

CASTING *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND'S* AUTHENTIC STARDOM

DANA RENGA

Name Dana Renga

Academic centre The Ohio State University, USA

E-mail address renga.1@osu.edu

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ABSTRACT

Using the HBO/Rai co-production *My Brilliant Friend* as a case study, this essay addresses the understudied arena of casting, particularly in relation to the creation of the “authentic stardom” of the child and adolescent

nonprofessional performers. Drawing from personal interviews with Laura Muccino and Sara Casani, two of Italian television’s most important casting directors, excerpts of which are included throughout the essay, I consider the gendered practices of casting in relation to Muccino and Casani’s epic search for the four nonprofessional child and adolescent girl performers who made the characters from the novel come to life. I focus on the casting and reception of the child and adolescent female actors in the series. In particular, this essay engages with performances of adolescence, as these performances relate to the productions’ desire to represent an authentic experience of youth in postwar Italy that is exported to transnational audiences.

“Casting is important but highly under-researched because, despite the willingness of scholars to interrogate the ideological content of representations available on television, they have expended relatively little effort to penetrate beyond final product to examine the process by which actors come to inhabit these roles and how these industrial practices transfer dynamics from the street to the screen” (Warner 2015: 19).

“To find the four girls and adolescents (‘bambine’) and all of the other young actors (‘bambini’) in *My Brilliant Friend* we saw about 9000 kids, it was a huge undertaking. It took us nine months and we are still in shock, because the fifteen of us were all scattered all over Naples, searching in every school” (Laura Muccino, Personal Interview with Sara Casani and Laura Muccino).¹

1. INTRODUCTION: CASTING MY BRILLIANT FRIEND

The HBO/Rai co-production *L'amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*) is the first installment of a four-part series adapting Elena Ferrante's internationally popular Neapolitan novels, which have been translated into forty-two languages, and of which more than 10 million copies have been sold (Amore 2019). The series premiered on HBO and on Rai in November of 2018 and has attracted a sizable viewership and fanbase internationally, with broadcast rights sold in more than 150 countries (Market 2019).² *My Brilliant Friend* is a transnational hit, thanks to its high production values, socio-political relevance, intriguing filming locations, international distribution and marketing model, and innovative practice of casting young female performers. Shot in Italian, and frequently in Neapolitan dialect, the series was distributed both in Italy

1 I express profound gratitude to Catherine O'Rawe, Danielle Hipkins, Allison Cooper, Monica Seger, Elena Past, and Amy Boylan for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article. Thank you as well to the anonymous reviewers for their insight and suggestions. I would like to extend deep thanks to Sara Casani and Laura Muccino, who agreed to an interview with me in Muccino's studio in Rome on June 17, 2019. The interview was conducted in Italian, and all translations are my own.

2 The series played well in the US, the UK, and Italy: The Rai premiere garnered a 29% share with more than seven million viewers. In the UK it is discussed as “the best performing foreign-language drama since ‘Babylon Berlin’” and averages 500k viewers per episode, while in the US it averages one million viewer per episode (Vivarelli 2018a).

and internationally with subtitles. This is a first for HBO, and implies that the network suspected that US viewers were finally “ready to break through their historic resistance to reading the screen” (Gilbert 2018).

The eight-episode series places a focus on female friendship, and charts the complex bond between Raffaella “Lila” Cerullo and Elena “Lenù” Greco as they grow up in the 1950s in a small, violent, and impoverished tiny town (or “rione”) outside of Naples. The series opens with a much older Elena, now an established author, learning the news that Lila has disappeared without a trace, and the entire tetralogy returns back in time to share Lenù's narrative account of Lila and Lenù's long and complicated friendship. In the first two episodes of the series, Lila (Ludovica Nasti) and Lenù (Elisa Del Genio) are young girls who bond over their dolls and a passion for reading. At the beginning of episode 1.03, Lila (Gaia Girace) and Lenù (Margherita Mazzucco) transition into teenagers, and these older incarnations bear a striking resemblance to their younger selves. As discussed by many critics, these four characters are also faithful to those in the novel, which adds to the series' much-discussed “authenticity,” which is a key focus of this essay (Zarum 2018).³

Indeed, when the trailer, posters, and publicity photos emerged for the series, I, probably like many, was struck by the faces of the girl and adolescent performers. I asked, “Who are they? How did the actors get the part? How did the casting directors get the right fit? They look like I had imagined they would, maybe a little different,” which reflects Amy Cook's statement that “The job of the casting director is to match the actor with the character” (Cook 2018: 3). Enter two of Italian television's most important casting directors, Laura Muccino and Sara Casani. Muccino is sister of both actor Silvio Muccino and well-known director Gabriele Muccino, and has already made a name for herself casting, among other things, the films *Latin Lover* (Cristina Comencini, 2015) and *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2015) and the series *Gomorra* (2014-), *Suburra* (2017-), *Romanzo criminale* (2008-2010), *ZeroZeroZero* (2019-) and *Luna nera* (2020-). Casani worked collaboratively with Muccino on almost all of these projects. The more I read about Muccino and Casani and their casting process, the more fascinated I became. For one, they are exceptional at finding “the authentic face” – a dictum frequently handed down to them by the showrunners with whom they work, as I discuss below.

