

# A director takes on interracial love in Italy

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## ROME

For decades, the popular movie genre known as "commedia all'italiana" has served as an insightful lens through which to observe the nation's changing society. These days, with the "Bianco e nero" (White and Black), its focus has shifted to close encounters of a culturally diverse

The glossy love story between a Senegalese woman played by Aïssa Maïga, and an Italian man, played by Fabio Volo, has tickled audiences, mildly amused critics, and has grossed nearly €5 million, or about \$6.5 million, at the box office since its release on Jan. 17, a respectable sum for an Italian picture.

What may surprise audiences outside Italy, however, is that Cristina Comencini's comedy is the first mainstream Italian film to tackle interracial romance.

Italian culture is way behind Britain, France or Germany, so 'Bianco e Nero' has been a success, but it's like finally got around doing a film that was done elsewhere 40 years ago," said the British-born long jumper May. She is married to the Italian pole-vaulter Gianni Lapichino, and forms half of one of Italy's best-known interracial couples. "Look at America, it may have its first black president. The rest of the world is catching up. Italy will just have to accept it," she added. In recent years, Italy has struggled to make sense of rapidly shifting demographics. Since the early 1990s, legal immigration has more than quadrupled, reaching nearly 3.7 million in 2006, the most recent figures available.

The predictable offshoot of an expanding melting pot is the rise in marriages between Italians and non-Italians. When last counted by the national statistics agency, in 2004, nearly 30,000 such weddings, 8.8 percent of the total, were celebrated. In 1992, fewer than 10 mixed couples went to the altar. These numbers don't take into consideration unmarried couples, which there are increasing numbers.

In the early '90s people stared at us a lot, more out of curiosity than maliciousness," said May, who became an Italian citizen in 1994, after her marriage to Lapichino. She went on to win two Olympic silver medals for Italy, and has now embarked on a television career. Last year she won the Italian version of "Dancing with the Stars," and starred in "Butta la luna" (Throw the Moon) the first mini-series on RAI, the national broadcaster, featuring an immigrant worker. May has been the exception rather than the rule in the Italian show business.

You never see black Italians on television; black people tend to play immigrants, or housekeepers, and almost all black women are cast as prostitutes 90 percent of the time," said Mauro Valeri, who teaches sociology at the University of Rome and monitors racial stereotypes in the media. He has also written two books about black Italians, a rarely considered social



Studio Lucherini Pignatelli

Aïssa Maïga and Fabio Volo play lovers in "Bianco e nero," Cristina Comencini's look at racism in Italy.

group, "except in sports, where it's easier for blacks to wear the Italian national team jersey."

Comencini, the director, believes that Italy's immaturity in dealing with interracial relations worked in her favor. "It's no coincidence that the film is a passionate love story between white and black people because we're still neophytes on this theme," she said. "Paradoxically, Italians feel less guilty, less angst-ridden. In other cultures it might have been more difficult for a white director to make a film about blacks."

The plot, Comencini added, is deceptively straightforward. "He's a bit of a simpleton, and very naïve. He sees her and falls in love," and they leave their respective spouses, despite the objections of their friends and families that a mixed match is doomed. "It shows that there are prejudices on both sides, when it comes to love, and betrayal," she said.

But like any commedia all'italiana, the film digs deeper, poking fun at a holier-than-thou political correctness of liberals (personified by Volo's wife, Elena, played by Ambra Angiolini) and the inadvertent, or at times overt, racism in Italy.

Critics of the film say it did not go far enough in ad-

ressing the cultural clash that immigration has sparked in Italy. Writing in the Rome daily, *Il Messaggero*, Fabio Ferzetti said the film superficially discounted "the problem of racism, which is widespread and pungent in Italy, even if we continue to hide it under the stereotype that 'Italians are good guys.'"

Valeri added, "The debate on the film will be very soft, because it doesn't incite reflection on the problems of racial integration. It's as though we weren't able to overcome Italian provincialism, which is to pretend that the problem doesn't exist."

Others felt that the film only paid lip service to the real problems that many immigrants face in the West. In the film, the four protagonists are ensconced in a bourgeois lifestyle: Maïga's character, Nadine, works for the Senegalese Embassy; her husband, Bertrand, played by the Cameroon-born Eriq Ebouaney, works for a humanitarian agency for Africa in Rome. Both Maïga and Ebouaney grew up in France.

But the reality for most immigrants, from Africa and elsewhere, is that life in Italy can be very tough.

"This is not the promised land," said a Nigerian woman, only identified as Nera, in a short documentary entitled "Nera" by Andrea Deaglio that was released last December.

Deaglio spent two years chronicling Nera's bleak life in Piedmont, from her days on the street (she was forced into prostitution to pay back the €50,000 loan she took out to emigrate), to a new underpaid job in a factory, marriage to a much older man, and barely expressed dreams of opening a clothing store.

"Most people don't know the drama that is behind streetwalkers. These are hard-luck stories of exploitation, so my idea was to create interest," said Deaglio. "And I wanted to offer a glimpse into their world, the way they pray, do their hair. That's how you build society, from the small, everyday gestures that we have in common."

May, the athlete turned actress, said that perhaps Italians should turn their sights on more serious problems than interracial love. "Love has no color whatsoever, end of story," she said.



Jerry Lampen/Reuters

Fiona May, above, and her husband, Gianni Lapichino, are one of Italy's best-known interracial couples.