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The non-professional actor child in neorealism: Interview with Alfonso Bovino¹

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Abstract

This interview with Italian former child actor Alfonso Bovino, who most famously appeared in the second episode of Roberto Rossellini's neorealist classic *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) elicits recollections from him about his time working with Rossellini. It covers his 'discovery' by Rossellini in his home town of Maiori, and his move to Naples, where he remained for several months to shoot the episode. This introduction contextualises the interview and reflections on some key themes: these include the significance of the child performer to

neorealist cinema, the circumstances of the film's production, some important methodological questions regarding the status of memory and testimony so many years after, and what it is exactly that interviewers or readers are hoping to access when they speak to an actor or other artist, especially so many years after the film's production.

Keywords: neorealism; post-war cinema; Rossellini; oral history; *Paisan*; Alfonso Bovino; non-professional actors; children

Catherine O'Rawe, Bristol University

Introduction

The figure of the child has loomed very large in accounts of post-war Italian cinema, partly because the films featuring children, such as *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*) and *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), which won Academy Awards in 1948 and 1950 respectively, were internationally influential. Thus the transnational impact of neorealism has been manifested in these child-focused narratives, notably celebrated in auteur films heavily influenced by neorealism, such as Buñuel's *Los Olvidados/The Young and the Damned* (1950) and Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955).² The neorealist child has almost always been understood as a symptomatic figure, often read as a symbol of lost innocence in the post-war period, of a desire for renewal of Italian society after fascism, and of (sometimes frustrated) futurity. Enzo Staiola, of *Bicycle Thieves*), has of course become the totemic face of neorealism, still endlessly sought out by journalists for comment on his glorious contribution to the film canon, even as he makes it clear he has little left to say, or tends to repeat the same vignettes.³ However, there has been very little attention to the on-screen work these child performers did.

Alfonso Bovino, as a ten-year-old boy, starred in Rossellini's 1946 *Paisan* playing the little Neapolitan *scugnizzo* (street urchin) in the second episode of the film. He was spotted by Rossellini in Maiori, a small town near Salerno, where the first episode of *Paisan* was

being filmed, a story Bovino recounts in our interview with him.⁴ So when the opportunity arose to interview him it provoked some interesting questions.⁵ Firstly, while Bovino has not been pursued by scholars and journalists as assiduously as Staiola, other interviews with him do exist, notably the one carried out by scholar Pasquale Iaccio in 1997 (in Iaccio 2006); in fact, Bovino contradicts his earlier interviews in various places when speaking to us, especially when he asserts that after filming *Paisà* he never saw Rossellini again, and he did not make further films. In reality, he appeared in two other films, and told Iaccio that Rossellini brought him to Rome, and that he could have been a star, but that Rossellini did not want him to work for anyone else (Iaccio 2006: 47).⁶ He also, in the Iaccio interview, asserted that he used his ‘spontaneity’ in coming up with the dialogue, while to us he repeats that he had to do exactly what he was told by Rossellini and by Massimo Mida, the assistant director.

These aporias or areas of doubt raise an important question: what can speaking to an actor about their experiences of seventy-five years ago (when they were a young child) actually tell us about the facts of that experience? Perhaps very little: the fragility of memory is notorious, especially at that temporal distance, and can result in what Alessandro Portelli has dubbed ‘uchronic memory’, which he describes as a way in which oral history stories ‘emphasise not how history went, but how it could, or should have gone, focussing on possibility rather than actuality’ (Portelli 1988: 46). This may seem just a more elaborate term for false or incorrect memories, as when, for example, Bovino asserts to us with regard to the famous scene with Dots Johnson, playing ‘G.I. Joe’, in which Johnson sings an African-American spiritual while Alfonso as Pasquale tries to play along on the harmonica, ‘no, he didn’t sing anything’. But there are other possibilities here: perhaps Alfonso misunderstood the question, or was remembering another scene. There is even a faint

possibility that, although most of *Paisà* was recorded with direct sound (see Wagstaff 2007: 205-206), Bovino is alluding to Johnson's voice being dubbed in post-production.

It also seems possible to us that Bovino at points has elided his own personal experience with that of his character Pasquale: when he refers to himself as 'lo scugnizz e' Napule'' because he stole to give to others, he seems to be referring to his character's actions in the film, and there is a layering and imbricating of the personal and the fictional which, at this temporal remove, is perhaps impossible to resolve or to untangle.

