



This young woman was 10 years old when her mother was killed in a Camorra shootout in Naples. She is alarmed that men like the convicted gangster Salvatore Striano, above, are now feted by the film industry as part of a new wave of mafiosi-turned-movie stars. Mark Franchetti reports from Italy on the rise of the showbiz mafia



**HORROR STORY**

Alessandra Clemente, 25, whose mother was accidentally killed by a Camorra bullet. She wants to become a magistrate. Top left: ex-gangster Salvatore Striano, star of the film *Caesar Must Die*



**MONEY SHOT**

A scene from the 2008 film *Gomorrah*. Left: a police helicopter patrols over Naples during an operation against the Camorra. Below: Alessandra Clemente (left) as a child with her brother, Francesco, and their late mother

Salvatore Striano committed his first robbery aged 10 and joined Italy's bloodiest mafia, the Camorra, before turning 18. In 15 years of crime, he was involved in racketeering, drug dealing, armed robberies and numerous shootouts between rival gangs fighting for control of his district in Naples. Addicted to cocaine, he rarely stepped out without two guns strapped to his chest. In total he served 12 years in jail. Whether he ever shot anyone dead is something only he knows.

Striano, or Sasa as he is known to his friends, cut an unlikely figure at this year's

the Camorra, stay alive and go on to redeem yourself. The Camorra is death, blood and pain, but it can be defeated. Now I'm sure of it."

Remarkable though it is, Striano's story is not unique. Italian cinema, which after its glory days of Federico Fellini, Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni, has greatly struggled to make its mark abroad, is again being acclaimed internationally. And this is due to the acting talent of convicted mafia criminals.

Among those shortlisted for the best actor award at this year's Cannes film festival for his captivating performance in the Italian film *Reality* was Aniello Arena, a convicted

the making of *Gomorrah* — another acclaimed film packed with mafiosi-turned-actors.

Judicial probes and unease aside, these former mobsters are not only being hailed for resurrecting Italian cinema but also as proof that, in some of Italy's maximum-security prisons,

## 'WE'D GO OUT, HIGH ON COCAINE, READY TO SHOOT ANYONE'

Berlin film festival, where he shared the red carpet with the likes of Meryl Streep, Christian Bale and Angelina Jolie. Lost in the glitz and unknown to practically everyone at the festival, Sasa was incredulous at being in Berlin. His bewilderment turned to disbelief when *Caesar Must Die*, a film in which Striano, now a professional actor, plays one of the main roles, went on to win the Golden Bear for best picture, the festival's highest accolade — which Italy hadn't won in 21 years. At the photo shoots and press conferences that followed, Striano was so overwhelmed he could barely speak.

"There are no words to express how I felt," Striano told me later. "Imagine my face if someone had told me when I was still running around with a gun in my hand that one day I'd act in a film which would win the Berlinale. I'm living proof that you can sever your links with

Camorra assassin who is serving a life sentence for his part in gunning down three men on the streets of Naples 20 years ago.

Arena received special permission to leave prison on day release to make the film. On set he was always shadowed by guards who led him back to his cell every evening.

When *Reality* won the grand prize, Lorenzo Ornaghi, Italy's culture minister, said that together with *Caesar Must Die* the films are "proof of the great potential and high quality of Italian cinema. We must all be proud of the international prestige of our cinema".

But Italian prosecutors announced on the eve of the Cannes film festival that they are investigating claims by a Camorra turncoat that Matteo Garrone, the director of *Reality*, may have paid bribes and protection money to leading Naples organised-crime families during

experimental rehabilitation programmes can yield impressive results. The hope is that Striano and Arena can inspire other convicts.

The accolades and media hype have left mafia victims uneasy. Alessandra Clemente finds it disturbing that amid all the national



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## TERROR TACTICS

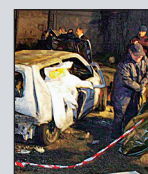
Five shocking episodes from the Camorra's recent past show why they are among the mafia's most feared



The brutality of the Camorra was given a global stage in 2009 when Neapolitan police released CCTV footage of the murder of Mario Bacio Terracino, a 53-year-old Camorra member. Filmed smoking outside a bar, he was killed by a hitman who crept up and shot him twice



In 2004, a bloody war erupted between two rival Camorra factions. Dubbed the "Scampia feud" after the Naples quarter where it took place, it sparked a wave of killings as a struggle for control of Scampia's drug and prostitution rackets spiralled into bloodshed



One innocent victim of the feud was Gelsomina Verde, the 22-year-old girlfriend of a Camorra member involved in the war. In November 2004 she was abducted, tortured by mobsters who wanted know her boyfriend's whereabouts, and shot three times. Her death provoked national outrage



Months earlier, 14-year-old Annalisa Durante was killed when a Camorra member allegedly used her as a human shield when hitmen on scooters cornered him and opened fire. Durante, who had been chatting with a friend and cousin outside her home, was shot in the head



In 1994, Camorra members entered a church in Casal di Principe, a town just outside Naples, and murdered Giuseppe Diana, a 36-year-old priest. His body was discovered by a nun — he had been shot in the head twice. Diana had been an outspoken critic of the Camorra

Anmar Frangoul

pride nobody had the sensibility to remember that more than 3,000 people have been killed by the Camorra alone in some 30 years. That is an average of 100 contract hits a year, mainly in a city of only 1m people in the heart of Europe, a 70-minute train ride from the Vatican.

