

The Son's Room

Nanni Moretti is a contemporary Italian director little known in the U.S. Only avid cinephiles would know his work, and but one of his movies, *Dear Diary* ("Caro Diario"), has had a commercial Washington-area showing in the last decade (1994). That film was relatively typical of his work, to wit, openly autobiographical and self-referential, by turns ironic and whimsical, and mildly caustic on matters social and political. His latest film, *The Son's Room* ("La Stanza del Figlio"), could find him some new adherents, but they will be discovering a very different Nanni Moretti. He has left his Rome-based, comedic, politically-committed persona behind to enter, very effectively, into a world of family drama and tragedy. The film was the first Italian film in more than two decades to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival last May, and it will be the Italian nominee for the Academy Award for the best foreign-language film.

The movie presents us with an attractive, middle-class family living in the Adriatic town of Ancona: Giovanni (Moretti), a successful psychiatrist with his office next to the family apartment, his wife Paola (Laura Morante), who works at a local art gallery, and their teen-aged children, feisty Irene (Jasmine Trinca) and younger, dreamier Andrea (Giuseppe Sanfelice). We are introduced to them leisurely, cutting between Giovanni and his practice (including glimpses with his varied clientele), and a cluster of mundane, domestic questions, often revolving around the kids: Did Andrea steal something at school? Is Irene getting serious about a guy?

About a third of the way through, a routine Sunday turns horrendous. Giovanni, hoping to go on one of his regular jogs with Andrea, gets a call from a patient Oscar (Silvio Orlando) who is suicidal. He feels he must go to the man's home to hear him out. The other family members, in turn, decide to go their separate ways. But there is a tragic accident, and this close-knit family now must cope with loss.

The rest of the film describes that coping, showing the family closer to breaking apart than coming together. Giovanni, who blames himself for what happened, cannot concentrate on his clients, while Paola quits her job and distances herself from Giovanni in her grief. Putting aside the old truism of tragedy bringing people closer together, Moretti himself has said instead that: "grief can divide people who love each other," as it does this family (a similar effect of a death in the family was seen with the recent *In the Bedroom*). Only at the very end of the picture, after a lengthy automobile journey, does the glacier of the family's grief begin to melt...

Moretti's film (which he wrote with two collaborators, Linda Ferri and Heidrun Schleef, is very real but also low-key, which makes the more poignant or dramatic moments stand out in even greater relief. These latter include, for example, the family in muffled weeping over an open coffin in a stark hospital room, followed by the morticians' efficiently closing the coffin lid with a power-drill. It occurs to me that this sequence--grim, but plain and honest--would be almost unthinkable in an American movie, which would be much more likely to feature an extended sequence of lingering death throes. Perhaps this is one of those essential differences between a more mature Europe used to simply facing death and an adolescent America using death for facile entertainment value.

Lest the film sound too much of a downer, be aware that Moretti is ever light on his feet, and his sequences and dialogue do not sag or turn sluggish. There is humor,

too, and insight, in the parade of patients the psychiatrist sees. Besides the puzzling Oscar, there is a silly, obsessive-compulsive woman, a raging porn addict, a supercilious academic, and a woman who “must buy a dress” after every session. The family members, too, are smashing, including Morante, as a radiant then touching Paola, and the two children, both of whom are first-time actors and add a wonderful, rounded freshness to their characters.

And what of Nanni as Giovanni (the name is a variation on his own)? He is himself, as always, giving off an aura of the decent, fair-minded guy, but tempered this time by bouts of grief mingled with rage. As in the scene, for instance, where a frustrated Giovanni rails before Paola about what has happened to their marriage, finding it as ruptured as a once-mended teapot he crudely breaks in his own hands. This is new acting territory for the actor-writer-director, and he handles it deftly. Once a kind of smart aleck of Italian cinema, Nanni Moretti has now become a dramatic storyteller of European filmmaking.

(February 2002)

Talking with Nanni Moretti

Nanni Moretti, tall and thin, in a trademark flannel checked shirts, has come to Washington for the first time to plug one of his films. A man of brisk curiosity, he disarms his interviewer by instantly quizzing him about the paper he writes for, his audience and his neighborhood. He normally does not do publicity, yet here he is traveling around promoting *The Son's Room* because his U.S. distributor, Miramax Films, asked him.

The director readily agreed that *The Son's Room* represented a considerable change from his more comedic and political films. As to why he chose a protagonist who is a psychiatrist, he said the story he wanted to tell was one of grief and one's reaction to it, especially confronting the hard reality of a death in the family. He wanted to create a “character that had to come to accept others.” “My earlier protagonists,” he said, “did not accept others as they were; they were always exhorting and shouting and mocking people, challenging them and urging them to change.” *The Son's Room* is, summed up, a quiet call for empathy.

He spoke of a new kind of maturity which comes to his protagonist in the course of his film. In the movie, Giovanni advises a client that he must not try to control his life so much--that “you have to wait for life to happen to you.” Yet, Giovanni himself is a person who wants to control himself and the lives of others, who desires to sustain and govern his comfortable life. But, after a traumatic death, Moretti noted, “the theories of Giovanni are exploded; they do not work anymore. My character is a man who cannot control his own grief, and--in turn--the grief of his patients.” In the film, this leads him to leave his practice. “This is not a defeat,” Nanni insists, “but a major change in direction. He may or may not finally give up his profession. It is nor clear what comes next.”

Giovanni's psychiatric patients in *The Son's Room* show a considerable range of symptoms and syndromes. The director was asked where he come up with their traits. “The sources were several,” he replied. “Some of these characters were simply invented, some were elaborations of what friends and colleagues told me about persons

they knew undergoing analysis, and some were taken from cases in psychiatric journals. All became part of the material.”

Moretti suggested that the change in subject matter and tone of his film may have come, on some level, from the fact that he had never worked with so many women on one of his films (indeed a rarity in the very male-dominated Italian film industry). On *The Son's Room*, for the first time in his career, he shares writing credit with, not one, but two other women, Linda Ferri and Heidrun Schleef. His editor was also female, as was his principal cameraman. Asked how he worked with his writing colleagues, he mentioned that the three writers did *not* produce separate scenes on their own but worked together in turning out the scenes--a true collaboration.

The Son's Room took a good deal out of him, the director admitted, and he may have left behind his politically committed characters. “My alter ego (in his films) did represent those earlier years. But one's life changes, and a person must adapt to different circumstances. I've changed, become more mature perhaps.” As to the future, “I honestly don't know what comes next. Not that I am in any kind of a ‘creative crisis’ or anything (grinning), but I'm not sure what to follow up with, and I need a bit of time to think of what to do.”

Switching from his current film to the broader subject of European cinema, Moretti talked of the relative lack of Italian--or any foreign language films--on American screens. He mildly lamented that fact, attributing it mainly to America's passionate distaste of foreign languages in movies (something not evident in polyglot Europe).

Addressing the situation concerning his own films, he smiled: “I'm not complaining--I do OK. I have an audience in Europe, especially in France, in South America. My films are seen. Still, I would like to see an international chain of art house cinemas that could show films regularly to those select audiences that would like to see them. Like my own cinema in Rome (he founded an art house, the Nuovo Sacher, there), which shows diverse and challenging films. Yes, there are the Angelika and the Lincoln Center cinemas in New York, but the United States needs more of these kind of venues.”