So interviewing an actor, especially one who had such a peculiar career as Bovino, raises the question of how the position of the (academic) interviewer and that of the artist might be reconciled. When Bovino recycles anecdotes that he has previously delivered, he demonstrates that he has perhaps found a smooth narrative of his experience with Rossellini through years of re-telling. However, the interviewer may be driven by a desire to find out 'what it was really like' or to excavate forgotten historical incidents, and it is here that the actor might frustrate. For example, I was keen to find out, as part of my current research on non-professional actors in the post-war period, what had happened to Carmela Sazio, the peasant girl cast by Rossellini in the first episode of the film. The conventional narrative, put forward by Rossellini and Massimo Mida, is that Carmela, spotted near her small village in Campania, had her head somewhat turned by filming, could not re-integrate into her previous life and became a prostitute.⁷ I had hoped that Alfonso might have had some special insight into her, as he says he met her on set. But he merely repeats that she was a prostitute. The limitations of his own understanding as a young boy, coupled with the layering in of myths about the film over the years, mean that he is not in a position to shed any light on her life, and demonstrate the enduring difficulties of disentangling myth from reality when it comes to neorealism.

This anecdote, for me, also exposed the limitations of my own epistemology as a researcher coming into contact with these subjects. Rather than looking to Alfonso to ‘fill in the gaps’ about the film, I have had to adjust my own position, and simply listen to the narrative that he wanted to offer about his encounter with Rossellini, which, in this telling, was one of success: a fortuitous encounter, a positive shoot and the definitive conclusion of a one-off experience. So while Bovino is able to enlighten us about certain aspects of what happened – the lack of film stock, for example, which meant he could not afford to get his lines wrong – the academic researcher may not be able to get what they really want from the actor, which is a sense of how things were, what did it *feel like* to act (especially as a non-actor), and did he think of himself as someone performing or as just saying some lines? This is, of course, not exclusive to Bovino, and is a paradox that often affects interviews with creative artists, whereby they may be unable to explain how or why they did what they did.

Bovino does reflect, however, on the ethics of care that Rossellini showed him when he swept him off to Naples for months. Despite previously having labelled his pay for the film ‘una fesseria’ (*rubbish*) (Iaccio 2006: 47), here he frames the pay as a welcome contribution for his financially challenged parents (he was one of many children). He also, interestingly, notes that Rossellini employed a babysitter to look after him at night in the hotel in which he stayed, although there is no mention, as with other stories from child actors of the period, of adherence to any labour laws or to chaperoning on set, nor of what happened to his schooling. He does mention, however, that Rossellini bought him his first pair of shoes.

Finally, one regret is that, due to the pandemic, it was not possible to interview Alfonso face to face. A face-to-face interview with video recording would allow us to supplement what is said in the interview by analysing body language, vocal intonation, pauses and other non-verbal cues.⁸ This was particularly the case as he brought out some old photographs during the interview, so it would have been useful to observe and record his

facial expressions when he was looking at them. The reader will also not get the sense of the respect coded in the 'voi' (a typically Southern form used to address elders) employed by the interviewers towards Alfonso in the questions.

Nevertheless, we express our deep gratitude to him for his generosity. His performance as Pasquale ranks alongside that of Staiola in terms of its combination of pathos, humour, and an uncanny mimicking of adult behaviour. That performance still exists as a testimony both to the hardships endured during the war and to the capacity of cinema to recount them. It is even more extraordinary coming from a small boy who knew nothing of acting or of cinema. We hope that Bovino's testimony here about his experience will encourage those who have not seen *Paisà* in a long time (or ever!) to go back and appreciate his work.

[Insert Figure 1: Alfonso at the time of shooting *Paisà*. (Photo courtesy of Alfonso Bovino).]

Interview with Alfonso Bovino

Mattia Boccuti and Valentina Geri

Introduction

A lively eighty-six-year-old man born and raised in the coastal village of Maiori, Alfonso Bovino agreed to (virtually) talk to us for about forty minutes on a Sunday afternoon in April. Over the last fifty years, he has been interviewed multiple times and asked about his memories as a child actor in Rossellini's *Paisà*. Alfonso is in fact one of the few living non-professional actors of Italian Neorealist cinema, and interviewers have generally turned to him to gain an insight into Rossellini's film making. And this was partly why we wanted to meet him: to go back to his days in Naples as the co-star of the film's second episode, talk about his experience of the set, and provide specific and possibly new details of Rossellini's cinematic modus operandi. At the same time, our conversation with Alfonso also had another

aim. It was our intention to address issues that had not been covered or deepened in previous interviews, such as Alfonso's relationship with cinema and his early understanding of the film industry of the 1940s, his childhood in Maiori, the economic struggles of his family and community during the war, his interactions with American soldiers. In other words, we were interested in framing Alfonso's acting performance in the broader – and problematic – context of pre- and postwar Italy.