Clemente was 10 when her mother, Silvia Ruotolo, a school teacher, was killed in crossfire during a shootout between rival Naples clans in 1997 as she walked her five-year-old boy, Francesco, home from kindergarten. Clemente had been playing at home with a doll when she heard the shots in the narrow alley below. She rushed out to the balcony and saw her mother lying in a pool of blood on the cobbled stones.

Now 25, articulate, sharp and extremely driven, Clemente graduated last year in law and aims to become a magistrate taking on Camorra-related cases. She gives free legal advice to victims of racketeering and has spoken at anti-mafia mass rallies.

"Stories like Striano's and Arena's are undoubtedly positive," Clemente told me. "They can be an example to others that rehabilitation can work. But there is a risk of giving far more coverage to former criminals than to the victims of Italy's mafia clans.

"This success should be an opportunity to shine a light on the problems that allow the mafia to be still so strong and to remember

innocent victims like my mother. These people shouldn't be glorified, they committed terrible crimes. They have a chance to start a new life, my mother doesn't."

Striano, 39, was born in the *Quartieri Spagnoli* — the Spanish Quarters — one of Naples' oldest districts, so named because the labyrinth of narrow backstreets was used in the 16th century to house Spanish garrisons dispatched to put down a popular revolt in the city. Lively, colourful and run down, it is typical of the city's historical centre. Children play football in the street, washing hangs from every balcony, fluttering like flags. Scooters, some ferrying as many as four people without helmets, negotiate the stone-paved lanes at full throttle. Animated locals chat loudly on street corners.

But when Striano shows me around, reading signs no outsider would notice, the district takes on a far more sinister air. Plagued by poverty, high unemployment, youth crime and unsanitary conditions, it is one of the Camorra's oldest strongholds.

"See those holes in the wall below the balcony," he says pointing to the building where he lived with his parents before going to jail. "They're from bullets. Every time members from a rival clan drove by on their motorbikes they'd just take pot shots. During turf wars things were very bad. I and my ►►►

mates would step out high as a kite on cocaine, a gun in each hand ready to shoot. There were a lot of tragedies, a lot of dead, both *camorristi* and innocent bystanders.”

Of small build, softly spoken and gentlemanly, Striano at first seems to fit oddly with the bloody tales he recounts. Watch him closely, however, and it's soon easy to picture him in an earlier life unhinged by drugs and brutality. His face is scarred, his eyes dark and impenetrable, and his manner remains edgy. He chain-smokes and his eyes dart continuously, betraying the sharp alertness of someone long used to watching his back.

“This street here, we call the tunnel of death,” he explains as we turn into a long narrow lane. “It's called this because once you are in it there are no side streets and therefore no escape routes. Ten guys have been killed along here over the years.”

**A** rebellious child, Striano was 10 when he took part in his first serious crime with a group of young men who, in a night-time heist, emptied a large toy shop. The local Camorra clan first noticed him when he was barely 14 after he falsely told police that three grams of cocaine found on a neighbourhood criminal belonged to him — he knew he'd get a more lenient sentence as a minor than the crim.

“You don't ask to join the Camorra, it comes to you after it's kept a close eye on you to see if you've got what it takes,” he says. “I'd passed a test of loyalty and guts. The man I'd helped gave me a Vespa and a large sum of cash.”

He was soon entrusted with delivering small stashes of cocaine to buyers and allowed to be seen in the company of clan members — in the Camorra's lexicon of symbolic gestures this was a coded message of public endorsement that locals read at once. Around



Striano. “To take it was to belong to a clan, which from then on would look after me. I took the cash. After that the clan came before all else, even my own family.”

Striano rose to command a group of several men who trafficked drugs, carried out robberies and dabbled in racketeering. Several of his associates died in shootouts during some of Naples' most vicious turf wars of recent times. “The first time I held a gun was an incredible feeling of power,” recalls Striano. “We'd go out, high on cocaine and paranoia,

Costa del Sol, a popular destination with Camorra members in hiding. Extradited back to Italy he was put on trial and sentenced in 1997 to nearly 15 years on a string of Camorra-related crimes. He served more than 10; he also served two years as a minor.

