
Cultural Daily

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Giancarlo Giannini, *Catch 22*

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 15th, 2019

Giancarlo Giannini, the Italian actor who became famous in the 1970s as the star of several movies directed by [Lina Wertmüller](#), is still working at age 76 (he was born in La Spezia on August 1, 1942). Last year he played a police inspector in *Tulipani*, a Dutch movie set in Puglia; this year he is the owner of a Rome bordello in the television miniseries *Catch 22* (Hulu, May 17), based on the 1961 anti-war novel by [Joseph Heller](#), set in Italy during World War II. *Catch 22* had also inspired a movie directed by [Mike Nichols](#) in 1970.

“*Catch 22*” is a term invented by [Heller](#) in his novel, which is explained in [the trailer for the TV series](#): “As soon as you ask to get out of combat duty, you are no longer crazy, so you have to fly more missions.”

Having been born in Modena, Italy after the end of World War II, I grew up hearing scary stories about those terrifying war years from my parents and family members. The worst fear for civilians was being the target of Allied bombing raids, when Northern Italy was occupied by the Germans, after the imprisoned Mussolini was rescued and set up at the head of a puppet state, [the Republic of Salò](#), in September 1943, while the Italian government had signed a truce and become a US ally. That is why the dark satire of *Catch 22*, about the senseless and indiscriminate American bombing of Italian cities and their historical monuments, resonates with me. Read about the [Bombing of Italy 1940-1945](#).

Catch 22 producer George Clooney, who has a house on Lake Como in Northern Italy, understands how Italians were caught in the middle, between the Germans, who blew up all the bridges in Florence as they were retreating, and the Americans, who bombed and destroyed the ancient abbey of [Monte Cassino](#). He says we should never get tired of talking about the absurdity of war.



Giancarlo Giannini, *Catch 22*. Photo by Philippe Antonello / Hulu

As Marcello in *Catch 22*, Giancarlo Giannini delivers a powerful speech about the resilience of Italians. “Italy is a very poor and weak country. That’s what makes us so strong. Italy will survive this war and will still be in existence long after your own country has been destroyed. America is a great novel idea, but Rome was destroyed, Greece, Persia, Spain, all great empires were destroyed, why not yours? You put so much stock in winning, while the real trick is losing wars.”

The actor said to HFWA journalists on the Sardinia set, “I saw the movie by Mike Nichols, *Catch 22*, many years ago, and I found it very beautiful. The anti-war book is a masterpiece, the most amusing thing about it is the irony and the grotesque of war. You always have to be against war. I really lived through that war period in Italy; I was a small child, but I remember it very clearly. And look how many wars are still waged in the world today, and that means that human beings, men, are very stupid.”

He said about working in close collaboration with Lina Wertmüller, “*Seven Beauties* was a movie that no one wanted to make, because it’s about a concentration camp and a true story. It had four Oscar nominations and I am very proud of that. There’s a famous scene where the protagonist tries to seduce the German woman commander, and she gives him a big speech, ‘We Germans are the ones who will lose this war, not you Italians, because you have the Mediterranean worm.’ This type of philosophical consciousness of the times was already in our film, because the Italians survive in any case. The imagination of Italians is such that you will never get the better of them. They have mastered survival, which is the basis of everything.”



Giancarlo Giannini 1978. Photo by Elisa Leonelli.

I had first interviewed and photographed Giancarlo in January 1978 at the Beverly Hilton hotel, while he was here with Lina Wertmüller to promote *A Night Full of Rain* (*La fine del mondo nel nostro solito letto in una notte piena di pioggia*, 1978). Wertmüller had directed Giannini in *The Seduction of Mimi* (*Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore*, 1972), *Love and Anarchy* (*Film d'amore e d'anarchia*, 1973), *Swept Away* (*Travolti da un insolito destino nell'azzurro mare d'agosto*, 1974), *Seven Beauties* (Italian: *Pasqualino Settebellezze*, 1975).



Giancarlo Giannini, Lina Wertmuller 1978. Photo by Elisa Leonelli

Lina said then, “We are artists, therefore, inevitably we are always political activists. I am not a Communist, I’m a Socialist. I believe in freedom, I fight for freedom, I am proudly democratic and I am a leftist.” And she’s still active today at the age of 90. In 2015 a documentary about her career, *Behind the White Glasses*, premiered at the Venice Film Festival.

Featured photo of Giancarlo Giannini (c) HFPA 2018

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