

DESTINATION
ITALY

A maestro and his muse

Luciano Di Gregorio conjures the spirit of the director Federico Fellini in the city that inspired him.

In my mind I can see the great Italian film director Federico Fellini, standing motionless in front of the extravagant Grand Hotel Plaza on Via del Corso, and I can imagine the stars of Rome and Hollywood that he would have entertained here during the filming of *Roma*, his dream-inspired and surrealist magnum opus.

From an early age, Fellini was obsessed with the decadence of world-class hotels: the flash of expensive fabric adorning the glitterati, the sparkle of crystal glasses and lavish chandeliers and the meticulously pressed black suits of clean-shaven porters. The Roman elite, wearing their furs and drinking spumante by the fountains, captivated him. As a fledgling, he endeavoured to reconcile the contrast between their well-bred manners and the darker, profligate lives he knew they lived behind the closed doors of their Piazza Navona apartments.

I fell in love with *Roma* some years ago. The film, shot in 1972, underscores Fellini's fascination with the chaos of 3000 years of continuous habitation. Rome was the director's *raison d'être*, inspiring and intimidating him in perfect chorus. While many film moguls have derived inspiration from writers, the Eternal City was Fellini's only muse.

"It's a kind of jungle," claims Marcello, the suave protagonist of Fellini's 1960 hit, *La Dolce Vita*. "Tepid and tranquil, where one can hide."

But if Fellini's wish was to hide in Rome, it was a dream that wasn't realised; in and around the Grand Hotel Plaza, I feel the director's presence everywhere.

I've seen every nook and cranny of this spectacle of a city but a recent unimpeachable attempt to understand the events – or lack thereof – that transpire in the immensely convoluted *Roma* leaves me bleary-eyed in my Roman apartment and hardens my resolve to find the man in the creative arena that inspired him.

Negotiating the cobblestones along the narrow Via Margutta, a stone's throw from Piazza del



Popolo, one of Rome's largest mediaeval squares, I imagine Fellini might have had this laneway in mind when he declared to Charlotte Chandler, the author of his memoirs, *I, Fellini*, that he lived in a fantasy world. Art galleries and antiques shops, many bequeathed to family for generations, jostle for space beneath opulent residential buildings designed even before Michelangelo was all the rage in the city. Even the wrought-iron lanterns of the 18th century, jutting out in defiance of modernity, seem to scorn the concept of electricity.

At No. 110, the apartment FeFe shared with the love of his life, the legendary Italian actress Giulietta Masina, I easily evoke images of the director turning the key to the heavy door of the peach-hued building and planting a kiss on his soul mate's lips after hours studying the people of Rome.

The area from Piazza del Popolo to the Spanish Steps – bound roughly by Rome's historic Via del Corso and Via dei Condotti, Italy's shrine to haute couture – was the centre of Fellini's universe and it is here that his presence is most keenly felt.



From Via Margutta I trace his steps to nearby Cafe Canova, a favourite hang-out on Piazza del Popolo. I've lived in Rome on and off for years and have never given the haunt more than a fleeting glance. But now I order an espresso – short and strong, the Roman drink of choice – and watch as men whizz past in casual navy suits and brown loafers and women negotiate their mopeds over the bumpy road around the square, their trademark curls flowing freely from dated helmets. I smile. It's a wonder that Italian movie critics had the gall to condemn last year's *Eat Pray Love* to the fires of cinematic hell – not because of its questionable entertainment value but purely because of a perception that its portrayal of Rome was based on tourist-perpetuated clichés.

The view from Cafe Canova hasn't changed in centuries. Three Roman thoroughfares – Via del Babuino, Via di Ripetta and Via del Corso – converge in a graceful display of baroque elegance. I imagine FeFe contemplating, from this very spot, the twin churches of Santa Maria in Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, built in the mid-17th century at the junction of the three roads.

Fellini was an avid people-watcher. From this spot he whiled away many hours. He scribbled nonsensical words and sketched faces with which he was instantaneously taken. These faces haunted him and were later brought alive in this movie or that.

Rome was his *raison d'être*, inspiring and intimidating him in perfect chorus.

His fascination with the links between Rome's multi-layered history and the concept of a Roman identity was born in these mediaeval squares and manifested itself in his cinematic works. Conjuring his analytical eye, I notice, for the first time, the baroque facades of the two churches. They contrast sharply with the Egyptian pillar adorning the middle of Piazza del Popolo and are framed by the mediaeval portals of nearby residen-

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Eternal City ... (from far left) Via dei Condotti leading to the Spanish Steps; a crowd admires the Trevi Fountain; a scene from Fellini's most famous film, *La Dolce Vita*. Photos: PhotoLibrary

tial buildings with their 2000-year-old Roman foundations.

The layers of the city's architecture, from the ancient to the mediaeval to the modern, show its evolution and, as Fellini often contended, are a metaphor for the concept of a Roman identity. He would claim Romans to be a complicated bunch, as friendly and warm as they are aloof and suspecting; as prone to passionate outbursts as they are to silence; their outlook as modern as it is rooted in the pillars of the Colosseum.

