

DREAMERS

A short film — and the series it proves

ASOLANDO · six × thirty minutes

Anthony Gustav Morris · agm digital arts GmbH

UNA CITTÀ CHE SI ERA STANCATA DI SÉ STESSA

A town that had become tired of itself

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

Two things, in the order a financier needs them.

The first is a twenty-two minute short film, adapted from the short story DREAMERS. It is cheap, it is festival-shaped, it has a real turn and a real ending, and it can be shot in one square with six speaking parts.

The second is the returning half-hour series that the short exists to prove: ASOLANDO, six episodes, built out of the world the short spends seven minutes inside.

The proposal is to make the short first and take the series with it. The short answers the only question a commissioner will actually have, which is whether this world is as charming on screen as it is on the page.

Both are drawn from the revised text of DREAMERS, and follow it closely. Where this document goes beyond the story, it is noted.

PART ONE — THE SHORT FILM

DREAMERS

Length 22 minutes

Cast Six speaking parts

Locations One town square, an olive grove, a writer's flat, one café terrace

Language Italian and English

Source The short story DREAMERS

Logline

A novelist wakes from an accidental afternoon into a version of his own town that has quietly become everything he ever wanted it to be — and finds, in his pocket, evidence that he wrote it himself and forgot.

The story

ONE THE GRILL

Sunday evening, an olive grove on the hillside below the Rocca. A grill somebody built years ago out of bricks and a sheet of mesh and never took down. Potatoes into the embers. The meat takes its time. The Prosecco does not. Six of them, then eight, then eleven, because in Asolo a plan for six is a rumour and a plan for eleven is a fact.

STEVE comes up the path late, carrying a bowl out in front of him in both hands like a man in a procession. "Salad." "You made a salad." "I foraged a salad."

ELENA takes the bowl and looks into it. Leaves, oil, something pale and torn, several dark little things. "What exactly is in this?" "Woods." A gesture broad enough to take in the hillside, the Veneto and possibly Venice. "It's completely fine. My neighbour's father does it every autumn." "That is not the reassurance you think it is."

The bowl goes round. FRANCO, 48, is in the middle of a sentence about a publisher in Milan who has stopped answering emails, and he eats what appears in front of him without looking at it, because his attention is on the end of the sentence. He goes back for more.

The light comes off the plain the way it does there, as though somebody had pulled down a blind. PAOLO claims Venice can be seen from the Rocca on the right day. Steve says people have merely agreed for a hundred years to say so. The argument cannot be settled, because it has become too dark to check.

TWO THE DRAWER, AND MONDAY

Franco's flat, next morning. He is looking for tobacco. The drawer of the desk comes open on a stack of old notebooks, and the camera sees — briefly, in passing, without comment — a page of blue ink under a heading. The audience gets one beat to read it. He does not look at it at all.

Then the square. He takes his usual table at the Caffè Commercio by the road, rolls a cigarette and reads yesterday's work off his telephone. Three paragraphs. One good. One doubtful. One apparently written by an idiot. A productive night.

CATERINA brings his coffee. “You look dreadful.” “Thank you.” “Not literary-dreadful. Ill-dreadful.” She puts down the croissant, points at the cup, and tells him to drink it before he dies; if he dies afterwards it isn’t her responsibility. “Thank you, Caterina.” “You’re welcome, Hemingway.”

Four words, and the audience has her: she has read him, she is amused by him, and she is not remotely available to be charmed. She is also, from this point, the only reliable witness in the film.

Franco feels peculiar. Not ill. A soft dizziness travels behind his eyes and for a moment the edge of the fountain seems outlined in blue. He blinks. Gone. He reads the same paragraph three times. The church clock says eleven seventeen. His head comes gently to rest on his folded arm.

THREE THE TURN

An escalation, built as accelerating cognition rather than as narration. The cup is inexplicably full again. The croissant is almost untouched.