3 There exist many articles that declare that the series' is a faithful adaptation of the novel. For one example, see Zarum 2018. For a discussion of the series' visual fidelity to the novel, especially in terms of the faces of protagonists, see Popkey 2018.

Using *My Brilliant Friend* as a case study, this essay addresses the understudied arena of casting, particularly in relation to the creation of the “authentic stardom” of the child and adolescent nonprofessional performers. It looks at casting practices and how casting is achieved at home and received and sold abroad. I am indebted to Pamela Robertson Wojcik, who argues that taking casting into consideration

helps deepen and expand our understanding of film acting. First, casting needs to be seen as an interpretive process. A consideration of casting could complicate current models of authorship and of stardom. Examining casting helps acknowledge not only the way roles are characterized but also the ideologies about identity they embody. In addition, a consideration of casting helps show changes in performance styles as only one part of what constitutes acting on screen. We need to relate performance styles more consciously to casting practices and take into account political, cultural, and labor issues at the time of performance (Wojcik 2003: 144).

In turn, and drawing from personal interviews with Muccino and Casani, excerpts of which are included throughout the essay, I consider the gendered practices of casting in relation to Muccino and Casani's epic search for the four nonprofessional child and adolescent girl performers who made the characters from the novel come to life. I focus on the casting and reception of the child and adolescent female actors in the series. In particular, this essay engages with the “difficult negotiations and performances” of feminine adolescence (Driscoll 2012: 7) as these performances relate to the productions' desire to represent an authentic experience of youth in postwar Italy that is exported to transnational audiences.

2. CASTING AND “GENDERED LABOR” (HILL 2014)

Scant scholarship exists in film and media studies that focuses on casting broadly considered, including casting directors, locations, and processes.⁴ Yet casting affects so much

4 However, scholars in Italy have examined Italian cinema and television through the lens of coaching and actor's training. Much attention has been paid to nonprofessionals in neorealist cinema, and youthful nonprofessionals in Italian cinema more broadly. See for example, Arnocida and Minuz 2016; Carluccio and Minuz 2015; Dagrada 2008; Pierini 2015; Pierini 2018; Pitassio 2007; Pitassio 2010; and Scandolo 2012.

on screen, from the film's tone to its position on charged categories like race and gender as Martin Scorsese points out in an interview: “More than 90% of directing a picture is the right casting”;⁵ or, according to Kristen J. Warner, casting is a “vital practice” because casting directors are in such close contact with actors, and are repositories for “important cultural notions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality” (Warner 2015: 34).⁶

Most library database searches for material on casting reveal how-to books.⁷ For example, the marketing materials for *Casting Revealed: A Guide for Directors* promise that readers will “gain a fuller understanding of the misunderstood art and craft of casting actors for film and video production”.⁸ Initially, scholarly treatments of casting focused on the casting process, and of particular interest is a group of essays by Joseph Turow who discusses stereotyping in casting, and acceptable casting standards.⁹ More recent studies approach the question of casting in film and television tangentially, focusing on typecasting, gender, casting and cognitive science, colorblind casting, casting gay characters as relating to race, sexuality and identity politics, and antidiscrimination regulations.¹⁰ Of particular interest to my project on “authentic casting” is an internet article that focuses on casting the HBO smash hit series *The Wire* (2002-2008) which looks at casting as related to performance and authenticity, especially concerning how race is represented and received by audiences when characters are interpreted by nonprofessionals (Kelly 2009). The commitment to authentic casting is underlined by Muccino, who notes that, in order to identify nonprofessionals who can interpret characters who viewers consider authentic, she and her team work to broaden the pool as much as possible (Casani and Muccino 2019).

I find it fascinating that the face behind the onscreen face is frequently out of the picture, as made clear by past multi-year President of the Casting Society of America, Richard

5 Cited in an interview in the documentary *Casting By* (Tom Donahue, 2012).

6 The vast majority of casting scholarship is related to casting in the theater.

7 For a sampling, see: Catliff and Granville 2013; Cerasola and Taggi 2011; Cutrona 2018; Davies 2019; Kendt 2005; Kondazian 2000; and Schell 2016.

8 You can find the publicity material here: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781315667799>. (Schell 2016). As Cook maintains, “Books on casting, which are often aimed at actors who are trying to figure out how to get hired, provide wonderful behind-the-scenes stories of great auditions or terrible audition gaffes” (Cook 2018: 10).

9 Earlier studies of casting include: Yoakem 1958; Turow 1978; and Turow 1984.

10 See, for example: Cook 2018; Hill 2014; Knox 2018; Martin 2018; Robinson 2007; Warner 2015; and Wojcik 2003. The book *Casting Masculinity in Spanish Film* does not mention casting at all, even though “Casting” appears in the title. (Hartson 2017).

Hicks, who explains why casting directors may be “short-changed in terms of creative respect.” He notes: “The job is so dynamic and so hard to pin down, and so rife for areas in which other people can take credit for it”.¹¹ According to Casani and Muccino, it is the director who most regularly takes the credit for a successful casting process. This is because, they maintain, the casting director is “incredibly connected with the director,” and the director tends to declare in interviews that they were the one responsible for “finding, choosing, and seeing” the actor (Casani and Muccino 2019).

