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'Tutta la Vita Davanti': All Italy is singing the call-center blues

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ROME: 'You have your entire life ahead of you,' is the leitmotif repeated by well-meaning adults to the 20-something protagonists of a new Italian film that suggests, instead, that when it comes to the future, Italy's youths are headed for some hard times.

The platitude doubles as the intentionally ironic title of Paolo Virzì's "Tutta la vita davanti," (All Your Life Ahead of You), which opened March 28 to rave reviews here.

It tells a commonplace tale in contemporary Italy: unable to find employment in her field (philosophy), a recent university graduate turns to an underpaid job in a multinational call center where she has no long-term prospects and few short-term gratifications.

On the surface, with its surreal juxtaposition of motivational psychology and reality-show feel, Virzì's vision is more whimsical comedy than biting reportage. But like other masters of the popular "commedia all'italiana" genre, Virzì's underlying critique of Italian society pulls no punches. The characters working at the call center exist in a permanent state of insecurity and fear.

"It's about the difficulty of living in Italy today," Virzì said in telephone interview before proffering a succinct catalogue of what he believes young people in today's Italy are up against: little generational turnover, which dooms young workers to transitory employment; a social environment that promotes privilege over merit; trade unions, which fight for those who already have jobs rather than those who don't.

It makes for bleak long-term prospects, and these issues have struck deep chords here.

Recent polls for this weekend's national elections put employment as a top concern for Italian voters, while widespread suspicion of new forms of employment (temporary work and short-term contracts were only liberalized in Italy in 2003) can be gauged by the many recent releases of films and books on this theme.

Apart from Virzì's film, the first months of 2008 have seen the cinematic debut of "Parole Sante" (Holy Words), a documentary by the actor-playwright Ascanio Celestini that chronicles the labor disputes at the Atesia call center in Rome (which claims to be the eighth-largest such structure in the world and to handle 300,000 calls a day) and "Cover Boy," a low-budget independent film that has sparked a spontaneous outbreak of You Tube videoclips of embittered "precari," as temporary workers without job security are known here, bemoaning their lot. Typically, they work at poorly paid positions with no benefits.

"Cover Boy" was shot in 2005 and spent a couple of years on the international film festival circuit, but it was released in Italian cinemas only last month.

"The theme of precarious workers has exploded recently, and politically it's appealing," said the director, Carmine Amoroso, pondering the timing of his film's release. Temporary employment has always existed, he said, "but now it's become a sort of brand or logo."

Temping has hit the stage - the monologue "Tutto Precario" (All Precarious) by Noemi Serracini had a successful Rome run in January after winning script-writing awards - and is the subject of numerous books, including "Schiavi Moderni" (Modern Slaves) by the maverick comedian-turned-political-polemicist Beppe Grillo, who describes the law that introduced job flexibility to Italy as "a modern bubonic plague."

Statistics differ regarding the number of workers in Italy without job security, depending on employment definitions. The most recent statistics by Istat, the national statistics agency, indicate that there are 2,282,000 workers in Italy - 13.2 percent of the work force - without long-term contracts. Other agencies, and economists, give higher numbers, anywhere between 3.5 million and 10 million, depending on the definition of long-term contract.

But Italy is well within the European Union average (16.8 percent in euro countries, according to 2006 Eurostat data) and well below Spain, where temp workers make up 34 percent of the labor force, according to Eurostat.

So why do Italians fret so much?

"It's a political theme that's used as an electoral issue to create consensus here," explained Michele Tiraboschi, a labor law expert and the scientific director of the Marco Biagi Foundation, named after the jurist and government consultant who penned the 2003 labor law reform. Red Brigade terrorists assassinated Biagi in March 2002.

Formulas put forth by the leading candidates in the April 13-14 national elections have mostly elicited criticism. The center-left candidate, Walter Veltroni, for one, proposed a monthly minimum wage of 1,000, more than \$1,500, for people with precarious jobs. (Italy has no minimum wage, and there is strong resistance to instituting one.)

Silvio Berlusconi, the center-right leader and magnate, took a more hands-on approach. During a television interview he told one attractive young woman with an unsteady work situation that she should "marry a millionaire, like my son, or someone who doesn't have such problems." The outraged reaction was predictable.

Tiraboschi noted that Italy had "one great anomaly that gives rise to feelings of insecurity that go with precariousness, even for workers with fixed contracts, and that is that many Italians enter into the work force when they're already in their late 20s." Starting job training or landing a temporary job that may not offer important formative experiences at that age "increases the feeling of unease."

A poll published in February by the Piepoli Institute for the Ministry of Labor indicated that 84 percent of Italians between 18 and 34 (based on a sample of 1,000 polled) had never even heard of the term flexicurity, a welfare-state model first implemented in Denmark that combines flexible labor practices for employers with benefits for employees.

Then, Tiraboschi added, Italians tend to snub manual labor while post-secondary education is seen as means to personal enrichment rather than a preparation for the labor market. "People are getting degrees in media communication or languages, where there is no market," he said. "They're not

going for the physics degrees." At the same time, universities, which should offer students some orientation, "don't dialogue with the marketplace."

Marta, the protagonist of Virzì's film, played by a newcomer, Isabella Ragonese, is a brilliant philosophy graduate who ends up at a call center after her attempts to break into the world of academia and publishing are rebuked.

"In a university system that works, the best and brightest would not be allowed to leave," Virzì said.

Eventually, Marta manages to publish an account of her call-center experiences for an elite philosophical journal at Oxford, exploring the dynamics between call centers, reality shows and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Celestini's documentary about the Atesia workers ends on a more depressing note. What is happening in Italy, Celestini says, is like "the Titanic with its lights on and the orchestra playing, while the ocean begins to seep into the hull."