From the Pincio, a lookout on the outskirts of Villa Borghese, just above Piazza del Popolo, the terracotta roofs of Rome seem to sizzle under the heat of the afternoon sun. From the perfect cupolas of myriad churches rings a chorus of tolling bells.

The top of the Vittoriano Monument gleams proudly on the skyline above the chaos of Piazza Venezia, one of Fellini's favourite squares.

I imagine FeFe, swathed in Giulietta's embrace, enchanted by the scene and I can almost conjure images of the floating statue of Christ above the city in the opening scene of *La Dolce Vita*.

I follow the imaginary statue south, navigating the cobblestone streets to the 18th-century Trevi Fountain, resolving to ignore the masses hurling coins and contemplate, instead, its status as a symbol of everything Fellini.

No FeFe aficionado could forget that fateful night in *La Dolce Vita* when Marcello and Sylvia, brilliantly portrayed by Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg, waded alone and uninhibited into the fountain. The scene, so superbly intimate, is not tarnished by the reality of knowing that it was filmed on a bitterly cold night in March when Ekberg tolerated freezing water for hours while her counterpart required the donning of a wet suit beneath his clothes.

Pretending to know an Italian without breaking bread with him is a sin, and my resolve to find Fellini propels me to his treasured Trattoria Al Moro in Vicolo delle Bollette, a minute's walk east of the fountain. After explaining my quest to the manager, I am ushered towards a meal of crispy goat infused in rosemary oil. With lightning speed, a waiter pours a glass of Montepulciano.

FAST FACTS

Getting there Air China has a fare to Rome for about \$1395, flying to Beijing (12hr), then Rome (1hr 20min). Fare is low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney, including tax.

Staying there

□ Live the life of Fellini at the Grand Hotel Plaza, a lavish palazzo built in the 19th century. Rooms are spacious and cost from €250 (\$328) a night, but specials are often available; see www.grandhotelplaza.com.

□ Located off Piazza Venezia, Hotel Iberia provides value accommodation in the thick of the action. Rooms cost from €99; see hoteliberia.it.

Eating there

□ Trattoria Al Moro has a humble interior and presents a menu of delightful meat, seafood and pasta dishes and mouth-watering desserts. Vicolo delle Bollette, 13,

Roma, phone +39 06 678 3495.

□ Enjoy an authentic Roman dining experience at Pizzeria EstiEstiEsti Da Ricci, with traditional thin-crust Roman pizzas topped with a variety of simple ingredients. Via Genova, 32, phone +39 06 488 1107.

□ Hang out at the star-studded Riccioli Cafe, a cocktail bar with an extensive selection of spirits and wines accompanied by sushi and oysters. Via delle Coppelle, 13, phone +39 06 682 10313.

Sightseeing there

Unknown to many, a ticket for the Colosseum also gets you into the nearby Palatine Hill ruin complex. Entry costs €13.50; see turismoroma.it.

Also don't miss the sunset views over mediaeval Trastevere or the Church of Santa Maria Immacolata, with its crypt of human bones.

A photograph of the restaurant's previous owner, Mario Romagnoli, joins me for lunch. Fellini was so entranced by his face that he cast the man as Trimalcione in his 1969 film *Satyricon*.

There's no rest for the star-struck, so I'm soon ambling along Via del Babuino, Fellini's old stamping ground. I imagine the director might have been taken by the flawless window displays of dimly lit shops and perhaps bought a surprise gift for Giulietta. After bantering with shop owners, who held him in high esteem, I imagine he sauntered down the road with a spring in his step and noticed, as I have, Rome's architectural layers, incongruous yet each woven firmly into the fabric of the city.

Fellini's fascination was not so much with the tangible evidence of the city's history as with the Roman ability to live at one with their ancient surroundings, almost uninterested in the presence of grand old landmarks.

Winding my way to the Colosseum, where FeFe sat and observed the women of Rome, I pull up a piece of Roman marble and decide to engage his idea further. In Rome, the locals can be sifted

from the tourists by simply watching with a keen eye. It's not long before I spot my true Roman. She's well dressed and walks in the shadow of imperial arches with a leisurely but firm sense of direction. Eyes ahead, the epic beauty of the Colosseum has no effect on her.

Fellini would have been fascinated by her reluctance to crane her neck to gaze at the 2000-year-old structure like so many around her; such complacency towards larger-than-life scenery engrossed him.

As the day draws to a close, I board Metro A in the direction of Anagnina and in less than 40 minutes I'm standing outside Cinecittà. The film studios have become tantamount to Fellini himself and he would make the same journey here on Rome's shabby subways even when he wasn't in production. Perhaps he fed the studio's stray cats and gathered his thoughts, ready to put pen to paper.

It's no surprise FeFe tapped into a well of creative genius to make timeless movies - as he observed, Rome is simply the most delightful movie set in the world.



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