

# Ermanno Olmi

Director whose films, exploring the lives of peasants and workers, were underpinned by his Catholic faith

**E**RMANNO OLMI, who has died aged 86, almost single-handedly revived the realist tradition of Italian cinema in the Sixties.

Of humble stock, he was associated closely with the peasants and the proletariat of his native Lombardy and made several films about the lives of ordinary men and women, though his later work was more allegorical. He was the film-maker par excellence of the workplace. While he depicted the monotony of dead-end jobs, he regarded work as man's "chance to express himself, the average person's opportunity to be creative".

Such remarks did not endear him to Leftists, who considered his characters too passive and his films flawed by political complacency and resignation. They judged this a by-product of his Catholicism. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Olmi retained his faith, which underpinned his films. Many, not least *I fidanzati* (*The Engagement*, 1963), consciously echoed the attitudes of the 19th-century Catholic novelist Alessandro Manzoni, also from Lombardy, who wrote *I promessi sposi*.

Olmi was a self-effacing stylist. He shot and edited most of his films himself, eschewing flashy photographic effects and concentrating on the beauty and simplicity of everyday life. His mentor was Vittorio De Sica, one of the founders of the so-called neo-realist movement, whose films *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D* created the mould which Olmi sought to fill.

Olmi's Catholicism, though always implicit in his work, surfaced in his fourth film, made in 1965. Known internationally as *A Man Named John*, it was Olmi's personal tribute to Pope John XXIII, who hailed, like himself, from Lombardy. Neither a documentary nor a drama, it had elements of both, with Rod Steiger miscast as the Pope and, in an Everyman role, as commentator. A commercial and critical failure, it embarrassed even Olmi's staunchest supporters. Years later, he conceded that he had been too close to the subject.

It cut short his rapidly growing reputation. Though he remained active, all his work between 1965 and 1978 was for Italian television. The films were seen at international

festivals, but few were taken up for cinema release. Outside Italy, he became a forgotten man until he bounced back in 1978 with his masterpiece *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, a three-hour survey of peasant life at the turn of the century, which won Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

Olmi suffered a severe stroke in 1983 and was in poor health for the rest of his life, though he managed to complete many more films. Most of them were more ambitious than his previous works (he tackled the Creation and the Flood, for example, in his 1994 work *Genesis*). But commentators regretted the absence of the common-or-garden touch that had informed his earlier films.

Born in Bergamo on July 24 1931, Ermanno Olmi was the son of peasants who had come to the city in search of employment. His mother had worked in a textile mill from the age of 13, while his father, a railway engineer, was fined for opposing fascism and died during the Second World War.

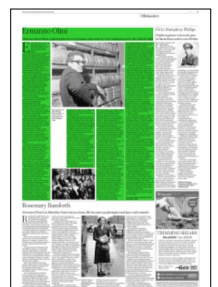
The young Ermanno studied at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Milan and gained early experience as an actor and director in amateur productions at the Palazzo Litta.

He dropped out of formal studies at the age of 18 and joined his mother as a clerk at the Edison-Volta electric plant in 1949. Continuing to act in amateur theatricals and to dabble in film-making as a hobby, he impressed his employers sufficiently to be put in charge of their new film department. Between 1952 and 1959 he made 40 documentary shorts on 16mm film about aspects of the company's activities.

One of these, shot in 1959, expanded during production to become Olmi's first feature film, *Time Stood Still*, in which he used non-professional actors, one of whom worked for Edison. It was about the building of a hydroelectric dam in the Italian Alps, focusing on two men, a watchman and his student helper, who spend the winter in the mountains guarding the unfinished dam. Though the difference in their ages at first causes friction, eventually they become firm friends. Out of a film originally intended as a public relations project, Olmi made a much nobler tribute to human solidarity.

Encouraged by the success of this film, Olmi left Edison-Volta and, with

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fellow cineastes, set up a film-making cooperative called the 24 Horses. It produced his second film, *Il posto* (1961), for under \$15,000. Semi-autobiographical, it was the simple story of a young boy applying for his first job – with a conglomerate. It concentrated on everyday life and, like the best work of De Sica, achieved a kind of poetry through truth.

