

We Have A Pope

Nanni Moretti, the Italian writer-actor-director, should be better known here. His wry, sardonic, yet politically cutting films over the last 35 years offer a searching panorama of Italian life over those decades. It should be noted also that his films are very Italian and, perhaps for that reason, they don't travel well across the pond.

His latest, "We Have a Pope" ("Habemus Papam") may turn out to have a bit wider appeal, especially for Catholics with a sense of humor. The title is the phrase used by the Catholic Church when the College of Cardinals has elected a new pontiff—symbolized by the white smoke streaming from a Vatican stack. This film opens at that moment when the College meets (in a fine re-creation of the Sistine Chapel) to name a new pope. The vote is divided, so a compromise candidate, Cardinal Melville (Michel Piccoli) is selected. But the retiring Melville is shocked by his election, feeling he is not worthy. Though duly elected, he panics before addressing the faithful.

Fellow cardinals try to convince him to accept, and they even call in a psychoanalyst, Professor Brezzi (the sly Moretti), to assist him, yet he escapes from his Vatican prison to hide in Rome's streets. The Vatican's spokesman (Jerzy Stuhr) tries to locate him in vain, while all the cardinals are effectively held hostage inside the Vatican from by the choice they've made. Meanwhile, Melville is on the loose, discovering how the Romans live, telling bystanders (and another psychiatrist) that he is "an actor" (his real first love), and falling in with a Chekhov troupe.

This is all done with tender humor, although Piccoli's vivid and touching performance makes his pontifical stage fright all too believable. One can clearly sympathize with the weight of responsibility a sheltered personality might sense, and Piccoli delivers that dread. Moretti himself, as the psychiatrist used to plumbing psyches but who can get nowhere with the secretive clergy, is wry and winning. Especially so when he, playing for time while the search for Melville goes on, organizes a volleyball tournament for the gym-shy cardinals.

This is sweet parody for Italians, effective enough for the film to be nominated this year for several David di Donatello Awards, the country's equivalent of our Oscars (and Michel Piccoli won the prize for best actor).

(The film is not rated, running time 104 min.).

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