[Insert Figure 2: Alfonso Bovino in 2019. (Photo courtesy of Alfonso Bovino).]

MB/VG: We would like to ask some questions about your experience working on the film *Paisan* with Rossellini.

AB: Rossellini came to Maiori after the war; the Americans landed at Maiori on 8 September 1943 but Rossellini arrived here in 1945, between the end of 1944 and the start of 1945.⁹

MB/VG: Was there a cinema in Maiori before the war? Were there films you could see?

AB: There was a cinema, but it was silent. Before the war, I don't remember as I was just a boy, I don't recall if there was a cinema, I know there was a cinema building but I don't remember if they showed films inside or not before the war.

MB/VG: When were you born?

AB: In 1935.

MB/VG: Were you going to school immediately after the war? What were you doing?

AB: When the Americans landed in Maiori I was just eight and a half years old. I was a small boy in 1943. When Rossellini arrived in 1945 I was nearly ten, when I met him.

MB/VG: And what were you up to in 1945 when you were ten? Were you attending school, working or doing other things?

AB: What was I doing? Nothing. I was helping my father, who was a fisherman.

MB/VG: What do you remember about the war?

AB: I remember the beach in Maiori. There were two caves that were used by the Americans to store things and they were full of bombs, firearms, bullets, so much stuff. There were lots of beaches with tanks on them, and they all had this stuff. Maiori was full of explosives.

MB/VG: What were the American soldiers who arrived in Maiori like? Were they friendly?

AB: The Americans were all friendly, good guys, they gave us food when they landed.

MB/VG: Before Rossellini came to Maiori, did you know who he was? Did you know him by name?

AB: Rossellini was a director who made films. I knew about him when he met me, not before. How could I know him before? He was from Rome, he didn't hang out in Maiori.

MB/VG: When he arrived to shoot Paisà, people went to watch the filming. Why did you go to see him shooting the film if you didn't know him? Why was this interesting to you all?

AB: Rossellini was shooting his film at the Torre Normanna, and I went with another boy, out of curiosity to see how they were making the film. And that's when I met Rossellini.

MB/VG: How many people were in his entourage in Maiori? Do you recall if there were many actors with him?

AB: They were all non-professional actors (attori provvisori). Rossellini just gave them some money and shot the film.

MB/VG: So when Rossellini arrived in Maiori in 1945-46 were there lots of people who went to watch him film out of curiosity?

AB: Oh yes, there were lots of interested people who went along to see him filming. To see if they knew someone in the film, or to get noticed. Then there were two or three people from here who were working with them, one was a carpenter, another worked as an electrician on the film, so there were a few people in his crew.

MB/VG: How long did he stay in Maiori to shoot the first episode of the film? Do you remember roughly how long he was there?

AB: Rossellini stayed here a few days to shoot Paisà, for other films he stayed longer, but the first time he didn't stay long. He met me, then after three or four days, he brought me to Naples to shoot.

MB/VG: So how did you meet him, how did your first encounter come about?

AB: Like I told you. I went to see what they were doing with the filming at the Norman Tower, and met him there.

MB/VG: What kind of person was he?

AB: He was a respectable person, a good person.

MB/VG: So he took you to Naples: how long did you stay there, roughly?

AB: I was in Naples for quite a while. I stayed there for three or four months, in a hotel that Rossellini put me up in. And we shot the film in Naples.

MB/VG: And when you were shooting with Rossellini, what did he say to you? Did he tell you what to do and what to say? What was he like?

AB: When we were making the film, he told me what to say and I said it, I played my role. And so the film was made.

MB/VG: How many times did you have to repeat the scene because it didn't come out well? Or did it always come out well and so you didn't have to redo it?

AB: When it didn't come out well... I tried to make it come out well, because there wasn't much film stock then. And Rossellini would always tell me to pay attention to what I was doing, to be careful. And his assistant director taught me what to do and I said the lines.

MB/VG: So he told you how to move, if you were to laugh, if you should be sad? Was he the one how told you to do one thing or another?

AB: It was him, yes. He was the one in charge of the film. I appeared in the scene, but he was the one who told me what to say, to the police or the American I was with in the scene, it was always him.

MB/VG: Did you enjoy it? Was it fun to say the lines and act? Was it something that was a pleasure or was it a bit more of a chore?