A woman crosses the square scratching; her daughter, several steps behind, performs a remarkably similar manoeuvre. A Fiat door goes into a German BMW. Thunk. Franco finds himself admiring German paint technology and wishing briefly for the Fiat to explode. At the next table a girl feeds from her cappuccino like an infant at a small porcelain breast, leaving lipstick enough to flag down a bus.

Caterina passes with an impossible quantity of crockery, and Franco’s mind considers several things about her it has never considered in daylight, in public, or with anything resembling permission. He catches her hand and kisses it. She laughs: “There is definitely something wrong with you.” She walks on. He sits stunned. Yes. There definitely is.

Then the flamingos and the ancient provincial ballet. Then the cyclists, arriving in rigid shoes — one, then another, then six — Lycra aliens come to negotiate terms with Earth. Click. Click. Click. Then, for one shot, every face on the terrace turning towards him with bloodied teeth, and back again.

Then the bells. Clang. Clang. CLANG. Mechanical violence filling the square; a telephone conversation stops; a baby cries. The whole film is now being driven by its soundtrack.

He stands. “Fuck it! It’s a mess!”

Nobody responds. Asolo has seen writers before.

He sits down. There is a Campari Spritz in front of him and he has no memory of ordering it. He leans sideways. The light thickens.

FOUR THE OTHER ASOLO

He wakes with a shudder, catching his forehead before it enters the ice in his glass. Something is wrong. Or rather, several things are right.

The parking area is empty. In its place: chairs, market stalls, trees in stone containers, shaded tables, children round the fountain. A covered walkway from the loggia. Cars arriving at the edge of the square, where smartly dressed young people take them away and hand back a ticket. VALET PARKING €2 ALL EVENING. CAR WASH €5 EXTRA — ALLOW ONE HOUR.

The bells begin, and they are not as before: softer, slightly uneven, shaped by hands rather than machinery, different bells answering one another. Almost music. Nobody winces. Down via Browning a removable quiet surface has been laid over the cobbles, and he can hear diners laughing outside the Bacaro. A boy pulls a flag on a wire and the traffic below stops.

Silk. Embroidery. Books — actual books. A small brass ensemble setting up beneath an arch. A pigeon comes down at the fountain, and a small feathered object lifts silently off a rooftop and moves towards it; the pigeon reconsiders its position in the ecosystem and departs.

A cheerful man behind a wooden counter gives him roast potatoes and meatballs in a paper bag and will not take money. The restaurants pay for it; their names are printed on the bag with a reservations number underneath. “Why?” “Because hungry people become bad tourists.” A grin. “And hungry poor people become unhappy residents.” He nods at the group under the trees, who get the same, and paid work on the stalls if they want it.

The bells were changed years ago. The town had complained about them for years without quite admitting it hated them. It was paid for with fifty cents on every Spritz — voluntary, technically, and everybody pays it because they like the result. Bells, flowers, brass players, public toilets, sometimes roofs. “You’d be amazed what civilisation costs.” There was a Ciao tax too, for a while. Not a law. An embarrassment mechanism. It worked within two weeks.

Franco looks down at the bag in his hand. A small municipal emblem, and beneath it: UNA CITTÀ CHE SI ERA STANCATA DI SÉ STESSA. He stops breathing for a moment. He knows that sentence. Or believes he does.

“Who are you?” “Oh, mostly a man giving away meatballs.” A pause. “I also happen to be the mayor.” Franco sits down. “Of course you are.”

They talk. It was a revolution — a very Italian revolution, mostly meetings, called a revolution because nobody would have turned up for an administrative reform. One theatrical week of closing the gates, and underneath it elections, lawyers, regional authorities and enough paperwork to have defeated several actual revolutions. Culture stopped being a decorative expense and started being an industry. An albergo diffuso — a hotel without a hotel. A ceremonial citizenship that is legally meaningless, almost completely, because people behave better if you give them a certificate. Don’t tell Rome.

