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A Little Cut, A Splash of Color, A Change of Mood — It's Only a Movie! The Clash Between Filmmaker and Film Owner Over Alteration in the Name of Commerce

Time: 1985—Enter Bellini

In 1985, a young filmmaker, twenty-five year-old Federico Bellini, a native of Italy who along with his family moved to California in 1976, was determined to write and direct a film, *Hidden*. *Hidden* was Bellini's story about an Italian resistance family during World War II that supported and protected dozens of persecuted gypsies, who were special targets of fascism. While he pitched the film project to several Hollywood studios, Bellini found no support. Aware of the difficulty of a new director selling a story, he persevered. He received a small stipend from a local Los Angeles family whose relatives were victims of fascist oppression.

Since his script called for many of the scenes to be filmed on location, Bellini moved back to Italy, where he used his local Italian connections to obtain more financial support for the project. The angel for the project was Film Firenzica, a prominent film and television production/distribution company in Italy modeled after the U.S. Hollywood

studios. Film Firenzica agreed to underwrite the project in exchange for long-term domestic and international distribution rights. It also required Bellini to execute the standard Film Firenzica employment contract making his contribution a "work for hire" and Film Firenzica the author of the picture under U.S. copyright laws. While Bellini found it odd that the Italian company would rely on "U.S. copyright laws," he concluded that if he did a deal with a U.S. production company, he would face similar terms. Committed to the project, Bellini signed the deal.

The Making of *Hidden*

Over the next three years, Bellini researched and wrote the script. He spent much personal time with surviving gypsies, traveled with them, heard stories of first-hand experiences during the war. He was also told about many secret ceremonial activities. When he told his gypsy friends that he intended to portray their lives graphically and honestly, he was assured unique access to some of their

heretofore-unseen rituals. At some sessions, he was permitted to video record their ceremonies, prayers and musical performances. The movie was filmed entirely in Italian, in black-and-white. As to the latter choice, Bellini explained, "It is a dark and somber story that can only be told in dark and somber cinematic tones."

Released in Italy in 1990, *Hidden* achieved instant acclaim and was hailed by the difficult Italian cinema critics as a "unique cinematic accomplishment that touched the raw nerve of national prejudice." Despite the praise, gaining foreign distribution was a struggle. This coincided with a particularly bad financial period for Film Firenzica, which abandoned efforts to advance the film. Without his film company's support, Bellini decided to seize the initiative. He prepared a subtitled version in English and personally arranged for its showing in three theaters in Los Angeles and two in New York. To Bellini's joy and great surprise, *Hidden* was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Film for 1990. Even though it did not win, Bellini was acclaimed in the trades as "a worthy successor to the great lineage of Italian directors." At the same time, Film Firenzica faced a horde of creditors and teetered on the verge of bankruptcy.

After the award nomination, there was some distributor interest in the film. Bellini referred all inquiries to Film Firenzica, hoping that it would help his struggling benefactor. Film Firenzica had limited resources to do anything with the movie, but it finally granted one U.S. firm a short-term distribution deal, which in turn licensed the subtitled version of *Hidden* to art houses over the next year.

Bellini Becomes a Legend; Film Firenzica Becomes History

With the success of *Hidden*, Bellini became a hot commodity in Hollywood. He was signed to a three-picture deal with Silver Pictures, and given his handsome physique and outspoken character, became a constant in the gossip pages. His storybook life ended tragically in 1995, when at the tender age of thirty-five Bellini was struck and killed driving his motorbike in the Hollywood Hills. In death, Bellini's fame only increased. Though he had a legacy of but four films, he was idolized by a passionate and growing number of fans.