AB: Oh I liked it, it didn't matter if I liked it as I had to say what he told me to say, because otherwise the film wouldn't be made.

MB/VG: Were the clothes you wore in the film yours, or did Rossellini supply them?

AB: My jacket was a real American jacket that I used to wear for fishing. I brought it to Naples for my appearance in the film. Those were my own clothes. It was a jacket belonging

to Italian soldiers that I had on.¹⁰ It wasn't like it is now, there were no shops to buy clothes and material. There was no money for clothes.

MB/VG: And in the Naples episode, was your voice recorded live, or did you record it later in the studio?

AB: No, no, it was all recorded live, everything that came out ok was recorded on the spot, If not, you had to do it again.

MB/VG: And how often would it not come out well?

AB: No, it had to come out well, because, as I said earlier, there was no film stock. And in fact Rossellini told me this before we started shooting. He said 'Alfonsino, try to get the scene right the first time because we don't have enough film to shoot with'.

MB/VG: And the sets, the props, were they prepared beforehand or not? The tins, the other things, were they placed there just for the film or were they already there?

AB: Ah no, they were there, he didn't place anything there, the things were already there and he didn't do anything. That was totally normal when these scenes were filmed.

MB/VG: Did Rossellini speak in English to the American actors who took part in the film, or was there someone interpreting for him? Who translated?

AB: We boys made ourselves understood by the Americans, they understood us. The guy was called Joe and I called him 'Joè'. And he understood when we called him.

MB/VG: What was he like? Did you chat between takes? Did you hear from him after the film?

AB: No, no, he was an American soldier. And that was the only time I saw him, I never saw him again. He was an American soldier, who, during the war, found himself in Naples, and Rossellini hired him for the film. He was not a random person, he was an American soldier who came here during the war.¹¹ I don't know what happened to him as I never saw him again.

MB/VG: Did you speak to him? Joe spoke English, right?

AB: He spoke English but we could understand him. In the few conversations we had, I spoke to him in Neapolitan dialect, because, as you can see from the photo of the pile of rubbish, I stole his boots there and I say to him 'Joe, tu t'addurm e i' m'arobb e' scarp'' ('tu ti addormenti e io ti rubo le scarpe'/'you fall asleep and I nick your boots').¹² He finds me later and sees that in my jacket pocket there is a harmonica. When he grabs me, seeing that I steal from shipments arriving in Naples to feed people who have no food – because I stole to feed the other boys, who brought these things back to their families – when he finds me, after I've stolen his boots, he grabs me by this Italian military jacket, he grabs me and says 'you stole my boots'. And then he is upset and he takes me in his arms and asks: 'Where are mamma and papà?' and I say ''E' bomb', hann' muort' ('Le bombe, sono morti'/'the bombs,

they're dead'). He takes pity on me and gives me the boots. Because I was barefoot, I had no shoes, and he gives me the boots to put on. These are the words I said to the American.

MB/VG: Do you remember that in that episode he starts singing a song, do you remember that he sings, shouts and speaks really loudly?

AB: Singing? No, no, he didn't sing anything.

MB/VG: Had you ever seen a person of colour before this? Or was that the first time?

AB: There were black G.I.s then but that was the first time I saw one.

MB/VG: Do you remember if Rossellini paid you or did you act for free?

AB: Of course he paid me. He came to my house, he brought me to Naples, and he paid me, he paid my father to take his son off. I was Rossellini's responsibility.

MB/VG: Who looked after you in Naples? Did Rossellini take responsibility for you while you were there?

AB: He was responsible for me. He had to look after me and he was responsible if something happened to me during the film, because he'd come to my house to take me to Naples for the film. And there was a woman who slept in the hotel with me and I went back to the hotel every night. I stayed with this woman and in the mornings she'd help me to get dressed.

MB/VG: So Rossellini had entrusted you to this woman and told her to take care of you?

AB: Yes, because I was in Naples the whole time we were shooting the film. She was a kind of baby-sitter.

MB/VG: Did you used to go barefoot, we mean not just in the film but at home too? Was that normal?

AB: Nobody had shoes! I had a pair of wooden clogs that my father had made for me. Shoes didn't exist. The first time I wore shoes was when Rossellini bought me them in Naples.

MB/VG: So he bought you the shoes in Naples?

AB: I didn't own shoes, and when I met Rossellini I was going barefoot. I had only the clogs with a little bit of fabric over them to keep my feet warm. There were no shoes. There was no money to buy them.

MB/VG: When you say in the scene that your parents are dead and laugh, were these things true?

