

The Traitor

Told in epic form, “The Traitor” (*Il Traditore*) relates the singular true story of Tommaso Buscetta, the man who brought down the Cosa Nostra.

That story begins in the early 1980’s, with all-out war between the Sicilian clans of the Corleonesi, headed by strong man Totò Riina (Nicola Calì), and the Badalamenti, to whom Tommaso belongs, having reached a fragile peace. But the pact cannot last, and Buscetta, a “made man,” flees to Brazil with his wife and daughter to avoid the carnage. He then watches from afar as his two sons and brother are killed in Palermo, knowing he may be next. But by the spring of 1984, he is arrested by the Brazilian police and extradited to Italy.

Now in prison, Buscetta (Pierfrancesco Favino) is resentful of the direction the crime gang has taken, and he makes a fateful decision to tell all he knows about the Cosa Nostra, with names and dates. His interrogator is another Sicilian just as tough as he is, Judge Giovanni Falcone (Fausto Russo Alesi), and the outcome of that vast testimony results in the famous maxi-trial in Palermo, in which Buscetta is the star witness before more than 300 brutish mafiosi defendants. The trial itself, unique in Italian history, is shown as a rough and raucous affair—at times barely under control—with many defendants raging against Buscetta from their zoo-like cages while the “traitor” testifies in his bullet-proof glass box. You couldn’t make this stuff up.

While the maxi-trial forms the dramatic center of the film, “The Traitor” goes on to trace Buscetta’s life in the US under witness protection and his ongoing testimony back in Italy against top boss Riina (who was still at large during the Palermo trial) and even against high-level politicians associated with mafia activities. As he hoped, Tommaso Buscetta got his last wish: he died in his bed in Miami, Florida.

Pierfrancesco Favino must carry the film as Buscetta, and this veteran international performer (“Rush,” “World War Z”), sporting big hair and a big “stache,” handles the load with a mix of toughness and grace, portraying a once violent thug who seeks a way to a better life for himself and family and always considers himself a “man of honor.” While there is plenty of action and suspense in “The Traitor” (well over two hours), the crucial scenes are the quiet, thoughtful ones where Tommaso pours out his truths to the solemn, but sympathetic Falcone. That two-man exchange exposed the world of Cosa Nostra forever.

“The Traitor” was made by long-time Italian film legend, Marco Bellocchio, who has been making films for almost 50 years. More power to the man for helming an ambitious and compelling picture in his senior years!

(The film is rated “R” and runs 150 minutes.)

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