The office block in which the film was shot was the Edison building where Olmi himself had worked; the young lad in the leading role had been employed in a similar capacity, while the secretary with whom he falls in love was played by Loredana Detto, later to become Olmi's wife.

His third film, *Ifidanzati* (1963), was made by another cooperative, the December 22 Group. It was a considerable advance on *Il posto*. After the first sequence, the leading characters are separated. Long engaged, they are too poor to marry and their relationship has staled. To raise money, the boy takes a job in Sicily, while she remains in Milan. But instead of their engagement foundering, it is cemented. Much of the film is told in voice-over, while the camera cuts from then to now, from here to there, avoiding such cinematic clichés as fades and dissolves.

It took Olmi more than a decade to recover from the disaster of *A Man Named John* (1965). He carried on working, but Italian Leftists rejected his 1968 effort, *One Fine Day*, because it was about a white-collar worker rather than a representative of the proletariat. So he was driven back to television, for which he made *The Scavengers* (1970), about rag-and-bone men, *During the Summer* (1971), a whimsical piece about an eccentric who “ennobles” those he thinks deserve it, and *The Circumstance* (1973), a study of the impact of redundancy on middle-aged executives. They were all excellent works, but little seen abroad.

Then, after five years, Olmi

re-established himself with *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978). A panorama of peasant life in and around his birthplace, Bergamo, at the turn of the century, it was described by the critic David Thomson as “a mix of Breughel and neo-realism”. Based partly on his grandmother's recollections, the film told of a young boy who had to walk six kilometres to school and whose father cut down one of the landlord's poplar trees to make new shoes for his son – a “crime” for which the family was driven out of their home.

It was five years, however, before Olmi made another film. *Cammina, cammina* (1983) was a modern version of the story of the Three Wise Men, which some found more worthy than

inspired. Then, after a documentary in the same year about Milan, he made *Long Live the Lady!* in 1987 – a brilliant account of young waiters attending a rich old crone and her guests at a dinner that the servants could never afford. One of Olmi's wittiest films, it marked a return to form.

In 1988 he won the main prize at the Venice Film Festival for *Legend of the Holy Drinker*, an international co-production based on Joseph Roth's novel about a drunken tramp who comes, by chance, into a small fortune. After another four years, Olmi made a poetic documentary about the river Po, *Lungo il fiume*, followed by *The Secret of the Old Wood* (1993), another whimsical piece in which a sentient wood defeats plans for its commercial exploitation, and *Genesis*, with narration by Paul Scofield, in 1994.

He continued working until shortly before his death, winning variable reviews. *Il Mestiere delle armi* (“The Profession of Arms”, 2001) set during the 16th-century wars between the mercenary forces of the emperor Charles V and the armies of the Papacy, was nominated for the Palme d'Or, but left many critics baffled, one describing it as the “festival bore”. *Singing Behind Screens* (2003) was a visually seductive fable about war and peace set among the pirates of late 18th-century China.

*Centochiodi* (“One Hundred Nails”, 2007), began promisingly as a *Name of the Rose*-style thriller about the wilful destruction of sacred manuscripts, but turned into a somewhat sentimental story of a rural community transformed by the arrival of a reclusive religious scholar. *Villaggio di cartone* (“The Cardboard Village”, 2011), set inside a church which is being deconsecrated, was dismissed by one critic as “a heavy-handed religious tale with all the nuance of a provincial church pageant”.

For Olmi's Catholicism was always best expressed obliquely – in *Il posto*, *Ifidanzati* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. When he tackled it head-on, he did not always avoid pious banality.

His final major film, *Torneranno i Prati* (“The Meadows will Bloom Again”, 2014), a contribution to the commemoration of the First World War filmed, mostly at night, in remote corners of the wintry Alto Adige mountains, prompted one reviewer to observe that Olmi “may have never been a great storyteller, but very few filmmakers can hold a candle to his talent as a mood setter”.

Ermanno Olmi is survived by his wife Loredana and by their two sons and a daughter.

**Ermanno Olmi, born July 24 1931, died May 5 2018**

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