AB: No, they weren't true, that was what I had to say to the G.I. to get him to give me the boots. In fact when he asked me where my parents were I said that 'mamma e papà sono morti, le bombe', and he took pity on me and let me have the boots.

MB/VG: Did you go to see the film when it came out in the cinema?

AB: I've seen it fifty times and I have the video tape here. I've never seen it at the cinema. I got it recorded and sent to me.

MB/VG: Were your parents happy that you were acting? Was it a positive thing for them?

AB: Ah they were happy... They earned very little at the time and so they were definitely happy. There was so much poverty, hunger, they had endured the war. So if there was some money to be earned, then yes, they were happy.

MB/VG: Do you know that Paisà is very well known throughout the world, and so many people have seen it and heard of it?

AB: Yes, Paisà won Rossellini the top prize in America, it won so many prizes, because it tried to show the truth about what happened during the war, to show things that were true, true, true, true.¹³ Because I went down to the port to steal to give stuff to the needy who didn't have enough to eat and couldn't leave the caves because the air raid siren might sound at any time. So I was called 'lo scugnizz e' Napule', because I stole to give to others.

MB/VG: Do you like the film?

AB: Of course I like it. It reminds me of those sad days when I was a boy.

MB/VG: Did you keep in contact with Rossellini?

AB: When we finished the film he gave me what I was owed and took me back to Maiori, and said 'arrivederci e grazie'. And he went off. And we never saw each other again.

MB/VG: Did you enjoy acting?

AB: Yes, I liked it. But I didn't have a manager. So if I had had one, perhaps I might have had a career, but seeing as there was nobody to guide me, I did that film and then I didn't do any more.

MB/VG: When Rossellini was in Maiori shooting the first episode did you meet the girl in the scene at the Norman Tower (Carmela Sazio)? Do you remember her?

AB: The girl in that scene was a Neapolitan girl, she was a prostitute. She was from Naples.

MB/VG: Did you meet her?

AB: I met her when we were there together for the film. Then when we went to Naples from Maiori nobody saw her again.

MB/VG: The other kids in the Naples scene, were they also from Maiori or from Naples?

AB: No, they were all Neapolitan, I was the only one from Maiori, and the others were all from Naples. Rossellini came to Maiori in order to get me. Because I was the person he needed for that scene.

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¹ The interview was carried out through WhatsApp by Mattia Boccuti and Valentina Geri on 18 April 2021. It was conducted in Italian and has been translated by the authors.

² See Gergely (2014) and Biswas (2011).

³ See this clip from June 2020, when a reluctant Staiola was accosted by a journalist while on his balcony in Rome. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ9F3i8IhcA>. Accessed 15 June 2021.

⁴ This encounter is also recounted in Gallagher 1998: 195

⁵ The opportunity arose through the personal connections of Mattia Boccuti with Bovino, as both are from Maiori. We would like to thank Charles Leavitt, as well as Joanna Marta Tomaszewska and Lina Cioffi for their help in scheduling and organizing the meeting with Alfonso.

⁶ Bovino went on to appear in several films: the British-Italian production *La madonnina d'oro* (*The Golden Madonna*) (Luigi Carpentieri and Ladislao Vajda 1949), where he plays a Neapolitan *scugnizzo*, and was apparently credited as Alfonsino Bonino; the French-German co-production *Au revoir M. Grock/Farewell Mr Grock* (Pierre Billon 1950); Iaccio (2006: 44) also mentions *Hallo Paisà*, a French film, though I can't find any record of this.

⁷ See Mida (quoted in Aprà 1995: 119-120); O'Rawe 2017.

⁸ See Treveri Gennari, Hipkins, and O'Rawe (2019). The reader can get a sense of Alfonso's voice in this 1983 Rai Uno TV interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDUQYutkduc>. Accessed 19 June 2021.

⁹ Rossellini actually arrived in Maiori at the end of 1945 and began shooting in January 1946.

¹⁰ He contradicts himself on this point but the jacket resembles a civilian-style American one, while the longer coat Alfonso later wears in the episode could be either a German or Italian military tunic, according to military historian Damian Valle (personal communication).

¹¹ Dots Johnson was, in fact, a professional actor, although Rossellini claimed otherwise during the promotion of *Paisà*. See Gallagher (1998: 195-196)

¹² About halfway through the interview Signor Bovino showed us some photographs of himself as a child, and on the film set, photos to which he seems very attached.

¹³ The film won the New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Foreign Film and National Board of Review Awards for Best Film and Best Director, both in 1948.