Historically in the industry, significant contributions of casting directors have been downplayed,¹² a mentality that is still in play today in Hollywood as demonstrated in an interview with former President of the Directors Guild of America, Taylor Hackford, who states: “The reality is that you cannot call them a director, because they aren’t a director, and we take exception to them being called directors, you are a casting person, you are ‘casting by,’ but I do not call them directors, because they are not”.¹³ Hence, although casting directors are integral to the success of a film, television show, or theatrical production in working on the front lines in coordination with directors and showrunners, they “rarely enjoy the limelight like other film professionals receive” (Toto 2010). For example, there is no Academy Award for best casting (there is an Emmy category), and in the Italian context, in 2014 the National Union of Italian Film Journalists created a “Best Casting Director” award at the *Nastri d’argento* competition.¹⁴ Muccino, who is Vice-President of the *Unione*

Italiana Casting Directors, notes that the group fights hard for recognition as a trade union (“*sindacato*”) and always campaigns to have casting directors recognized on the awards circuit (Casani and Muccino 2019). Amy Cook makes an interesting point about why casting might be undervalued:

There is no Oscar for best casting—the assumption seems to be that there is a simple matching procedure: connect the description in the text to the description of the actor [...] Perhaps one of the reasons casting directors have not received the creative credit they deserve is the assumption that there is a character that precedes the actor who will embody it (Cook 2018: 12-3).

Rare efforts have been made to re-centre the significance of the casting practice in the profession, especially with regards to its gendered dimension. Tom Donahue’s 2012 documentary *Casting By* features several blockbuster stars and directors who pay homage to the profession, such as Oliver Stone who notes: “Casting has been severely neglected over the years.” The documentary focuses on the work of pioneer female casting director Marion Dougherty who is credited for revolutionizing the casting process as she listened “to her instincts about actors over typecasting them based solely on looks” (O’Keefe 2015). Dougherty has seventy-nine casting credits to her name (seven of which are uncredited) including *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969, uncredited), *Slaughterhouse Five* (George Roy Hill, 1972), *Lenny* (1974, Bob Fosse), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), and *Immortal Beloved* (Bernard Rose, 1994). Dougherty is credited with “discovering” actors such as James Dean Warren Beatty, Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, and Glenn Close. Casani and Muccino also spoke with me at length about the centrality of intuition in their casting practice (Casani and Muccino 2019).

According to director Tom Donahue, casting is a “female driven profession” and Ronna Kress notes that the Academy still sees casting directors as “secretaries” without a function (O’Falt 2015).¹⁵ Although as Russell K. Robinson suggests, despite “the subordinate and feminized nature of this job, some casting directors have significant influence and try to diversify the casting process” (Robinson 2007: 6, note 15), which can happen through casting practices

11 Hicks cited in Kendt 2005: 158. Accordingly, Warner describes the casting process as a “jigsaw puzzle organization” (Warner 2015: 34).

12 For example, in 1960 an issue arose regarding the on-screen credits for the film *Naked City* (cast by seminal female casting director Marion Dougherty) when a memo circulated from the Directors Guild stating “there is a limit set as to how many people can get the title ‘— Director.’” (cited in the documentary *Casting By*, Tom Donahue, 2012).

13 As cited in the documentary *Casting By*. Later in the documentary, the hosts of the television program *The View* discuss the possibility of creating a best casting award for *Grey’s Anatomy*, and Bette Midler retorts: “then we get out of hand. Then the garbage collectors have to be awarded.” The documentary then cuts to an interview with *Grey’s Anatomy* casting director Linda Lowy, who states, “Hundreds of colleagues and myself would be hurt by that comment, but we wouldn’t be shocked by it. I think that there is a common misperception and a common underestimation of what casting directors do.”

14 The *Nastri d’argento* Casting Director Winners are:

2014: Pino Pellegrino for *Allacciate le cinture* (*Fasten Your Seatbelts*, Ferzan Ozpetek)

2015: Francesco Vedovati: *Maraviglioso Boccaccio* (*Wondrous Boccaccio*, Paolo e Vittorio Taviani)

2016: Barbara Giordani: *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese)

2017: Anna Maria Sambucca *The Young Pope* (Paolo Sorrentino)

2018: Francesco Vedovati: *Dogman* (Matteo Garrone)

15 Erin Hill notes that casting directors are still treated like “glorified secretaries.” Quoted in an interview in Robinson (2007).

called non-biased casting, blind casting, integrated casting, or nontraditional casting. Indeed, the “gendered practices” of casting are particularly interesting when considering casting’s historical evolution, a topic that Erin Hill has worked upon extensively.¹⁶ Earlier Hollywood casting was considered male-dominated, which, in the words of Hill, was “symbolized by the ‘casting couch,’ a euphemism” for sexual harassment (Hill 2014: 142-43). Casting was a patriarchal industry until the 1970s (Hill 2016: 196). More recently, the vast majority of casting directors are women: 78% of Italian casting directors are women, as listed on the “chi siamo” page of the “Unione Italiana Casting Directors”,¹⁷ and data from 2012 shows that the Casting Society of America lists 131 male members and 390 female members, with women representing close to 75% of all CSA members (Hill 2014: 162) who have, according to Hill “reformulated post-studio casting into the women’s creative field it is today” (Hill 2014: 144). In turn, my project considers casting directors as “cultural agents” who “shape and refashion their [own] identities in the process of making their careers” (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009: 9).

