

FILM | TELEVISION | RADIO | NEW MEDIA

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Storm Front

Fred Schepisi takes
on PATRICK WHITE

Swerve's
Desert Noir

TOOMELAH
Life
on the
Margins

Giorgio
Mangiamiele

AUSTRALIA'S
Forgotten Auteur



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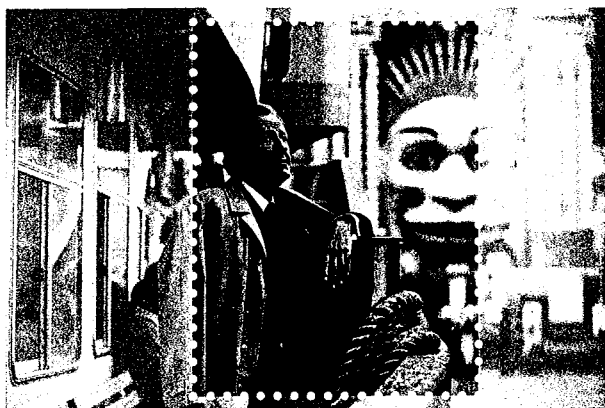
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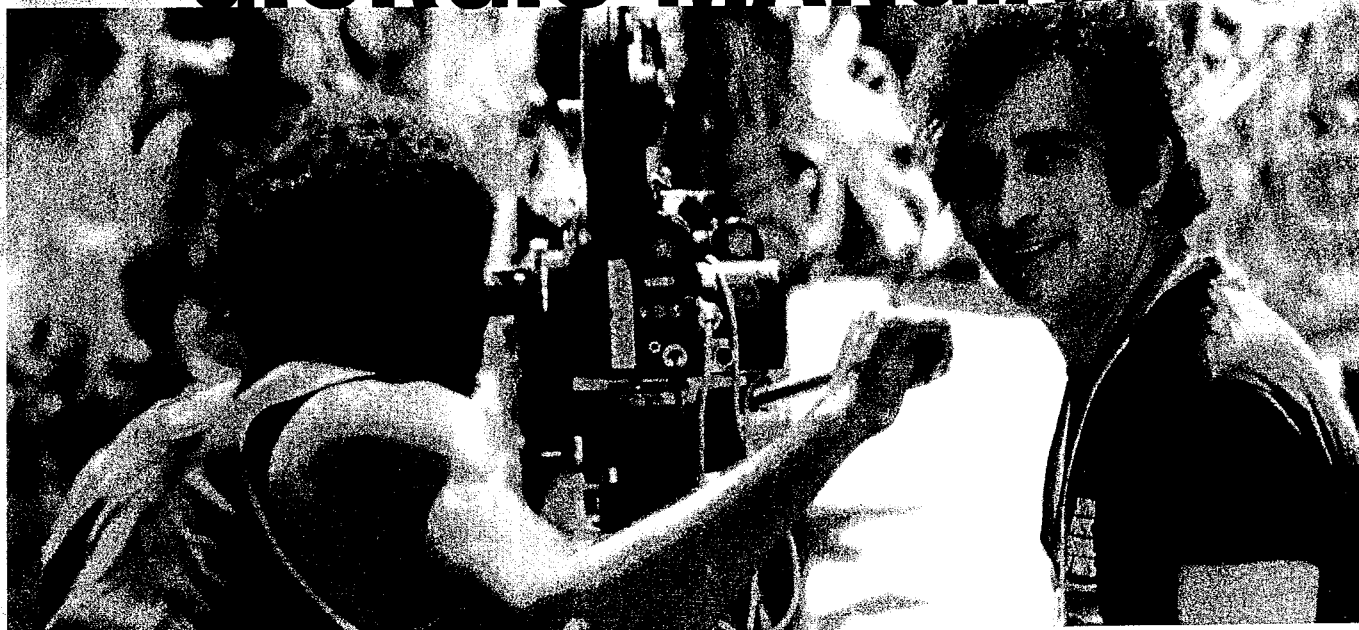
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THIS PAGE: GIORGIO MANGIAELE AT
WORK OPPOSITE: MANGIAELE FILMING
SOUTH PACIFIC FESTIVAL OF ARTS



GIORGIO MANGIAMELE



Visionary of the Australian Screen

Giorgio Mangiamiele produced a body of work that for the first time brought a European art film sensibility to Australia and put Italian Australians on the screen. GINO MOLITERNO looks into the life and work of one of this country's pioneering filmmakers.

