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The nostalgia of Renzo Villa, the father of Antenna 3: “This is my story”

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A poll carried out at the end of the 1970s revealed that Renzo Villa was one of the most famous TV personalities, close behind such legendary figures as Mike Bongiorno and Pippo Baudo. Renzo Villa (right, with Enzo Tortora and Lucio Flauto), who is 69 years old, is the founder of Antenna 3, the private TV company, north of Milan, which invented what have become memorable programme formats, and which, for one season, was the real alternative to the monopoly of the state TV company, RAI. In his home in Varese, the inventor of “Bingo”, a successful programme which was broadcast for several years, has written a moving book of memoirs, where his personal adventure is intertwined with those of private TV in Italy, and of personalities popular with the public.

“Ti ricordi quella sera?” (“Do you remember that evening?”), by Renzo and Roberta Villa, is story of the first private television companies in Italy, as told, in words and pictures, by one of its protagonists.

The pretext for the book is private too, and strikes delicate and familiar chords that touch those who read the book. A few months ago, Villa announced that he had a serious illness; he dictated his adventure to Roberta, his daughter, day and night, recalling his memories, and choosing new pictures and magazine cuttings from the time. The result is an interesting portrait of Italian television, when it was still possible, with a good idea, and a pinch of madness, to invent a real television company that was loved by the people.

And then there is the list of famous people, starting with Enzo Tortora, the star who was dismissed by RAI in the 1970s, because of an interview in which he criticised the top management (even then ...), and who was convinced by Villa join him in the adventure of private television. “A few months ago, we had dinner with some old TV colleagues, and a lot of them asked me to write a story about that time,” Villa explains. “To tell the truth, I didn’t really think many people would be interested, but then, more and more people asked me.”

In fact, the book is still in the writing stage, but the drafts are finished. It will be available in January. Villa has also taken on the role of publisher, and any proceeds will be given to a social initiative, the Food Bank. The story is of a dream that Renzo Villa had had since his childhood. He was born in Germignaga, to a working class family, and he started out as a waiter at Bellinzona station. Very soon, he took on organisational tasks; he changed jobs several times. He went to Rome in the atmosphere of “La Dolce Vita”, he was an extra in famous films, he came back to

Varese where he was employed by the town council, and he was also a manager of the workers' association, ACLI. One day, he read about "Telebiella", the first private television company, so he went to talk to Peppo Sacchi, the founder; there, he met Enzo Tortora, and together they founded "Telaltomilanese", in Busto Arsizio, with a local businessman. And thus, the first programmes began, but the company fell apart. In 1977, with what little money they managed to obtain from the previous experience, Villa and Tortora, founded the company "Antenna 3". And very successful TV shows were created, including "Bingooo" (this was the original title, like a scream), "Pomofiore" and "La Bustarella". Fininvest was not the only creator of a private television company. For many years, Villa's artistic talent merged with his extraordinary feel for business. He was also a bon vivant, and an excellent finder of sponsors, so much so that, after 1987, he took care of selling advertising space for the company.

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