When I spoke with Casani and Muccino, Casani told me that they had been thinking for quite some time about my question with regards to why casting is a profession that is principally female. Casani revealed her own theory, which has to do principally with power. She notes, “It is probably because up until recently [the profession] is not or was not viewed as powerful within film and television [...] Maybe in the past casting directors chose for the director, gave the director advice, but were not as central as they are starting to become now.” Further, Muccino denies the “sensitivity argument” – e.g., more women are drawn towards casting as they are maternal or sensitive. Instead, she points out that in the world of film and television production, casting is a much more accessible profession for women who have a family or plan to have one, in particular as casting directors have much more control over their schedules than assistants to directors, for example (Casani and Muccino 2019).

16 See Hill 2014 and Hill 2016, in particular pp. 195-212. Linda Seger’s *When Women Call the Shots* includes hundreds of interviews surrounding the role of women in the film industry (Seger 1996). The problematic gendered discourse surrounding casting crops up in an interview with past Casting Society of America president Richard Hicks, who states: “I liken us to old girlfriends. You have a really intense relationship with the actors and the producers and then they go off and have a really intense relationship with other people they make the movie with” (cited in Kendt 2005: 154).

17 Further, ten out of the eleven casting assistants listed are women.

3. AUTHENTIC ADOLESCENCE

In writing my recent book on the cultural fascination with criminal antiheroes in contemporary Italian television series, I was intrigued by explicit comments from reviewers, showrunners, fans, and, actors, debating the “authenticity” of representations of organized crime, representations that sparked polemics while drawing in millions of fans (Renga, 2019). Reviewers and fans of *My Brilliant Friend* also laud the series’ particular take on female friendship and give praise for a “realistic” depiction of 1950s Naples. The series’ “authenticity” is a key feature of the vast majority of Anglophone reviews which make mention of the use of Neapolitan dialect and the casting of nonprofessional actors, which contribute to the process of manufacturing an “authentic” experience from the novels.¹⁸

For example (all emphases mine):

- “It’s an *authentic* Italian production that was made in conjunction with HBO” (Bleznak 2018)
- “Notably, the show was shot in Neapolitan dialect to make it as *authentic* as possible to the books” (Anderson 2018).
- “I asked why an American network should care about the accuracy of a language if their audiences would be watching the series with subtitles. They replied that they wanted the series to be *authentic* [...]. Such attention to detail and *authenticity* is relatively new in the United States” (France 24 2018).
- “The pressure to remain true to the book and the author’s vision was enormous; anything less than *authentic* might trigger the wrath of the Ferrante faithful” (Press 2018).
- “HBO has patted itself on the back for its devotion to *authenticity*” (Wanshel 2018).
- “This *authentic* take on the first Neapolitan novel is the most honest and vivid portrait of the lives of young girls ever brought to TV” (The Guardian 2018).

The following comments refer principally to casting and performance:

18 The obsession regarding the series’ authenticity extends as well to its reception in academic scholarship. For example: “It seemed inauthentic to watch 1950s’ school boys in *My Brilliant Friend* get together as a gang to throw stones at a girl for the sole reason that she beat a boy in a classroom academic contest, or to see the father of the smart girl throw her out of a second-story window because she wants to go to middle school” (Dika 2018: 93).

- “In a throwback effort at *authenticity*, producers are looking for amateur child actors — two sets of girls in 8- and 15-year-old iterations, and then a large ‘Annie’-esque supporting cast of hard-knock lifers” (Horowitz 2017).
- “The show, with roughly 150 actors and 5,000 extras, makes its push for *authenticity* clear in an early scene when Lila throws Elena’s doll into a dark cellar with both daring and treachery” (Gameran 2018).
- “Then, on top of that, you have to find actresses who speak in the Neapolitan dialect, because that was the only way to bring this to life in an *authentic way*” (Sarner 2018).
- “In case you haven’t noticed by now, the directors of *My Brilliant Friend* are all about *authenticity*, so their casting process was no different” (Daw 2018).

This anxiety around authenticity could be explained in part by the anxieties around the authenticity of the identity of the novels’ author, about which much work has already been done.¹⁹ However, clear in reviewer and fan reactions to the series, the stakes for getting it right are high. And the majority of critics and fans (in the many sites I consulted) tend to agree that the adaptation is a success.²⁰

A striking amount of criticism on the series references the series’ neorealist qualities or precursors. *Vanity Fair Italia* defines *My Brilliant Friend* as “una serie ‘neorealista’ che De Sica, De Santis, e Rossellini avrebbero fatto a gara per dirigere / a neorealist series that De Sica, De Santis, and Rossellini would have fought it out to direct” (Manca 2018). And series director Saverio Costanzo compares the series’ elaborate casting process to the plot of Visconti’s *Bellissima* (1951), a film that foregrounds female performance and precarity, and the potential perils of film casting (Horowitz 2017). The critical discourse of *My Brilliant Friend*’s neorealist legacy brings up, as Catherine O’Rawe has argued in her discussion of the nonprofessional child performer, the “legitimizing label of neorealism” (O’Rawe 2018).

