

La Scorta

Dear Moviegoer, are you tired of the explosions and broken glass of *True Lies*, *Speed*, *Blown Away*, and *Clear and Present Danger*? Weary of the cartoon characters and cartoon plots of movies like *Maverick*, *The Mask*, or *Baby's Day Out*? Ready for some real adult (no, I don't mean that kind of "adult") entertainment with real tension, pace and motivation which is modeled carefully on actual events? Then try *La Scorta* ("The Escort"), an outstanding Italian film from a director who is one to watch.

La Scorta, directed by Ricky Tognazzi, is as fresh and vivid as the Italian crime headlines of the last few years, due in great part to its being based on the real experiences of one Francesco Taurisano as an investigating magistrate (called a "judge" in the sub-titles) in Sicily during the late 1980's. It is such judges, at least the honorable ones, who have become the target of Mafia hit men as they plumbed closer and closer to the heart of Cosa Nostra operations. The most infamous of these assassinations was that of the anti-Mafia Judge Giovanni Falcone, killed in a car bomb in May 1992. This is not, then, a world of facile and meaningless blow-'em-ups where Schwarzenegger or Stallone dwell, but the real, nasty thing, happening in one of Europe's established democracies.

The film follows four policemen who find themselves assigned as the protective escort for one of these investigating magistrates working in the town of Trapani, in the far northwest corner of Sicily. The men belong to the *carabinieri*, the Italian State Police, and they have their share of personal tension to go along with the pressures of the job. The team leader, the edgy Corsale (Enrico Lo Verso), is a devoted family man and wants favors from his superiors. Bulldog-faced Mandolesi (Claudio Amendola) is a local boy returning home, but he is wound too tight for the others' taste. Rookie Muzzi (Ricky Memphis) is simply scared to death of the detail and wants a transfer--fast. Only Frasca (Tony Sperandeo) seems relatively at ease with himself. As they are gradually exposed, however, to the granite-like integrity of their protectee, Judge De Francesco (Carlo Checci), they are drawn ever tighter together as a team.

This is definitely not slick "Dirty Dozen"-type male bonding. The film shows the far more genuine phenomenon of the solidarity that comes with real risk. As their judge first investigates a local water scam that leads to other evidences of corruption, the perils become real. Their every move on Trapani streets is fraught with stress as they look for hit men who may or may not be there. The judge's files are stolen, the team's wiretaps are, in turn, tapped by *mafiosi*, and De Francesco and Corsale receive death threats. Finally, the Mafia make a direct hit on the group, forcing De Francesco and his escort into a bunker-like hideaway. They continue to function, with the judge moving to make arrests on some local bigwigs, but higher-ups in the Supreme Judicial Council finally relieve De Francesco of his duties. He leaves Sicily and *la scorta* is broken up to take on more menial assignments.

The unresolved, equivocal ending is not a downer. It is in the honorable

tradition of the work of the great contemporary Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia, who wrote so tellingly of the Mafia's effects on his island, invariably ending his elegant crime dramas in mysterious, murky territory, but with bodies and blood on cobbled pavements. It also parallels the films of the Italian director Francesco Rosi, who has so convincingly adapted several of Sciascia's stories for the screen. With *La Scorta*, you are heartened by the courage and tenacity of these men, and you are likewise heartened by a film that leaves you with such an honest feel.

Ricky Tognazzi, not yet 40, comes from a film family, his father being the great Italian film star Ugo Tognazzi, known for his comic roles (most famously *La Cage aux Folles*). As a young actor, Tognazzi appeared in Italian film comedies, but his work as a director in television and film has shown increasing seriousness, with a strong emphasis on native Italian themes. His previous film, for example, *Ultra* (1991), offered a candid and visceral look at Italy's professional soccer hooligans. *La Scorta* shows a filmmaker in even greater command, able to show restraint in his effects while not letting up on the tension the bodyguards live with. His style clearly differs from Hollywood directors, for example, in his handling of the film's one explosion. The blast of a car bomb comes shockingly, with no telegraphing, right after the sunniest scene in the picture, and its grim, lingering aftermath is shown in the last twitches of a bodyguard's life. Tognazzi shows that he can both superbly delineate a world and lead a troupe of actors in true ensemble.

That ensemble is so effective in creating characters and so seamless in producing their interactions that the singling out any one performer seems superfluous. That's another one of the ways this film is so different from American cop films. Unlike standard U.S. movie stuff, where the individual star has to always triumph on his own, the *carabinieri* here are triumphant inasmuch as they work together, support each other, and create a team. One gentle scene has them coming together subtly, in the best Italian manner, over food, this time a pile of cannoli. Individually, they do not really appear as heroes; it is only as a unit that they become truly singular.

The entire technical crew deserves plaudits, but a special word should be reserved for the music by that movie monument, Ennio Morricone. Responsible for memorable film scores for 30 years, from *The Battle of Algiers* to *Cinema Paradiso*, he has come up with another winner. He creates mood here with plaintive airs that foreshadow the escort's trials as well as propulsive chords that perfectly match the bodyguards' cars racing down city streets. He even slides in Beethoven's Seventh at just the right moments.

Hurry to see *La Scorta*, a serious movie for people serious about movies with serious themes.

("La Scorta" carries no MPAA rating but does have measured scenes of violence and blood and carries some tough Italian language.)

(September 1994)