At the time of Bellini's death, Film Firenzica was also undergoing a dramatic change. The company's long-time owner had experienced severe financial reversals; finally, in 1997 Film Firenzica sold all its interests in some forty-five films to an American company, FOXXY

Films, that was gobbling up titles all around the world. Rupert Burner, head of the company, fancied himself a titan of the David O. Selznick and Cecil B. De Mille standard, and wanted to own movies to feed both his growing international satellite television operation and what he saw as the "new frontier for film, this thing called the Internet." He instructed his Vice President of Development, Ima Faque, to "buy, buy, buy—especially from those foreign companies that'll sell us movies real cheap." Rather than licensing movies, Burner felt he could buy films and then parlay them into new revenue streams with the advent of newer technologies.

The Remaking of *Hidden*

Burner knew that in acquiring Film Firenzica's titles he had purchased the great first film of Bellini and felt he had hit a jackpot. "Now that I own that film, I can make it more suitable for American audiences and market in on the Internet and in DVD format." After viewing a screening of the film, Burner decided he could improve upon it by "brightening it up with some color." "Also," he declared, "those somber scenes with the gypsies should be cut back. Who needs them? And that music! It's ghastly dreary. My boys can juice it up!"

For the DVD version, Burner wanted to add some scenes from his library of acquired World War II stories. He felt they would make a fitting supplement; explaining more clearly than the movie what terror fascism wrought on the world. He also stressed, "Those gypsy ceremony scenes are too long. If we cut them out of the televised version, we could squeeze in a dozen more commercials." "Go for it!" Burner told his business staff.

Burner also was a disciple of internationalism when it came to film distribution. He felt the movie could make some extra money if it could be translated into other languages. He set about to have the movie dubbed into French, German and Japanese. "Of course," he cautioned, "when we do the German versions, we'll have to cut out that entire section that depicted the Italian gypsies being shipped off to one of those Nazi prisoner camps." And with that, Bellini's vision—his masterpiece—was cut, tinted, diced and spliced. Of course, when the credits rolled, in all versions, *Hidden* was still touted as "A Federico Bellini Film," and Bellini was the credited director.

FOXXY Films also developed a hot Web site. It offered the English, French, German, Japanese and Italian versions of *Hidden* online,

A Little Cut, A Splash of Color

and featured an interactive component. To promote the Web site's capabilities, Ima Faque created FOXXY's "Choose Your Star" contest and used Bellini's film as a prototype for the plan. Residents of each country were encouraged to log on and identify their favorite male and female actors. Based on the polling, FOXXY contacted the winning performers—and those that agreed had their images substituted for the lead roles in *Hidden*. "This contest makes the film 'more relevant' and 'updated' for a youthful audience," Ima explained. As you might expect, Burner just loved the idea, and after the Bellini test of "Choose Your Star" was successful, he "green-lighted" the contest for a dozen more titles.

The Wounded Widow: Artista Rites

It turns out that when Bellini lived in Italy during the making of *Hidden*, he not only spent time with the gypsies, but also fell in love with one. Artista Rites was a spirited and passionate soul, who believed in the beauty of her people and the earnestness of this filmmaker. After more than a year of being together, they were wed in an Italian church. Artista played an instrumental role in the making of *Hidden*, bringing

her friends and family to her husband's side. She contributed to many of the scenes, rewriting the dialogue and even singing several of the ballads in the film. There was never any business relationship in writing between Film Firenzica and Artista; however, Bellini dedicated the film to Artista.

While Bellini did live a wild life after returning to the States, he remained faithful to Artista. She was with him on his bike on that fateful ride, when he rounded a sharp curve, throwing them both off. Bellini was killed instantly, while Artista was hospitalized for six months and had to undergo multiple operations. Her recovery was slow and painful; but her greatest pain soon became what she called the "mis-exploitation" of her husband's name and reputation. Although she felt powerless to stop the gossip (much of which was cruel and unfair to her), Artista was determined to keep his artistic reputation intact. When she discovered all that FOXXY Films had done to his—and her—masterpiece, she was heartsick. "His great work is being destroyed," she lamented, before vowing, "I will save this film if it is the last thing I do!"