Four years into his sentence, a fellow *affiliato*, who was serving life for murder in Rebibbia, a Rome high-security jail, asked him if he wanted to join the prison's theatre workshop. Striano agreed only because rehearsals meant an extra few hours outside

## ‘I KEPT MY MOUTH SHUT. I PAID MY DUES WITHOUT SNITCHING’

that time Striano tried cocaine for the first time, becoming hopelessly hooked. By 16 he was delivering drug consignments by the kilo.

The *Sistema*, as the Camorra is known in Naples, asked him to become an *affiliato*, a fully fledged member, when Sasa was 17. At the house of a senior clan member, as the teenager and several members watched football on TV and snorted cocaine, a boss offered him a large sum of money.

“Accepting it meant formally joining, as the sum represented my first weekly pay,” says

guns cocked, ready to shoot at anyone. We'd commit our crimes and then go back to a safe house, to do more drugs — always together, day and night. The more we snorted, the more on the edge we were. I became a piece of shit, that's the only way to put it. There were a lot of shootouts, at times involving Uzi machineguns and Kalashnikovs. I was twice lucky — firstly because I should be long dead, and secondly because I did only 12 years in jail.”

After several months on the run, Italian police finally caught up with Striano on Spain's

his cell. He also began spending time in the prison library, first reading books like *The Godfather* but soon becoming bored because, as he put it, “I'd lived through the real thing.

“Gradually I began reading Shakespeare and Brecht and started taking part in the theatre workshop more seriously. The experience blew me away. Through acting I could be a different person. It made me feel free despite the prison walls. Reading became therapeutic. I cried a lot and gradually learnt to come to terms with my mistakes.”



**CAMORRA VICTIM**  
The funeral of the priest Giuseppe Diana, 1994. Aniello Arena in a scene from Reality.

crime family. An eight-year-old was wounded in crossfire and an elderly woman who witnessed the bloodbath died of a heart attack. Arena went on the run but was arrested a year later when he brazenly returned home to join his family for Christmas dinner.

"I turned over that black page of my life a long time ago and I am no longer that man," says Arena, who is expected to serve another

his face tough and his nose flattened like a boxer's, the man was under strict police surveillance after his release. As two burly *affiliati* loitered outside, we met in a small, modest office where I found him sitting behind a desk under the portrait of a local patron saint, a picture of him embracing his elderly mother and a couple of framed quotes by Toto, a native Neapolitan who died more than 40 years ago but is still Italy's most loved comic actor. It quickly became apparent that the main reason the Camorra boss had finally agreed to meet was to play me a CD of sentimental Neapolitan songs he had written, and was visibly proud of. I was exceedingly complimentary, of course.



In jail he and his fellow inmates staged several plays, including an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The same cast would later act in *Caesar Must Die*, which triumphed in Berlin.

After his release, as Striano struggled to pursue his acting dream, a member of the strongest clan in the *Quartieri Spagnoli* asked why he had not called on its bosses: the sort of oversight the *Sistema* takes as a sign of disrespect. "I felt the clan's eyes on me, the street was watching me to understand if I was serious about starting a new life," says Striano. In a symbolic act he gathered his old guns, packed in a sports bag, which his long-suffering wife had kept hidden during his decade behind bars, and paid the clan a courtesy call.

"It was my tool bag," he says. "I put the guns on the table and told them I didn't need them any more. I explained that I had done my time and my life had changed. I was able to get out and cut my ties because during those long years in jail I always kept my mouth shut. I paid my dues without ever snitching."

Aniello Arena, 44, the star of *Reality*, who is serving life for murder, also first discovered acting in jail and is now the lead figure in a 50-inmate prison theatre company. The former Camorra hitman was 24 in 1991 when he and four others shot dead three members of a rival

10 years in jail. "I would never have imagined that I would open a book, let alone recite Brecht or Shakespeare. The theatre opened my eyes on a world I didn't know existed. It taught me to listen to others, not to judge and jump to conclusions, but instead to try to understand the motives behind their behaviour. Theatre changed my outlook by 360 degrees."

"Arena's a quiet type," said Armando Punzo, the director of the prison theatre company in which the convicted killer acts. "He's not flashy and never shows off, not even when he's been getting all the attention generated by Cannes. But when he gets on stage something happens, he's completely transformed. He's an incredibly versatile actor, doing everything from Hamlet to Alice in Wonderland."

I once met a hardened Camorra boss who in total had served 20 years in jail. In his fifties,

Back in the *Quartieri Spagnoli*, where he was once a *camorrista*, Striano is now a local celebrity, people greet him whenever he takes a stroll and impoverished mothers come up to him to ask if he can secure their children a better future. And for the first time since he turned to acting, he is being offered a part that does not involve playing a criminal. "Finally, I've truly turned the corner," said Striano.

"Someone even wrote to me on Facebook that I made Italy proud. Given my past, that really made me laugh. I thought that was taking it a bit too far," said Striano. Clemente, among others, would agree ■



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