Giorgio Mangiamiele landed in Australia on an assisted passage in 1952 and within a year had made *Il Contratto* (1953), arguably the first Australian feature film about the migration experience. With little more financing than what he was able to generate from the photographic business he had established in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Carlton, he went on to make six other short films before completing his second full-length feature, *Clay* (1965), which

was accorded the singular recognition of being invited to screen in competition at Cannes in 1965. Five years later saw the release of his first colour feature, *Beyond Reason* (1970), which Columbia picked up for distribution in Australasia. Despite living into the new millennium and continually presenting a host of proposals and scripts to government film-funding bodies, however, Mangiamiele was never able to make another film in Australia and remained, for the longest time, the forgotten man of Australian cinema.

There has been a growing interest in his work in recent times, especially from film historians and commentators. For its part the National Film and Sound Archive, which conserves much of his work, had also long been planning a restoration of some of

Mangiamiele was never able to make another film in Australia [after *Beyond Reason* in 1970] and remained, for the longest time, the forgotten man of Australian cinema.

his major films. The result has been the release this year of a two-DVD set of Mangiamiele's films curated by the NFSA and marketed by Ronin Films. Finally making Mangiamiele's work available to a wider audience, this release offers the opportunity to rediscover the work of this neglected pioneer of Australian cinema who doggedly attempted to make films and champion the cause of a local film industry at a time when practically no-one believed in such a utopic dream.

Quentin Turnour, who since the late 1990s has done much to redress the neglect a previous generation of film historians has shown to Mangiamiele, has justifiably characterised *Il Contratto* as 'one of the most extraordinary independent feature



productions in Australian cinema history'.¹ Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the film is the fact that Mangiamiele was able to make it at all. He had just arrived in Australia, he had no funds or ready-made connections, and he had no real previous experience with feature filmmaking. He *had* studied photography in Italy but, by his own admission, his only practical knowledge of filmmaking had been acquired photographing and filming demonstrations as a member of the scientific branch of the Roman police.² This can only have been scant preparation for writing, directing, producing and acting in a ninety-minute feature film. All the more remarkable, then, that using an old 16mm Bolex camera and with an ensemble cast and crew made up only of friends and acquaintances, Mangiamiele was able to produce what Turnour calls 'the real thing: in its use of found locations,

cast and celebratory communal occasions; in its sense of urban place; and in its interest in the common plight of marginalised Australians'.³ The film was shot without sound and Mangiamiele was never able to find the money to create the soundtrack, but *Il Contratto* still manages to effectively tell the saga of four young Italian men who arrive in Melbourne with the promise of a two-year work contract, but instead find themselves destitute and unemployed in a less than hospitable foreign land. Their plight only improves when they move out of the city to work on a farm owned by other 'new Australians'.

The film was never released, no doubt because it lacked sound, but Mangiamiele's passion for filmmaking had now been ignited. A few years later, his home and photographic business in Rathdowne Street were equipped with basic film-editing facilities and he had also taken over a faltering acting school in Russell Street where he ran acting classes. At the same time, with what must have been absolutely minimal capital, he established the New Continent Film and TV Production company. Using students from the school as actors and crew, he made his first short feature, *Unwanted* (1958), which recounts



the story of an illegal migrant who arrives in Australia, works hard and falls in love with an Australian woman. The woman's jealous Australian suitor then underhandedly frames the migrant, causing him to be deported. It's unclear how close the film came to actual completion since Mangiamiele himself always spoke of it as having been irretrievably lost.⁴

The experience of making *Unwanted* forged a close working relationship with actor and writer Robert Clarke, who would become one of Mangiamiele's closest collaborators. Clarke co-wrote the next short feature that Mangiamiele made with actors from the school and under the aegis of New Continent, *The Brothers* (1958). The story of a devoted younger brother who almost commits murder in order to get enough money to keep his older sibling out of prison, *The Brothers* shows Mangiamiele already beginning to shrug off what Turnour calls 'the brittle cladding of modish neo-realism' evident in *Il Contratto* in favour of the more poetic art cinema style that would distinguish his films from then on and achieve its highest point of realisation in *Clay*. In addition to this stylistic development, *The Brothers* also initiated a close personal and working relationship with Ettore Siracusa, who acquitted himself superbly as the younger brother in the film and who would act as assistant director on most of Mangiamiele's subsequent films.⁵

Returning invigorated from a short period in Europe, Mangiamiele made the first version of *The Spag* in 1960. As the name implies, the film is a vehement denunciation of what

* * * * *

The Spag is a vehement denunciation of what was then widespread discrimination against Italian migrants, not least deriving from their insistence on eating this strange food, 'spaghetti'.