“What’s the catch?” There are many. Property owners hate the rules. Businesses complain about the levies. Half the town believes the other half is corrupt, and the other half believes the first half is stupid. “So — normal?” “Entirely.” “Then why does it work?” “Because things don’t have to be perfect to be better.”

A line of cyclists appears at the end of the street and a steward steps into their path. They dismount. “One achievement enjoys almost universal support.” “Officially, pedestrian safety.” “And unofficially?” “There are only so many shaven legs a civilisation can tolerate.”

Franco laughs until his vision blurs. The square tilts. He hears the clink of his glass going over.

FIVE WAKING

Caterina, affectionate rather than accusatory. Cars everywhere. The stalls gone. The bells crashing overhead with mechanical enthusiasm, obliterating a telephone conversation at the next table. “You are definitely ill.” “Were there meatballs?” “What?”

Paolo and Elena crossing the square, exhausted. “On a scale of one to ten, how strange was your night?” Then Steve’s salad. Then the little dark things. Then the mushrooms — and not the ones Steve thought they were. “Were they poisonous?” “Depends what you mean by poisonous.” “That’s not a useful answer.” “No one is dead.” “That is a very low medical standard.” Steve is no longer allowed to forage. “By whom?” “Everyone.”

Caterina returns with coffee, puts it down, and — here the film goes one line beyond the story — says the thing that tells him she has known for years exactly what he does with the people he loves, and that she has no intention of appearing in a book. She leaves. It lands harder than anything in the dream.

Franco reaches into his jacket for his tobacco. His fingers touch paper. Folded. Soft. Slightly greasy. He draws it out below the table where the others cannot see, and cannot unfold it for several seconds. Then he does. A list of restaurants. A reservations number. A small municipal emblem. And underneath: UNA CITTÀ CHE SI ERA STANCATA DI SÉ STESSA.

Cut, for the length of one breath, to the drawer from Beat Two. Blue ink. A heading written fifteen years ago: THE TOWN THAT BECAME FED UP WITH ITSELF.

The bag in his hand is still warm. The bells crash on above the square. Franco folds it carefully, puts it back in his pocket, and says nothing at all.

Why it works at this length

It has a want, an obstacle, a genuine reversal and an ending that pays twice. It is funny for its first fifteen minutes and quietly unsettling for its last three. It can be shot in a fortnight.

And the ending is not the ending it appears to be. This is not a man discovering that his dream was real. It is a man discovering that the most humane idea he has ever had was his own, that he wrote it down fifteen years ago, and that he did nothing with it — which is a considerably worse thing to find in your pocket than a miracle.

It also does the job the series needs: seven minutes of the world, played straight, with a mayor handing out potatoes and a town that has decided to be pleasant on purpose. If that sequence works on screen, the series is financeable. If it does not, better to have found out for the price of a short.

PART TWO — THE SERIES IT PROVES

ASOLANDO

Length 6 × 30 minutes, returning

Genre Comedy-drama

Language Italian and English

Setting One hill town, present day

The pitch in one line

A hill town in the Veneto wins the right to run itself, appoints a failing novelist to write down what happens next, and discovers that the most civilised place in Europe is extremely expensive to be — not in money.

The engine

Every episode, Asolo decides one thing.

The decision is small, charming, entirely plausible and cheap to enact. Fifty cents on every Spritz. Two boys with a flag instead of a set of traffic lights. Valet parking at two euros so the square can be emptied of cars. Free meatballs from a stall, paid for by the restaurants whose names are printed on the bag. Bells rung by hand.

The decision works. That is important, and it is what separates this series from every dystopia it will be compared to. Asolo is not a trap and it is not secretly rotten. It is genuinely, measurably nicer than the place you live, and the series never takes that back.

And every decision costs somebody something. Not a body in a cellar — a person who is now on the wrong side of a list, or a rule, or a vote. The series is one question asked six different ways: this is better, and somebody is paying for it, and would you pay?