The vast amount of reviews of *My Brilliant Friend* that emphasize the series’ realistic elements, authenticity, or neorealist genealogy, further underline Italian cinema’s (and television’s) limited international circulation practices. With some exception, those products that appeal to viewers outside of Italy’s borders evidence a prevailing “ignorance of and prejudice towards contemporary Italian Cinema [and television]

wherein ‘quality’ still equals Neorealism” (Hipkins and Renga 2016: 381), or some other socially engaged representation. *My Brilliant Friend* places a focus on poverty, access to education, physical and sexual violence, and physical and mental abuse. This focus on “serious” issues places *My Brilliant Friend* in line with other “serious” Italian films and television series that found international audiences.²¹ One critic considers the series important because it “faces outward, asserting Italy’s place in the world,” in particular because of its anti-Trump, anti-populist, and anti-nationalist message regarding the potential of overcoming barriers, and of breaking down walls.²²

The series also stands out to reviewers thanks to its placing “brilliant, ambitious, and complicated women” at the narrative core (Horowitz 2018). These women, Horowitz maintains, are nowhere like the “Berlusconi-era adornments” from earlier television programs characterized by the “velina” or television showgirl, a term that “redefined popular culture,” particularly because many Italian television showgirls featuring on Mediaset’s channels followed ex-premiere Silvio Berlusconi into politics after his party’s 1994 victory, a win that launched him into office as Prime Minister (Wolff 2009). Aside from a joke here or there, television showgirls do not speak, and they spend their screen time dancing, sometimes singing, or silently standing by, aiding the star persona. As Danielle Hipkins has shown, the media has a history of vilifying girls who work towards stardom through performance. Ironically however, the “figure of the showgirl is the most internationally notorious trademark of Italian television” (Hipkins 2012: 154-55), a national emblem most likely created in the media as a result of the many global scandals associated with Berlusconi involving young and under-aged women, many of whom made their breakthrough in television whilst working as showgirls. Contrary to the much-maligned television showgirl, Lila and Lenù are viewed as embodying an “authentic” adolescence that appeals to both local and global audiences.

21 See Hipkins and Renga 2016. For example, with regards to which productions are taught in Anglophone countries: “The ‘new canon’ of our title refers to the way in which a surprisingly rigid canon of contemporary cinema and television has already emerged in the Anglophone curriculum, one that maintains Neorealist and political auteur films preoccupation with ‘serious’ issues” (388). Further, the majority of the corpus that informs the “International Circulation of Italian Cinema” project is composed of films that have as a focus engaged issues such as immigration, terrorism, World War II and the Holocaust, sexual violence, the mafia, the clergy, or the prison system (International Circulation of Italian Cinema). My 2014 study on Italian screen studies in the anglophone context concludes that “Neorealism and auteur/director specific studies still appear to be the bread and butter of the publishing business” (Renga 2014: 246).

22 However, I disagree that *My Brilliant Friend* narrates the *overcoming* “of ignorance, sexism, and provincialism” (Horowitz 2018).

19 See, for example: Savoy 2018; Tizzi 2018; and Bojar 2018.

20 One critic praises the series, even in its “alluring artificial[ity]” (Grisar 2018).

4. AUTHENTIC FACES

I am particularly intrigued with the casting of the series as related to the so-called authenticity of the child and adolescent characters and the actors who interpret them. In the words of one Italian critic, the four nonprofessionals find themselves, “Tra il sogno di Hollywood e l’ombra di *Gomorra* / Between Hollywood and the shadow of *Gomorra*” (Rep tv 2017). This transnational status of the four actors also applies to the casting, reception, and fandom around Lila and Lenù, as I discuss further on. I asked Casani and Muccino if their casting practice was at all influenced by the status of *My Brilliant Friend* as a co-production, and whether they chose actors who could “represent” 1950s Italy to a broad audience. Muccino responded that their choices were not at all influenced by how American audiences might imagine the characters, “who maybe saw them as prettier, more folkloristic.” Instead, they relied upon instinct backed by an incredible amount of labor on the part of the production and casting teams (Casani and Muccino 2019). *My Brilliant Friend* is of course not the first Italian production that casts nonprofessionals. The series joins multiple other film and television series who look locally for talent, a practice that goes back to neorealism, and before. For example, Muccino and Casani have a history of casting nonprofessionals, for example in the series *Gomorra*, and Muccino was told by Sollima to only cast fresh faces in the series *Romanzo criminale*.