* * * * *

1: *THE SPAG* (UNRELEASED VERSION) 2: MANGIAMELE'S PHOTOGRAPHS CAPTURED URBAN EXPERIENCE 3: *THE SPAG* (RELEASED VERSION)



was then widespread discrimination against Italian migrants, not least deriving from their insistence on eating this strange food, 'spaghetti'. The film's protagonist, a young Italian immigrant, is a hard worker and a model citizen but is continually denigrated by neighbours and attacked by fellow workers. Eventually, he dies while saving a young boy from the wheels of a speeding van driven by a drunken Australian. The film's rough edges and poor sound quality betray the non-existent budget, but Mangiamiele's developing poetic style is clearly evident in the imaginative framings and extremely moving images. Nevertheless, it appears that following the advice of Erwin Rado, then director of the Melbourne Film Festival, Mangiamiele chose to shelve the film without releasing it. Two years later, again with Clarke as co-writer and Siracusa as assistant, Mangiamiele made a second and longer version of *The Spag*, which was released and which received an honourable mention at the 1962 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards.

By this time, his talents as a first-class cinematographer were widely recognised, and another up-and-coming young director, Tim Burstall, hired Mangiamiele to photograph two

THE GIORGIO MANGIAMELE COLLECTION, released by The National Film and Sound Archive and Rohin Films, is a DVD box set featuring *Il Contratto*, *Ninety Nine Per Cent*, *Clay* and two versions of *The Spag*. It was launched in August at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

CELLULOID IMMIGRANT: ITALIAN AUSTRALIAN FILMMAKER GIORGIO MANGIAMELE, by Gaetano Rando and Gino Moliterno, will be published in late 2011 by Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM), the publisher of *Metro*, as part of the *Moving Image* monograph series.

documentaries on Australian artists as well as multiple episodes of *Sebastian the Fox*, a children's series that Burstall was making for ABC TV. Within a year, however, Mangiamiele had returned to directing his own films – this time his one and only comedy, *Ninety Nine Per Cent* (1963). Co-scripted by Clarke, who here also took on a crucial acting role, and with a remarkable and very convincing performance by a non-professional father-and-son team, Francesco and Carmelo Pino, *Ninety Nine Per Cent* is without doubt one of the most unfairly neglected comic gems of Australian cinema. The film recounts the story of a dumpy middle-aged Italian widower who goes to a marriage agency in order to procure a new mother for his school-aged son, only to be defrauded by the agency and spectacularly humiliated by the young would-be bride. *Ninety Nine Per Cent* again takes up the migrant themes articulated in the earlier films but here inflects them with a charming sense of comedy that recalls the humour of Jacques Tati. As in Tati's films, *Ninety Nine Per Cent* is rife with clever poetic stratagems that succeed in transforming even a bellicose Australian drunk – a threatening character in some of the earlier films – into a mere figure of fun.

GIORGIO MANGIAMELE

IL CONTRATTO (The Contract)

1953 • 16mm • Black and white
• 90 minutes

UNWANTED (Indesiderato)

1958 (lost)

THE BROTHERS

1958 • 16mm • Black and white
• 19 minutes

THE SPAG (unreleased version)

1960 • 16mm • Black and white
• 25 minutes

THE SPAG (released version)

1962 • 16mm • Black and white
• 36 minutes

NINETY NINE PER CENT

1963 • 35mm • Black and white
• 47 minutes

BOYS IN THE AGE OF MACHINES

1964 • 16mm • Colour
• 18 minutes

CLAY

1965 • 35mm • Black and white
• 85 minutes

BEYOND REASON

1970 • 35mm • Colour
• 84 minutes

SAPOS

1982 • 35mm • Colour
• 56 minutes

While carrying out post-production for *Ninety Nine Per Cent*, Mangiamiele accepted a commission to make *Boys in the Age of Machines* (1964), a twenty-minute informational film aimed at encouraging young men to undertake apprenticeships in the metal trades. Yet his desire, as he confessed to an interviewer only a few weeks before his death, had always been to make art films.⁶ No doubt buoyed by what he had been able to achieve in *Ninety Nine Per Cent* – the film received an honourable mention at the AFI Awards – he now set his sights squarely on the international film festival circuit.



