

Federico Fellini (1920 – 1993)

Every time I start a picture ... I feel the same fear, the same self-doubts ... and I have only one source on which I can draw, because it comes from within me.

Federico Fellini

Born in 1920, Federico Fellini grew up in Rimini, a small coastal town on the Adriatic Sea. When he was twelve, he ran away with the circus and briefly worked as a clown. He left home again at seventeen to follow a vaudeville troupe, earning his keep this time by writing comedy sketches for them.



Fellini spent World War II in Rome, avoiding the draft and writing for *Cico and Pallina*, a radio drama that featured Giulietta Masina as Pallina. He married the actress in 1943, and they marked their 50th wedding anniversary the day before his death. Masina appeared in several of his films and was called by him, “the greatest influence on my work.”

After the Allied forces liberated Rome in June of 1944, Fellini and comic artist Enrico De Seta opened the Funny Face Shop where they survived the postwar recession drawing caricatures of American soldiers.



Roberto Rossellini gave Fellini an important break in 1945 when he invited him to collaborate on the script for *Open City*, a seminal work of the neorealist movement in film.

In 1950 Fellini co-produced and co-directed his first feature film, *Variety Lights*, a backstage comedy set in the world of small-time travelling performers.

Fellini's international breakthrough came in 1954 with *La Strada*, the story of an innocent young woman, played by Masina, who is sold by her family to a traveling circus. This film also marked the beginning of a long collaboration with composer Nino Rota that lasted until Rota's death in 1979.

La Dolce Vita (Italian for “sweet life” or “good life”) was actually inspired by the sack dress introduced by Balenciaga in 1957. According to his collaborator Brunello Rondi, Fellini felt it gave a woman physical beauty on the outside that might be hiding “a skeleton of squalor and solitude” inside. The 1960 film was condemned by the Vatican newspaper—and Fellini declared a “public sinner”—and was subject to heavy censorship elsewhere. The film wasn't shown in Spain until 1975 after Franco died.

Now an international celebrity, the world eagerly awaited his next film. As early as 1960 he outlined the idea of a man suffering from creative block in a letter to a colleague: “Well then - a guy (a writer? any kind of professional man? a theatrical producer?) has to interrupt the usual rhythm of his life for two weeks because of a not-too-serious disease. It's a warning bell: something is blocking up his system.”

Unclear about the script, he scouted locations throughout Italy “looking for the film.” Apart from naming his hero Guido Anselmi, Fellini had little else. Nonetheless, he gave orders for a spring 1962 start. He signed deals with producer Angelo Rizzoli, fixed dates, had sets constructed, hired his cinematographer and cast Marcello Mastroianni, Anouk Aimée and Sandra Milo. The crisis came to a head in April when, as Fellini relates in *I, Fellini* (a book by Charlotte Chandler based on fourteen years of conversations with the director):

“Everybody was ready and waiting for me to make a film. What they didn't know was that the film I was going to make had fled from me. I sat down and started to write a letter to Rizzoli, admitting the state I was in.

“Before I could send the letter one of the grips came to fetch me. The grips and electricians were having a birthday party for one of them. I wasn't in the mood for anything, but I couldn't say no. I thought they were going to toast the person having the birthday, but instead they toasted me and my 'masterpiece.' Of course they had no idea what I was going to do, but they had perfect faith in me. I left to return to my office, stunned.

“I was about to cost all of these people their jobs. They called me the Magician. Where was my 'magic'? Now what do I do? I asked myself. But myself didn't answer. Then, I heard the small voice of creativity within me. I knew. The story I would tell was of a writer who doesn't know what he wants to write. I tore up my letter to Rizzoli.

“Later, I changed the profession of Guido to that of film director. He became a film director who didn't know what he wanted to direct. It's difficult to portray a writer on the screen, doing what he does in an interesting way. There isn't much action to show in writing. The world of the film director opened up limitless possibilities.”



According to actor Eugene Walter (who played an American Journalist in the film) when shooting began on May 9, 1962, Fellini taped a message near the viewfinder of the camera: "Remember, that this is a comic film."

Confused by the chaos on the set, Fellini's American press director asked for a rationale. Fellini told her he wanted to convey the three levels "on which our minds live: the past, the present, and the conditional - the realm of fantasy".

As was the usual practice with Italian films of the day, the sound was dubbed in afterward. Fellini took full advantage of this, having the actors on the set mouth random lines while waiting until post production to write much of the actual dialogue.

The title Fellini finally settled on, *8 1/2*, refers to the film as number eight and a half in his catalog of work, much like an opus number. He had previously directed six films and participated in three collaborations that counted for a half each.

The film was released in America in June 1963 by Joseph E. Levine who'd bought the rights sight unseen. It was so popular with American audiences that a company attempted to obtain the rights to mass-produce Guido's black director's hat. The day after *8 1/2* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, Fellini toured Disneyland with Walt Disney as his host.

According to Fellini biographer Tullio Kezich, before the musical *Nine* opened on Broadway in 1982, *8 1/2* had also inspired: Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* (1965), Paul Mazursky's *Alex in Wonderland* (1970), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971), Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), Bob Fosse's *All that Jazz* (1979) and Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980.)



Fellini's first Lifetime Achievement Award was bestowed at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival. In 1985 he was honored with the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and became the first non-American to receive the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual award for cinematic achievement. In 1993 he was given an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement.

When Fellini died later that year, a memorial service was held in Studio 5 at Cinecittà (where *La Dolce Vita* was shot), and tens of thousands lined the narrow streets of his hometown to applaud as his casket was carried from the main piazza to the cinema where he'd seen his first films as a child.

In a 2002 poll of film directors conducted by the British Film Institute, *8 1/2* was ranked as the third best film of all time. That film was also included on the Vatican's compilation of the 45 best films made before 1995, the 100th anniversary of cinema.

by Suzanne Bixby