m funny, but not that funny. Fear
keeps them loyal to me. The trick is not being hated. I treat my men
good. But if I give too much, I’m not needed. I give just enough where
they need me but don’t hate me. Don’t forget what I’m telling you.

The lines of Machiavelli quoted by Sonny/Palminteri brings his speech to a
-crucial point: the political definition of a minority community, regardless of
its configuration, is always on the defensive, just as the small Italian states
had to come to grips with foreign invasions in the sixteenth century. It is a
political idea intended as an existential opposition between friend and
enemy, between the insider/resident and the outsider/foreigner, which is
at the center of Schmittian theories derived from Machiavelli’s strategic
approach to realism in conflicted terms, leading to war. Italian Americans
become “Dir-Actors” to distinguish themselves in or from Hollywood;
however, they do so without approval and contrary to the laws of the mar-
ket, and using the same logic that caused the newcomers to resist the larger
American context, in which they arrived unprepared and disillusioned.
There are still many who recognize themselves to be different from the
others, from the Americans—those who usually make genial films. They
open themselves up using many actors, as if their conscience, recalling
Pirandello, were a piazza. It is a piazza that is open to all members of the
same community, but closed to those who are outsiders. Because the “out-
side” is a jungle where artistic autonomy is negotiated; it is an American
jungle received as a dowry from their ancestors.

Translated from the Italian by Giulia Prestia