THE FUGITIVE EXAMINES A
SCULPTURE OF HIMSELF IN CLAY

Even with its undeniable blemishes due to the as-always meagre production budget, *Clay* must be one of the most remarkable films produced in Australia in the period before the Australian film revival of the 1970s. The film marks not only the high point of Mangiamiele's own achievement but also, as Tom O'Regan has suggested, the very beginnings of art cinema in Australia.⁷

The story itself is relatively simple: a mysterious fugitive fleeing from the police finds refuge at an artists' colony thanks to an old potter and his daughter. Inevitably, a romance develops between the enigmatic stranger and the young woman, inflaming the jealousy of another young potter at the colony who is also in love with the girl. Unable to rid himself of the new rival even after a physical confrontation, the young potter denounces the stranger to the police, forcing him to flee again. The young woman pretends to acquiesce but soon attempts, and succeeds in, taking her own life in a car crash. Sensing what she has done, the fugitive returns to grieve by her body and then give himself up to the police.

This basic story outline can hardly convey the film's stunning beauty and the haunting lyricism of its



extraordinary imagery. Typically doing more with less, Mangiamiele filmed most of it at the artists' colony of Montsalvat in Victoria, making effective use of the evocative location and the artistic connotations that the setting naturally provided. Furthermore, bookended by a voiceover meditation on whether it may have all been a dream, and highlighting the active creation of images and simulacra throughout, the film continually tends towards an allegory of the artist and the artistic struggle that is reminiscent of Cocteau. It was all an attempt, as the director himself acknowledged, 'to express poetry through visual form'.⁸

Mangiamiele had aimed the film at the international art film circuit and achieved his wish when, with no Australian government support of any kind, *Clay* was chosen to screen in competition at Cannes in 1965. In the event it didn't win but, as *The Australian* correspondent at Cannes



that year suggested, it was a landmark even as a try.⁹ When a month later it was screened at the Melbourne Film Festival, it prompted a very tepid reception and at the Sydney Film Festival the reaction was decidedly hostile.¹⁰ A year later Mangiamiele organised a season of special screenings at the St Kilda Palais but by then the film, made with less than £11,000,

Even with its undeniable blemishes due to the as-always meagre production budget, *Clay* must be one of the most remarkable films produced in Australia in the period before the Australian film revival of the 1970s.

was competing at the box office with Hollywood blockbusters such as David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (1964), and so understandably failed to attract more than a cursory interest.

Disappointed but still passionate about creating a local film industry, Mangiamiele decided to embark on a more commercial venture, the result of which would be his first colour feature, *Beyond Reason*. He approached playwright Oriel Gray with an idea for a post-nuclear-holocaust film in which a large group of mental patients are locked together with their doctors and nurses in a bunker following the outbreak of a nuclear war. The film was probably partly in response to the heightened fears of a nuclear war that ongoing French nuclear testing in the Pacific generated, and partly inspired by the ideas of the anti-psychiatry movement that had gained currency in the growing counterculture of the time. Working, as always, within the slimmest of budgets, he scheduled a

1: *NINETY NINE PER CENT* 2: *THE FUGITIVE RECOILS FROM THE PRIEST'S SHADOW IN CLAY*

three-week shoot in the basement of the RMIT building. But the production was beset with difficulties from the beginning, with Gray soon abandoning the project having written very little. The shoot itself, which couldn't be extended because the space was scheduled to be refurbished, turned into a nightmare: the camera was too noisy and had to be encased in a lead blimp, which made it difficult to move; the mixture of professional and amateur actors and crew proved to be difficult to manage; and the high cost of 35mm colour film meant that they couldn't re-shoot scenes that hadn't worked. The result was undoubtedly quite far from what Mangiamiele had intended.