As Warner explains, “selecting the best person for the role has weighty implications” (Warner 2015: 12), and the stakes are particularly high when working with an adaptation of a highly successful source text. The series’ strict fidelity to the novel is underlined by Casani and Muccino. Casani bluntly notes that when casting the series “there was no freedom,” and Muccino adds that they “had to be very faithful [to the novel...] that was the biggest challenge, to try to convey the sensation ‘I imagined it like this’” (Casani and Muccino 2019). Costanzo underlines that when casting *L’amica geniale* he was looking for “classical faces” (Press 2018) and he and his team were clearly willing to put in the effort to scour Naples and surroundings looking for the right fit. In casting the four key faces of *My Brilliant Friend*, Muccino, Casani, and crew interacted with over 9,000 nonprofessional female children and adolescents over a period of seven months, all of whom were required to be from in and around Naples.²³ Muccino notes

23 Vicki Mayer speaks to the “alienated labor involved in many, if not all, casting calls. Quite simply, a lot of time and effort goes to waste in finding ‘real people’ that could just as easily be found next store, at the super market, or at the shopping mall” (2009: 22).

that they worked with a team of fifteen or sixteen, which is quite large (they note that most casting ensembles involve three or four people). Casani, Muccino, and company scoured Naples, in particular educational institutions and theatrical and acting schools, which are numerous in Naples because of Campania’s “rich theatrical culture” (Casani and Muccino 2019). One critic dubs the casting process “epic” and notes that it was “akin to the *Gone with the Wind* search for Scarlett O’Hara” (Press 2018). The casting call for the first season declares: “we will meet children, girls and boys exclusively from Campania that have not yet come to a similar casting call recently” (Facebook 2017). This casting process is similar to the early Hollywood casting and neorealist casting patterns called “face casting” where “the director procured actors wherever he could, sometimes off of the streets or wherever he happened to be shooting his film” (Yoakem 1958: 36). According to Warner, face casting is having a comeback in Hollywood (and clearly in Italy), as both face casting and contemporary casting processes are “concerned with what look best fits the role” (Warner 2015: 16). Casting practices that focus upon the performer’s face are not new trends in the business, as discussed in a 1958 article on Casting in *Film Quarterly*: “No matter how elaborate the system became, one basic factor prevailed: the accent was always on the face” (Yoakem 1958: 36), a casting technique underlined by Muccino: “It is almost automatic when you are reading a screenplay to think of the face” (Berbenni 2018). However, she maintains that “it is not a question of beauty or ugliness, instead what is important is expressivity, impact, and communicating with the face” (Muccino and Casani 2019).

With *My Brilliant Friend*, the best look was one unassociated with established actors. Muccino has a long, successful history of casting nonprofessionals dating back to her work on *Romanzo criminale. La serie*, which Muccino describes as “her first job that was so free” that did not rely upon famous faces to draw in the audience. With regards to her collaboration with Stefano Sollima, she notes that the showrunner insisted, “I do not want anyone who is even somewhat known’ [...] That was the first job with a lot of freedom and clearly that entailed a huge amount of work, because it requires more research, and therefore, many many many screentests, months and months, a year of work” (Casani and Muccino 2019). And later in casting Sollima’s 2015 film *Suburra*, Muccino notes that Sollima “did not want known faces,” and explains that she finds “new faces” all over the place: “In amateur theater companies, in acting schools, at the cinema, even on the street” (Berbenni 2018). They do note that many of the ac-

tors that they cast do have professional theatrical training (Casani and Muccino 2019).

In an article entitled "The Faces of Ferrante," Miranda Popkey (2018) puts forth that Muccino and Casani "got the faces right," populating the series with faces that are "sloppier and saggier, more wrinkled and more weathered and more crooked than many American readers will have imagined for these characters." She goes on to discuss how bedraggled, wild, and infirm in particular the women look, noting that Muccino and Casani understand what poverty looks like (Popkey 2018).²⁴ Popkey's emphasis is on the choice of faces that express an authentic experience of 1950s Neapolitan destitution. Here, the burden of corporeal decay is placed primarily upon the women surrounding Lila and Lenù, who, in the books and series, are beaten, mentally unstable, and subjugated to the men in their lives. This ensemble cast of vanquished women speaks to the casting director's reliance upon what Turow defines as standards for acceptable casting: credibility and visual balance. The first ensures that the characters will be believable and will not distract viewers from the narrative, while the second regards how actors look in relationship to other actors, and how well they fit together.²⁵ The series' credibility and visual balance are underscored by one reviewer: "Young Elena and Lila dominate the series' first two hours so completely that none of the other characters in their orbit really stands out, which also means none of them stands out as fake or distracting" (Fienberg 2018). Further, Turow notes that minor characters are important because they "form a large part of the 'landscape of people' which unfolds daily on TV and helps anchor the dramas of 'real life' locations" (Turow 1978: 18-19).

One particular challenge in casting *My Brilliant Friend* is locating two *different* sets of nonprofessional female performers who would be credible and also visually balance with the series' extensive cast. In casting the series, a lot of it came down to luck, as is clear in this *Vanity Fair* piece on the discovery of the four focal actors:

24 The full citation reads: "The women fare no better. Lila's mother's face is pocked with acne scars. The lips of Gigliola Spagnuolo are twisted into a perpetual sneer. Melina Cappuccio, a widow in frail physical and mental health, has skin leath-ered before its time and a nose like the blade of an ax. Even Lila, a stubborn stick of a child who matures into an unequivocal beauty, wears her sex appeal like a weapon. The teenage Lila is all cheekbones and eyes and hidden teeth. Her hair appears, until a fifth-episode visit to Naples proper, never to have been combed" (Popkey 2018).

25 Turow defines credibility as: "A caster's perception of what most people think someone in a particular occupation or role looks like" While visual balance implies: "the caster's perception of how well actors fit next to one another from an aesthetic standpoint" (Turow 1984: 171-72).