Two things the source text settles, and both are load-bearing

First, this is not a secession. Asolo obtained enhanced local administrative control after years of argument between the historic centre on the hill and the much larger commercial population below — through elections, regional authorities, lawyers and paperwork, with one theatrical week of “closing the gates” for the cameras. That is far better than a fantasy coup: it is recognisable, it is legally arguable, and it means every episode can be about process rather than about magic.

Second, the police were never privatised. Uniformed municipal officers still exist; parking, visitors, late-night noise and town-centre assistance are handled by stewards employed through a local service cooperative. “The police can police. Everyone else can explain to Germans that their car is not a human right.” That distinction is the spine of Episode Five.

Where it came from

Asolo is an actual member of the international Cittaslow network and one of the *Borghi più belli d'Italia* — a town that has already decided, on the record, to be deliberate about how it lives. ASOLANDO is one plausible step past what Asolo has really done, which gives the whole thing a floor under it that invented satire does not have.

Tone

Warm, dry and precise. The comedy is administrative — minutes, amendments, the wording of a clause — played completely straight by people who care enormously. Nobody in this town is stupid and nobody is a hypocrite. They are all right, which is the problem.

The look is the opposite of a travelogue: long lenses, patient framing, a great deal of standing about in a beautiful square while something procedural goes wrong. The town is photographed as somewhere people live, not somewhere people visit, and the difference between those two things is eventually the plot.

Sits alongside DETECTORISTS, for the affection and the pace, and for taking a small place seriously

And PARKS AND RECREATION, for civic machinery played dead straight

And LA GRANDE BELLEZZA, for the visual register and the beautiful-decay melancholy

Structurally only BLACK MIRROR — one idea per episode, followed honestly to its end. Never the cruelty.

Sound is the signature

This series is unusual in that its subject is audible. What changes when Asolo takes charge of itself is, before anything else, the soundtrack: mechanised bells become hand-rung ones; the shouted “Ciao!” drops to a murmur; engine noise leaves the centre; a removable quiet surface over the cobbles lets laughter carry all the way up the via Browning; a live brass ensemble marks six o’clock under an arch.

Every episode opens on the town’s soundscape and closes on it altered. The bells are a character with a proper arc — and the sound they used to make is lost in the first episode and never comes back.

This is an authored element and a genuine point of difference in a market full of very quiet, very well-photographed European drama. It should be resourced properly: real bells, recorded on location, and a real ensemble.

Who is in it

FRANCO 48. Novelist. Books that sell fewer copies each time, and a royalty statement that occasionally reaches the point of being worth opening. He was for fifteen years the romantic figure of the town and is now closer to its furniture. Asolo makes him its Chronicler, which flatters him enormously and turns out to be a job about what you leave out. His real deficiency is not that he is a fantasist, though he is one. It is that he metabolises the people he loves into prose — transformed, improved, given to somebody else — and has never understood why they all eventually leave. The series is, quietly, about a man learning to ask a question instead of taking a note.

CATERINA 29. Carries trays at the Caffè Commercio, and from Episode 2 sits on the Council, having been elected on the grounds that she was the only person who read the whole document. Pugliese, nine years resident, and therefore not eligible for the citizenship she is helping to administer. Fast, dry, and the only person in Asolo who has read all four of Franco's books and recognised somebody in them. She is the person who actually runs the town, and the series knows it well before Franco does.

THE MAYOR 60s. Gives away meatballs and the occasional potato from a stand in the square and smiles at most people; also happens to be the mayor. Genial, tireless and a great deal harder than he looks. He is not the villain: he believes every word of it, he is usually right, and roughly once a season he will do something unforgivable for a reason you cannot fault. (*Unnamed in the short story — he needs a name for the series.*)

PAOLO 45. Photographer, Franco's oldest friend, and the man who makes the town's pictures — which is to say the man in charge of its myth. Cheerfully cynical, the first to say the thing everyone is thinking, and the only person who profits directly from Asolo being looked at.