Substantially finished in 1968, *Beyond Reason* remained without a distributor until a year later when Mangiamiele and assistant producer John Gauci struck a deal with Columbia for distribution in Australasia. Worried that a poor showing in a large city theatre might harm the film's chances with other exhibitors, and also soon realising that the fine print of the contract meant that as producer he was wearing most of the costs, Mangiamiele proposed opening the film in a small suburban theatre and a drive-in, and Columbia agreed. But the tactic backfired: despite a number of relatively good reviews, the film made very little money and, after being moved around several other suburban theatres for a few more weeks, sank from sight.

By this time, the federal government had, after much entreaty, finally started to support a local film industry via bodies such as the Australian Film Development Corporation. Undaunted by the limited success of his recent ventures, Mangiamiele repeatedly applied for development funding for a number of different projects but was consistently refused because they weren't deemed financially viable. By the end of the 1970s, thoroughly disheartened by prospects in Australia, he accepted an offer to work for the Office of Information in Papua New Guinea, where he would be making informational films and helping to set up a local film industry.

His three years in Papua New Guinea were both happy and productive. Finally paid to make films and provisioned with adequate budgets, he was able to produce three public information films promoting various initiatives of the country's government, one seventy-minute documentary about the Third Pacific Festival of Arts, and *Sapos*, a sixty-minute fictional feature dramatising the problem of alcoholism, which was rife in Papua New Guinea at the time.

At the end of his contract with the Papua New Guinea government, Mangiamiele spent some time in Europe exploring the possibility of working in Italy. But the Italian film industry was itself going through a downturn at the time and he quickly became aware that there were very few opportunities. In any case, his real allegiances were in Australia, so he returned and again began to submit a host of projects to Film Victoria and other bodies. Unfortunately, these were also regularly rejected as commercially unviable. Continual application and continual refusal appear to have bred hostility on both sides, settling into a mutual antagonism that practically ensured nothing that he submitted would receive any support.

After many more attempts, in 1997 he finally received a modest amount of development funding from Film Victoria for a film set in Papua New Guinea, and by 2000 had attracted the interest of a number of producers. However, his health had been fading for some time and in December 2000 he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. He died on 13 May 2001.

A certain inflexibility of character and an unwillingness to compromise on his part no doubt significantly contributed to the small number of films he was able to produce. Perhaps, tragically, Mangiamiele became the victim of his own idealism. Yet the recently released DVD set effectively displays his impressive talent as an artistic filmmaker and amply supports his claim to be regarded as one of the most visionary and devoted pioneers of the Australian cinema.

Gino Moliterno is Head of the Film Studies Program at the Australian National University. He has written on a range of filmmakers from Andrei Tarkovsky and Pier Paolo Pasolini to Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese. He is also the author of the *Historical Dictionary of Italian Cinema* (Scarecrow Press, 2008). His most recent interest is in the work of Giorgio Mangiamiele.

Endnotes

- ¹ Quentin Turnour, 'Giorgio', *Senses of Cinema*, vol. 14, 2001, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2001/14/mangiamiele_quentin/>, accessed 16 August 2011.
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ An article in *La Rivista Italiana* (20 May 1958) reporting a visit to the school where the film was being made and accompanied by a number of photographs is the only remaining evidence of the film's existence. Mangiamiele is quoted in the article as saying that the film is part of his attempt to help create a local film industry that could supply the needs of local television and so diminish its dependence on American and English products.
- ⁵ Siracusa would later go on to become a significant filmmaker himself. See <<http://www.innersense.com.au/mif/siracusa.html>>, accessed 17 August 2011.
- ⁶ Rob Ditessa, 'Mangiamiele's Last Interview', *Italy Down Under*, vol. 6, Spring 2001, p. 20.
- ⁷ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 171.
- ⁸ Quote from the flyer advertising the film screenings at the St Kilda Palais, 27–31 August 1966.
- ⁹ Tony Mayer, 'Cannes: we didn't win but we tried', *The Australian*, 9 June 1965.
- ¹⁰ *The Film Weekly* (24 June 1965) reported the reaction as 'The audience was not prepared to tolerate the film's defects just because it was an Australian feature' (p. 3).