The four stars they chose had no professional acting experience at all. Fifteen-year-old Gaia Girace, who plays the older Lila, is the only one who'd ever taken acting classes. Sixteen-year-old Margherita Mazzucco, who plays teen Lenù, auditioned after someone handed her a flyer at her school. Eleven-year-old Elisa Del Genio (younger Lenù) accompanied her brother to an audition and was chosen, while he was rejected for looking too Nordic. (He is still unhappy about that.) Twelve-year-old Ludovica Nasti, who plays the young version of Lila with a savage intensity (and who is equally magnetic in real life), said she approached the audition as if it were a game (Press 2018).

Typically, the nonprofessional actor adds a sense of "authenticity" to narrative as audiences are not distracted by familiar faces, and, in particular with nonprofessionals cast locally, can represent the lived vitality of a location. According to Pamela Robertson Wojcik, the nonprofessional creates a "realist effect," lending a "documentary touch" in fulfilling a "realist criteria for physical appearance, but also is taken to reflect and be typical of the reality represented" (Wojcik 2003: 230-31).²⁶ And this is even more so with the child nonprofessional, who can be considered a blank slate and who just gushes realism and emotion. Unlike "star casting", which can lend "visibility and status" to a product while drawing in viewers (Knox 2018: 311), the child nonprofessional, as Catherine O'Rawe notes, "becomes a kind of 'star attraction' on the festival circuit, an object of curiosity and a marker of authenticity for a cinephile audience" (O'Rawe 2018). Muccino underlines the commitment to legitimacy and authenticity in the casting of the series: "Our priority was to be faithful to these descriptions, not only from a physical point of view, but also from a psychological and behavioral one" (Reilly 2018).²⁷

The process of narrowing down the list of potential Lilas and Lenùs was extensive, and every evening at about six o'clock, the team would meet up and compare notes, preparing a list of candidates for Costanzo, who then provided in-

26 See also an insightful article on casting the television series *The Wire* with several nonprofessional local actors who speak in the Detroit accent: "The appearance of real-life locals who have experienced many of the problems and issues dealt with in the narrative only lends this credibility [... The series is less] concerned with the acting abilities of the supporting cast than with conveying their everyday reality" (Kelly 2019).

27 Such a casting practice goes against the "English speaking fantasy casting suggestions" for the imagined Hollywood remake of the series (Bromwich 2016).

put. Such a collaborative process that evolves over time helps shape characters physically and emotionally, up until “you have ten Lilas and ten Elenas, and then four, and then two, and finally one” (Casani and Muccino 2019). In deciding the final faces of the younger dyad, Muccino notes that they looked for something within the child actor that resembled the character. For example, “Ludovica Nasti is Lila, she has the same temper, the same force, and is also a bit masculine at times. She plays soccer, she fought hard in life as she had leukemia, so she is determined and strong just like Lila,” while Elisa del Genio “was exactly Elena, more reserved, always observing, who was always one step behind, never knowing until the last moment that she would make it” (Casani and Muccino 2019).

More frequently than not, after a memorable debut, non-professional young performers fall out of view and are rarely cast in another role (O’Rawe 2018).²⁸ However, this is not the case for Mazzucco and Girace, who star in the second season of *My Brilliant Friend: Story of a New Name*. This is also not the case for Nasti, who has been compared to Sophia Loren, and who currently has a role in Italy’s longest running soap opera *Un posto al sole (A Place in the Sun, 1996 -)*, features in *Rosa, Pietra e Stella* (Marcella Sannino, 2019), and plays Anne Frank in the short *Il nostro nome è Anna (Our Name is Anne, Sergio and Sara Martinelli, 2019)*. Indeed, Muccino points out that Nasti was a natural on the set, as during the screen tests and call backs she instinctively knew where the camera was while it was moving around her, an intuition that professional actors are incapable of (Casani and Muccino 2019). This insistence on unrehearsed naturalness recalls Karen Lury’s contention that a “preference for untrained children seems to be consistent, regardless of the film’s genre or its production context.” This is because the child nonprofessional’s “apparent spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness” translates into a naturalistic performance that is more difficult for those “who have been trained to ‘act’” (Lury 2010: 160).

5. CONCLUSION: MY TRUE BRILLIANT FRIEND

Promotional material around the series foregrounds in particular Girace’s and Mazzucco’s status as nonprofessionals. For example, Carissa Cappellani’s 2018 documentary *La mia amica geniale (My True Brilliant Friend)* focuses on Girace and Mazzucco, and how they prepared to play Lenù and Lila, their

experience while filming, and the series’ aftermath at festivals and premieres.²⁹ The English translation of the title, with the addition of the word “True,” stresses authenticity, in this case, authentic friendship. Much of the documentary focuses on Mazzucco and Girace’s offscreen friendship and on how, in the series, documentary, and in real life, Girace and Mazzucco perform girlhood, for example in slumber parties with castmates and in discussions with family members about their future, and whether they will continue in school. At one point, viewers watch Girace as she has her braces removed, the camera voyeuristically hovering just above her mouth as it is manipulated by the dental equipment.

