

HOLLYWOOD ON THE TIBER

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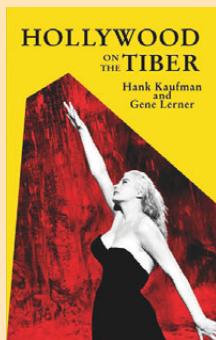
REVIEWED BY PAMELA HUTCHINSON

This juicy showbiz memoir depicts the Roman film industry in the 1950s and 1960s as a paradise for cinephiles: the auteurs of neorealism rubbing shoulders with Italy's greatest stars and a stream of excitable Hollywood visitors. All the glamour of *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953) and *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960), and just a hint of the bureaucracy and backroom deals that allowed the cameras to turn and the cocktail parties to swing. Anita Ekberg dancing in the Trevi Fountain in the small hours, but the camera pulls back for a few seconds to reveal the heavy wading boots she wore to protect her feet from the freezing February waters.

In 1953, Hank Kaufman and Gene Lerner were a couple of young Americans besotted with Europe who decided to do whatever it took to stay on the continent. Their scheme was to open a movie talent agency in Rome, and while this was not exactly welcomed by the locals, somehow Hank and Gene made it work. They positioned themselves at the centre of a glamorous exchange of transatlantic celebrities and cineastes, with a front-row seat for Hollywood's European expansion, and rapidly became confidantes and counsellors to stars from Ava Gardner to Anna Magnani.

Hollywood on the Tiber is officially their account of the rise and fall of Kaufman-Lerner Associates, but in fact it is something far more appealing: a breathless collection of intimate anecdotes about their A-list clientele, comprising tantrums and trysts and the occasional troubled contract negotiation. The book was written at the very end of the 1970s and published in an Italian translation in 1982. It is now published in English for the first time. As such, this is film history at a double remove, tales of the mid-century, through a filter that already seems euphemistic (about Hank and Gene's own romantic relationship, in particular), and occasionally quaint.

Not that that should stop most of the fun. Kaufman and Lerner lean into the allure of their subject, recalling tempestuous encounters with high-strung clients in uncanny detail. And the prose is ripe. This book is rich with flagrantly overwritten tributes to the eternal city ("Rome, seductive courtesan of the night, was continuing to exercise her sorcery"), where "luminaries" enjoy "repasts"... as such the style is perfectly fitted to the subject. That said, the reader's patience may wear thin on the subject of décolletage. The descriptions of famous breasts in this book could fill a chapter of their



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ABOVE
Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (1953)

own. Hank and Gene rarely seem to meet a female star at eye level, rhapsodising about the figures of Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Ekberg and more with phrases such as "twin mountains and the gorge between them", "mammoth mammary equipment" and other inelegant variations. Regrettably, if they have nothing nice to say about a woman's bosom, they focus instead on her "fatness" in less complimentary terms.

Still there is plenty of good, solid business here and when the book concentrates on the nuts and bolts of making movies it is fascinating. How their actors staged a strike to persuade Italian producers to include their representatives in negotiations, how they worked out a clandestine deal with Charlie Chaplin for *A King in New York* (1957), how they talked Marlon Brando out of escaping from the Italian premiere of *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), how they persuaded Ekberg to dance in that fountain for Fellini... The enthusiasm is muted occasionally, just enough to make it clear that this is a tale with a serious side. The arrival of Hollywood on the Tiber was not always a boon to the Italian film industry, and many of those *émigrés* were escaping the brutalities of the House Un-American Activities Committee back in the US. Also, Gene, for example, increasingly wanted to write rather than represent, which meant leaving Rome.

Then there are the deals unbrokered. Gene and Hank candidly recall how they placed Rossano Brazzi in David Lean's

Summertime (1955) opposite Katharine Hepburn, but were pushed out of the deal – and the commission. Of all the anecdotes here, the most breathtaking, and unedifying, involves Ava Gardner, who had famously played the mixed-race character Julie in *Show Boat* (George Sidney, 1951) contemplating whether to accept another role as a Black woman – Billie Holiday. In a quite uncomfortable scene, Gene attempts to advise Gardner frankly, without neglecting his unwritten obligation to flatter his client: "A white woman doing Billie... It's tough, Ava. But I really think you can do it." The duo wrestle with the dilemma until Gene hits upon the idea of writing to an outside authority: the novelist James Baldwin. His measured reply settles the matter: "It is widely rumoured – and this may sound like a joke, but it isn't – that Ava Gardner is white... In this particular case, I don't quite see how we could hope to get around this problem." Diana Ross went on to play Billie Holiday, in *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972), and although the authors maintain that Gardner could have triumphed in the role, we can all be grateful for Baldwin's gracious intervention.

Hollywood on the Tiber has a heady appeal: an insider's view of the business that maintains the lovestruck gaze of a movie fan. As a partial account of a celebrated period in cinema, it offers all the pleasures of a great party: beautiful people, exaggerated emotions, grade-A gossip and only a trifling hangover.