

Malena

Every few years or so, a modest Italian movie sidles into public consciousness and, through word of mouth, goes mainstream, enough so that even the multiplex masses are reading subtitles. In 1991 there was the Academy Award winner *Mediterraneo* which did good business. In 1995, *Il Postino* (*The Postman*) did even better, earning more money in the U.S. than any previous foreign-language film. In 1998, *La Vita é Bella* (*Life is Beautiful*) did even better boxoffice.

One could say that this string of Italian hits began little more than ten years ago with Giuseppe Tornatore's charming tale of Sicily *Cinema Paradiso*. Tornatore, a Sicilian himself (see interview below) has now returned with another Sicilian period piece, *Malena*, hoping no doubt for another success in the American.

The film tells the story of the gloriously beautiful Malena Scordia (Monica Bellucci) during the early 1940's in the Sicilian town (fictitious) of Castelcutto. Impeccably dressed but genuinely modest, she has every man in town panting for her and every woman in town despising her. Her husband is away at war, after all, and nobody has the right to look that good. Observing Malena from a distance--and worshiping her--is 13-year-old Renato (Giuseppe Sulfaro) who dreams of being her protector and who follows her every move (including spying on her home).

After receiving word of the death of her husband, and after her doddering father comes to believe the worst rumors about her, Malena is left alone and destitute. She gradually yields to the inevitable male advances and eventually becomes a high-priced call girl for the occupying German troops. With Sicily's liberation, she is summarily denounced and publicly humiliated in the town piazza. The now smug citizens of Castelcutto drive her out of town. Yet, right at war's end, her soldier husband, an ex-POW with one arm, returns to Castelcutto to find her. Himself ridiculed and with no hint of what has happened to Malena, Scordia's only support comes from a now mature Renato who writes a letter telling the former how to seek out his vanished wife.

There are many things to like about *Malena*, things familiar from other Italian films: luscious settings (the film was shot mostly in the Sicilian seaside town of Syracuse), evocative and poignant music (by the veteran Ennio Morricone), lovely period re-creations, and a whole gallery of small-town characters and types (Tornatore admits of Fellini as an influence). Then there is the beautiful, enigmatic Malena herself and the randy but well-meaning Renato, part of a nutty family out of a pizza commercial.

It could be said that the film, at bottom, lacks warmth since the title character is always and only observed--never plumbed; her patent sexuality and beauty, spectacular as they are, come to hide any real human dimension. Further, the sentiment of the picture (it has plenty) could be taken as merely sentimental by some filmgoers.

So, *Malena* is perhaps not as moving or sweeping as *Cinema Paradiso*, but one could go to see it as a kind of variation on a theme of the earlier picture, and, withal, a lovely tour of a vanished Sicily through the eyes of a searching child.

A Talk with Giuseppe Tornatore

Miramax Films, the American distributor of *Malena*, feels they have a potential art house hit on their hands with the new Italian film. The film opened very well during

October in Italy, and Miramax hopes it will see a similar reception in the U.S. To further that end, the company brought the film's director, Giuseppe Tornatore, on his first full-blown publicity jaunt in the States, including Washington, D.C.

Tornatore, 44, was born in the Sicilian town of Bagheria, near Palermo, and lived on the island till he was 26, eventually working his way up in television. By 29, he had made his first feature film, *Il Camorrista* (shot in Naples). By his second film--*Cinema Paradiso*--he had become a force in Italian filmmaking. *Malena* is his seventh feature, and the third he has set in post-war Sicily (the second was *The Starmaker* in 1995).

Asked what has drawn him to this period, he said that "the 1940's through the 1960's were the decisive years for Sicily, in everything, both for the good and for the bad. At that time there was great promise and hope; great passions about things. Yet there was also great poverty and some of the worst years of the Mafia. Such a time makes for great subjects."

He told of how *Cinema Paradiso*, his breakthrough to international notice, began as "a total disaster," a film roundly panned by critics and ignored by audiences, even after undergoing a drastic cut in the original (almost three hour) version). Its Best Foreign Language Film prize in 1989 catapulted it to success first in America, and only then did it take off in Italy. "It took the Oscar," he admitted, "to get the film back into Italian cinemas."

Malena comes from a short story written in the 1960's by Italian writer Luciano Vincenzoni. Tornatore said he knew the story for some time but was never interested in it as film material until five years ago, when, while filming a Dolce and Gabbana commercial in Rome, he found his "Malena"--Monica Bellucci. With her always in mind for the title role, he needed to find his Renato, whom he finally discovered in first-time actor Giuseppe Sulfaro "after more than four months of screen tests." Tornatore also adapted the story to his purposes, changing its location to Sicily.

Tornatore's film influences are legion. "I was an omnivorous filmgoer growing up in the 1960's and 70's in Sicily," he noted, "I saw all the Hitchcock, Fellini, and Kurosawa I could. I saw everything, both the classics and the--how do you say it?--trash." The director has a soft spot for two films he made in languages other than Italian, evidencing perhaps the kind of affection one has for the unfavored child in a family. Neither *A Pure Formality* (made in French in 1994) or *The Legend of 1900* (in English) were box office successes, the first getting no American release and the second, in 1999, receiving only minimal distribution. Though they might have been a bit more difficult to make (because of working in another language), the director added that "they are still the films of mine that I love the best."

Clearly, making a film in a language other than Italian doesn't intimidate him (he would even consider working in the U.S.--"if the right property could be found"). Above all, he emphasized, "it is the language of film which is most important (to have). I can shoot in any language."

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