The documentary helps to promote the series through the focus on female adolescent behavior. Central to nonprofessional performance is the acting coach who no doubt aids in manufacturing Lila and Lenù’s “authenticity.” Antonio Calone and Anna Redi are the two coaches behind *My Brilliant Friend*, and they spent substantial time with the actors in rehearsals and training sessions. *My True Brilliant Friend* represents on how childishness and adolescence are coached and performed in and around the series, and received by audiences and fans, which speaks to how child performers are often “over-determined” by those who surround them (Lury 2010: 10), and how the casting and coaching of child and adolescent performers is “crucial” to the production practice (Pierini 2015: 14).³⁰

Mazzucco’s over-determination is clear in an exchange with Costanzo, who attempts to coach her on how to get into character. He tells her,

Your job is simpler but also much more difficult. You have to be the main protagonist without being the main protagonist. She [Lila] needs to work on the tremendous nuances of her performance. But at least there is a text. You have to do the same thing, but invisibly, without devices. It’s much more complicated. You must approach it altruistically [...] Take a vacation from yourself, Margherita. Take a vacation... from your cynical defense mechanisms. Take a vacation and you’ll see what an amazing journey awaits.

28 Also at issue is the question of pay as nonprofessionals come cheap.

29 The documentary was originally available as an extra on HBO and RaiPlay, and at the time of writing can be purchased on Amazon Prime.

30 I follow three of them on Instagram (Mazzucco has yet to accept my request, and does not have any posts), where they are incredibly active in promoting seasons one and two of the series.



FIGURES 1-2

This interaction between director and actor reveals, how “the body of the actor and his/her history is always on stage with the character” (Cook 2018: 13). Also, in the words of Catherine Driscoll, Costanzo’s coaching underpins the “difficult negotiations and performances of feminine adolescence” (Driscoll 2002: 9) as these performances relate to a desire – on the part of many stakeholders – for a representation of an authentic experience of youth.³¹ In this example, Mazzucco’s authenticity comes at the cost of her self-abnegation, which undermines Lury’s argument regarding the inherent realism of the child nonprofessional. Also relevant is Mariapaola Pierini’s statement regarding the difficult task of the acting coach, which falls between “authenticity-virginity and knowledge” (Pierini 2015: 15).

In *My True Brilliant Friend*, and also in interviews and red-carpet appearances featuring the quartet,³² it is clear that the child actor’s self-presentation is conditioned by a transnational film/television industry which places young actors in situations that are profitable for the product, and potentially precarious for the girl. And this sense of precarity is apparent in two of the most widespread images from the series (Figures 1-2).

In the first, headless girls are shown running towards a threat, or from an enemy. In the other, they appear listless and glum as they read. Precarity is etched on their faces and bodies, and this sense of imminent peril recalls series director Saverio Costanzo’s assertion: “Naples is an open-air theater.

Probably to defend themselves from violence they always have to wear masks. Everyone there is an actor” (Vivarelli 2018b); or, as Amy Cook argues, “Some bodies pass more seamlessly than others” (Cook 2018: 9). Knowing a bit about the family lives of some of the four female actors, in particular Mazzucco, who is from one of Naples’ wealthiest neighborhoods, this is a loaded claim, and it appears that Costanzo understands authenticity as theatricality. And Costanzo’s remarks on authentic peril – or how growing up in the streets of Naples translates into an authentic performance of poverty – resonates with this comment from co-producer Lorenzo Mieli: “We couldn’t imagine American actresses playing Italian schoolgirls in poor areas of Naples in the 1950s” (France 24 2018), or also this comment from a mother of two children who auditioned for the series, but did not make the cut: “Acting is in the Naples blood” (Horowitz 2017).

This essay explores such loaded claims regarding the mechanisms by which an “authentic” Italy is exported to transnational audiences. For example, if, as Mieli claims, the team could not imagine American actresses in the roles of Lila and Lenù, how could they imagine wealthier Italians doing so? In the end, it comes back to the face, as Muccino explains. When I asked how Casani and Muccino prepared for the casting process of *My Brilliant Friend*, Muccino excitedly responded that Casani is “the queen of the mood board.” Casani elaborated: “Luckily we were working with a period in history right after the Second World War. We began by looking at photographs, cinema, art.” Muccino added that her mother was born in 1944 in Naples, and she “took all of her mother’s photo albums, that included faces that were truly ‘those.’” Muccino points out they were confronted with the challenge of finding faces that corresponded to the characters who had

31 I am indebted to Danielle Hipkins’ work on performances of girlhood in relation to casting and precarious adolescence. See: Hipkins 2017a and Hipkins 2017b.

32 For example, Nasti and Del Genio are coached by an interviewer on how to look at the camera when answering questions (YouTube 2018).

entered the “collective imaginary of the reader” and hence they spent a lot of time researching “the appearances and the faces of the epoch” and thinking about “the thinness of the postwar period” (Casani and Muccino 2019), which underlines how casting directors are “cultural producers” (Martin 2018: 294). In one reviewer’s opinion, Del Genio and Nasti have “the unforced naturalism of the best of juvenile neorealist stars” (Feinberg 2018). Ultimately, *My Brilliant Friend*’s casting process and its reception are anchored in a postwar neorealist aesthetic that has a proven transnational appeal.

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