

Il Postino

A slim slice of Italian life set upon a Neapolitan island wherein a word-starved ex-fisherman bonds with a world-famous poet--sound too precious, too specialized, too airy-fairy to be compelling? The one line description fits the film *Il Postino* (The Postman) but hardly does justice to a motion picture that can be recommended for its strong sense of place, its natural and nuanced acting, its tender humor and tact. It shows yet again the ability of Italian films (although, surprisingly, it was directed by an Englishman), to display a delicacy of sentiment without the curse of sentimentality, to show sweetness laced with sorrow.

The film's real sensibility comes from the lead, Massimo Troisi, an Italian comic actor who plays the postman of the title and who died, at 41, just after this film was finished. Mr. Troisi, while very popular in Italy in films such as *Ricomincio da Tre* (his debut in 1983) and *Splendor*, presented a persona which did not travel much outside his native land, as often happens with comedians. His brand of humor was the more difficult to comprehend given a thick, slush-mouthed Neapolitan accent which even many Italians could not always grasp. Massimo, rather like our Woody Allen, never really varied in his personages: he was ever the shy, gangly, melancholy, self-deprecating guy who had a tough time with girls and with finishing his sentences. He is all of this in *Il Postino*, and the role suits him perfectly as a young man stuck in a super-traditional fishing village who harbors a poetic bent, and who ultimately gets to exercise it through a friendship with one of the century's great poets, the Chilean Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda.

The plot is dead simple. Mario Ruoppolo (Troisi), a wistful soul who hates going out on his father's fishing boat, is hired as the "auxiliary postman" in his tiny island village of Cala di Sotto because he is literate and has a bicycle. He is to deliver to one recipient only: the famed Nerdua (Philippe Noiret), who has come to the isle in exile from rightist forces in Chile (the year is 1952). Intrigued by verse and awed by the presence of the Great Poet, Mario gradually strikes up a relationship with Nerdua, who is distant but not *too* distant. Eventually, he enlists the poet in helping him win the attentions of Beatrice (Maria Grazia Cucinotta), the canteen girl whose "smile expands like the wings of a butterfly." With time--and Nerdua's verse--he wins the girl, and the poet helps him celebrate before he must leave the island to world fame. In a coda, Mario and the villagers hope to have Nerdua come back and visit them, but he seems to have forgotten all about the island paradise he once shared.

That's about all that happens, but it happens in the most dulcet way. Troisi certainly matches the role to his own schtick. He is all shaky tentativeness as he slowly works up the courage to talk to Don Pedro, and his ever-sad eyes brighten as he discovers the other worlds there are to inhabit outside his narrow island. One of his best scenes, of many, is a late monologue he delivers, defending Nerdua against those in the village who feel the poet has forgotten about them. Here, the actor's innate humility comes through as he gently argues that Nerdua is right to go on to his other life, that the village cannot have any real hold on him, and that they should simply feel graced that he was present among them. Troisi himself is all grace in this, one of the last scenes he

ever filmed.

Philippe Noiret is noted as a French film actor, but he has achieved renown, too, in major Italian films such as *I Tre Fratelli* (Three Brothers), *La Famiglia*, and, most memorably for American filmgoers, as the projectionist in *Cinema Paradiso*. His Neruda starts off as a remote, no-nonsense figure--just as Mario sees him--and he gradually warms on the screen as he warms to Mario. Ever confident, he never condescends to his new friend but patiently guides him into *poesia*. While Noiret basically plays Neruda as a self-contained fellow, he can still show the passions of the man famous for his love lyrics, as when he hears a tango or communicates, via tape recording, with friends back in Santiago. Noiret actually bears some resemblance to Neruda, but the actor, at nearly 65, looks more like the poet in his last years than when he was in his forties (as he was in 1952).

Screenplays done by many hands are often abominations, but this one, with five writers getting credit (including Troisi and the director) is fundamentally consistent in tone and texture. Neruda's poetry itself is used sparingly but well, and there are some nice comic tirades from Beatrice's crusty aunt (Linda Moretti). Troisi's own dialogue, which he must have crafted for himself, is haltingly eloquent. There is a lovely leitmotif in the use of "metaphor" throughout the film, the term itself expressing Mario's gradual grasp of poetry, which he comes to realize "isn't for those who write it, but for those who need it."

The surprise, perhaps, is that *Il Postino* was made by an Englishman, Michael Radford. The connection of Radford and Troisi came years before, when the director tried to get the actor to appear as an Italian prisoner-of-war character in his first film *Another Time, Another Place* (1983). Although they did not work together then, they formed an enduring friendship, and eventually, ten years later, Troisi presented the Englishman with the idea (taken from a Chilean novel by Antonio Skarmeta) that became *Il Postino*. Radford, also known for his features *1984* and *White Mischief*, jumped at the chance to shoot a film in Italy, and by the looks of this effort, he acquired the right sensibility for it.

To Note: As indicated above, this was Massimo Troisi's last film, and he never lived to see it. The fact that the actor struggled through shooting with a failing heart only to die just after principal photography could be seen as almost unbearably poignant--or grotesquely voyeuristic. I found it much closer to the former and felt that the Mario Ruoppolo he left on celluloid, gaunt and cavern-eyed but life-affirming, was a fitting, final legacy.

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