ELENA 40s. Paolo's partner. Runs the *albergo diffuso* — hotel rooms spread through buildings all over the historic centre, serviced centrally, with no hotel anywhere. Which means she holds a key to almost every door in town and knows exactly who is really sleeping where.

STEVE 50s. English. Eleven years in Asolo and still puts the stress on the wrong syllable of its name; everybody gave up correcting him years ago. Forages, brews, trades, and operates the entire informal economy of a town that has just written itself a rulebook. He is the part no document catches — and he is, as of the pilot, banned from foraging by everyone.

DON MASSIMO 70s. The priest. Lost his bells in Episode 1 and gained, to his considerable irritation, a congregation. The only person in Asolo who has lived through a change of regime before and is therefore not surprised by any of it.

NADIA 30s. Works a stall in the square, sleeps in a building that officially has nobody in it, and is on no list at all. She is not a symbol and she is not a problem. She is the fourth episode.

The rules of Asolo

Established across the first two episodes and then simply lived in. All of them come from the source text, and all of them are cheap to shoot.

- The Spritz levy. Fifty cents on every drink served in the town. Voluntary in theory; almost nobody opts out. Pays for bells, flowers, brass players, public toilets and sometimes roofs.

- The Ciao tax. Not a law — an embarrassment mechanism. Saying it is free. Shouting it across the square cost fifty cents. It worked within two weeks.
- Valet parking at two euros for the evening, five more for a wash, allow an hour. No parked cars in the centre.
- Free food from the street stalls, paid for by the restaurants whose names are printed on the bag, with a reservations number underneath. The group under the trees get the same, and paid work on the stalls if they want it.
- Bells rung by hand by a campanology society — retired men mostly, some women, good exercise. A brass ensemble under the arch at eighteen hundred.
- A removable quiet surface over the cobbles on the steeper streets.
- Two youngsters with a flag on a wire in place of traffic lights.
- Small feathered drones to keep the pigeons off the fountain.
- Asolano citizenship: ceremonial, long residence, and legally meaningless — almost completely.
- Stewards through a local service cooperative for parking, visitors and late-night noise. The police remain the police.
- An *albergo diffuso* — a hotel without a hotel.
- No cyclists in the centre. Officially pedestrian safety. Passed by vote.

The six episodes

ONE THE BELLS

Asolo votes to retune its own bells. The campaign is conducted with total seriousness over a fifty-cent levy, the founders come to examine them, and metal comes off — and once that metal is off, it is off. Franco, badly hungover and the only man at the meeting not already on a committee, is appointed Chronicler, largely because nobody else wants the minutes.

Don Massimo does not fight it and does not forgive it. His father rang those bells. The sound that goes is a sound with a person inside it.

Ends on the first hand-rung peal, and on the whole town outside in the street, silent, listening to something better than what they had.

TWO THE CERTIFICATE

Citizenship opens. It is ceremonial and legally meaningless, which everybody knows and nobody behaves as though they know. Franco, who has never worked a day in the town and inherited a flat in it, qualifies immediately. Caterina, who has lived here nine years and effectively runs the square, does not.

Franco is asked to write the text — the words on the certificate, the description of what an Asolano is. He writes something rather beautiful. It is adopted. Caterina gets her certificate, because he pushes for it and because she was always going to.

Ends with him realising, too late and alone, that two names came off the list to make room, and that his beautiful document does not contain either of them. People behave better if you give them a certificate. They also behave worse if you don't.

THREE THE CYCLISTS

The famous vote. A delegation in Lycra petitions the Council for the right to ride through the centre; the Council, with immense courtesy, holds a hearing; the town votes to keep them out. Officially, pedestrian safety. On the surface it is the funniest half-hour of the six.

Underneath, it is the first time Asolo excludes a category of person for no better reason than not liking the look of them, and everybody can feel it. Steve immediately opens a black-market bicycle hire in an olive grove, on the grounds that he is banned from foraging and has to do something.

The Mayor votes against the ban, loses, and then enforces it perfectly. Franco cannot work out whether that makes him better or worse.

