

The Secret Behind Italy's Favorite New Film

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ABSTRACT

The new film "Quo Vado?" is bigger than "Star Wars," because it speaks to the country's nostalgia for safe, secure careers.

FULL TEXT

ROME -- A BALDING government clerk in his late 30s has one true love: "il posto fisso," a job for life. He doesn't want to compete in the labor market; he has no urge to move on. He doesn't even want to earn more. Give him a desk, a chair and a 9-to-5 job in the "pubblica amministrazione," and he's happy. Clocking in late, chatting with colleagues, accepting small bribes from taxpayers (most favored: quail), a regular salary -- that's life! And, of course, there are rubber stamps. The clerk loves them. Slam! Slam! Slam! When his boss, who wants to get rid of him, asks angrily: "What have you contributed to this department?" he shows her his stamping prowess, and almost demolishes her glass table.

This is, more or less, the story of "Quo Vado?" a new comedy that has smashed Italian box office records. It had its premiere on Jan. 1, and in its first week made \$39 million; "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," in three weeks, reached just \$23 million. According to The Hollywood Reporter, "Quo Vado?" -- or "Where Am I Going?" a modern spin on the Latin question "Quo vadis?" ("Where are you going?") -- is on course to beat the box-office record for an Italian film in the country, currently at \$56 million, set by 2013's "Sole a catinelle." (Italy's top-grossing film, "Avatar," made \$71.5 million here.)

"Quo Vado?" is indeed funny, full of crisp jokes and amusing situations. But movies don't just happen. When they strike it big, it means they've tapped into something in the national psyche. So what is it?

The clerk, Checco -- played by Checco Zalone, a comedian from Apulia -- is a simpleton with a good heart who strikes it lucky, an Italian Forrest Gump, with tagliolini instead of shrimp. The ministry wants him to resign; he refuses, and ends up relocated to the most unlikely places, from mob-infested Calabria to freezing Norway. There he falls in love with a biologist who challenges his habitual road rage. He becomes a good, law-abiding citizen, but Italy's siren call is too strong. So he goes back to his southern homeland, and to political incorrectness. Hilarity ensues: One day he shouts at a young boy who is about to clean a window, "Don't! There are rules in this country. Leave it to her." And he passes the cloth to a girl standing nearby.

Are Italians really that sexist? Are real Italians as passionate about that job for life? Not anymore, thankfully. But we love seeing a film that reminds us of what we have overcome. And it comes at a time when the public- and private-sector labor forces are diverging, in terms of their job protections, incomes and worldviews.

Italians aren't afraid of a more dynamic labor market. There is still the dream of making it in the private sector, even if it is less secure than the public-sector jobs that have long been the backbone of the Italian work force. Two out of three workers, according to a recent survey in the Turin newspaper La Stampa, wouldn't mind taking a risk, as long as it meant the prospect of career advancement.

To foster this more proactive mood, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi -- who has seen "Quo Vado?" with his family -- last year introduced labor-market legislation known as the Jobs Act (in English, mysteriously). It makes hiring and firing easier, but only in the private sector. For state jobs, like Checco's, things stay the same. Once you're in, you're in.

That's not all. In the public sector, pensions and perks are protected by trade unions, with military efficiency. But private-sector unions are steadily losing ground. As a result, most young Italians who enter the private-sector job market face many hurdles. Only a small percentage find employment at job centers or hiring halls; most succeed through personal connections. Pay is lower than in Northern Europe. German engineers, for example, make 30 percent more than their Italian counterparts.

And the overall number of private-sector jobs is still far too few. In the last two years, according to the European Central Bank, 2.16 million jobs were created in the eurozone: 724,000 in Spain, 592,000 in Germany, but only 127,000 in Italy. And of these, almost two-thirds are part time. Unemployment in Germany is 6.3 percent; in Italy it's going down, but is still high at 11.3 percent. And only 15.1 percent of Italians between 15 and 24 have a job at all, against 43.8 percent in Germany.

And so, even as Mr. Renzi and the Italian media celebrate the private sector, many Italians are longing for the security of the dull but solid life of the government clerk. The region of Umbria expects 32,000 people from across the country to apply for the 94 clerical jobs it will soon open in its local government offices.

It's no coincidence that people are lining up to watch "Quo Vado." Why cry, when you can laugh?

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