FOUR THE ROOMS

A routine audit of Elena's *albergo diffuso*. A hundred and forty rooms, an occupancy sheet, and a discrepancy: the town has more beds than it has people, and one of the beds has somebody in it.

Nadia has been living in a room in a building with nobody registered to it, working a stall, paid in cash, for two years — inside a system that feeds the people under the trees and is genuinely proud of doing so. Everyone behaves decently. The paperwork does not.

A person isn't a problem to be moved along. It turns out to be much easier to say that than to write it into a form.

FIVE THE STEWARDS

The service cooperative comes up for contract renewal on a pitch it is very proud of: in four years its stewards have never once had to call the police.

Then one of them does something a police officer would not have been allowed to do, and the question of what a man in a uniform that is not a uniform is actually permitted to do arrives in the Council chamber with nobody having a good answer.

Franco is asked — politely, over a good lunch, by someone he likes very much — to leave that page out of the chronicle. It is a small matter, it is nobody's business, and it will look like something it is not. The episode is the argument about what a chronicler is for, conducted almost entirely between people being extremely reasonable with one another.

SIX THE VISITORS

A television crew arrives to make a charming film about the most civilised town in Europe. Asolo, correctly, understands the danger: the moment it is looked at, it becomes a thing to be looked at, and the waiting list becomes a queue.

The finale is the town voting on whether to be seen — with Paolo, who makes his living from the town's image, on one side, and Caterina, who would not be here at all if the town had always been full, on the other. Franco finally publishes. What he publishes, and how much of it, is the last act.

Ends on the six o'clock brass under the arch, the square full, and one long shot from the Rocca out across the plain — where Venice is, or is not, visible in the distance. Which was always the argument at the grill, and was never really about Venice.

Where it goes

A second season has an obvious spine. The certificate acquires, by custom rather than law, a meaning nobody voted for; the waiting list becomes long enough to have a politics of its own; and a town on the other side of the plain copies the model, badly, and asks Asolo for help. The engine — one decision, one cost, one episode — is good for several years, because a town that has chosen to run itself deliberately has to keep choosing.

PART THREE — MAKING IT

Why this, now

The subject is live. Over-tourism, residency rules and the question of who a beautiful place is actually for is being argued in every town within an hour of Venice, and in a hundred others besides. This is that argument, made funny and made specific, without a single scene of anybody shouting about it in the abstract at a public meeting.

The premise is real, and verifiable, and worth putting in front of funders directly: Asolo genuinely is a Cittaslow town.

And the register is scarce. There is a great deal of European drama about institutions failing. There is very little about an institution working, and about what working costs. A comedy about civic competence is, at this moment, close to counter-programming.

Production

Scale One town. One square principally, plus the Rocca, a church, an olive grove, a writer's flat and a handful of interiors. A small standing cast. Predominantly exterior daylight.

Visual effects Minimal, and mostly the pigeon drones, which can be practical.

The dressing A car-free square, a valet canopy, market stalls, stone planters, the quiet surface over the cobbles. Dressed once for the short; dressed once again and lived in for six episodes.

The cost centre Sound and music. This is where the money should go, and it is the element that will not be replicable by anyone who copies the idea.

Location Asolo itself, subject to the town's goodwill — which the revised text can plausibly earn, since it is now affectionate about the place and satirical only about the narrator. Seek it early rather than assume it, and scout a named alternative in the same range of hills in parallel.

Clearances The story names the Caffè Commercio, the Bacaro and via Browning. For production these should be fictionalised while the town itself is kept.

Financing

The short is small enough to be made from a single source, and is the sensible use of a first tranche. Italian regional and national support alongside German and European co-production, with agm digital arts GmbH on the German side, is the natural shape for the series that follows.

The recommended sequence is unambiguous. Make the short. Take the series with you.

DREAMERS · a short film, and ASOLANDO · a series in six parts · agm digital arts GmbH