

## Ciao, Professore!

A decent, upstanding teacher with principles and scruples is erroneously or perversely assigned to a deficient, decaying school and inherits a willful pack of incorrigible delinquents... Sound familiar? Could be *The Blackboard Jungle* or *Conrack* or *Up the Down Staircase* or *To Sir, With Love*. The latest version of this familiar plot device is done *a la italiana* in Lina Wertmüller's *Ciao, Professore!*

Lina Wertmüller was a sensation in the mid-1970's with a series of sardonic, edgy movies like *The Seduction of Mimi*, *Swept Away*, and *Seven Beauties*, but her work has been little seen in the United States during the last 15 years. After her spectacular successes, she won a Warner Brothers contract and tested the international market with the partly English-language *A Night Full of Rain*, but that and the next picture bombed, and she reverted to making mostly quirky Italian comedies with extravagant titles, such as *Summer Night with Greek Profile*, *Almond Eyes* and *Scent of Basil*.

The inspiration for her latest film was a set of compositions written by Neapolitan street children to their elementary school teacher and compiled by Marcello D'Orta into a 1990 Italian bestseller. Entitled "Me, Let's Hope I Make It" (in Italian "Io Speriamo Che Me La Cavo," the original title of the film), the book was adapted by Wertmüller (and four other writers!) and altered principally by creating the character of a teacher (*professore*) from Northern Italy who must adapt to very different Southern Italian mores. This disparity between northern cool and southern raunch is supposed to be the salt and spice of the movie, but the film's recipe turns out to be too bland, more sentiment than spice.

The professore, Marco Tulio Sperelli (played by popular Italian comic Paolo Villaggio) is a teacher who is transferred, through a bureaucratic computer error, to a town called "Corzano" in southern Italy near Naples, instead of to "Corsano," near his own city of Genoa. His arrival in the picturesquely downtrodden town offers several belts of culture shock, including the fact that but three of the 16 kids in his third-grade class show up to school. He himself has to round up the others from the gas station, the market, the ice cream parlor, the street itself. And he gets little help inside the school: the principal (Isa Danieli) is a comical breeding cow and the janitor (Gigio Morra) is a hustling slacker who sells chalk to the faculty and toilet paper to the students. An utter *pesce-out-of-acqua*, Marco anxiously seeks a transfer back to the civilized North.

Let's see...can we guess how this is going to turn out? We can, as Marco is drawn into the disheveled lives of his smart-aleck kids and comes to understand why they act as they do (vile home environments, mostly). He even inadvertently gains respect by slapping around the toughest kid of the lot, Raffaele (Ciro Esposito), a Capone-in-the-making, although he immediately regrets the act. He finds himself marveling at the bay outside his room, picking up a bit of the kids' incomprehensible (to him) argot, and absorbing some local folk wisdom, as in the tough maxim delivered by a cynical neighbor: "Life is like a ladder in a chicken coop: short and s----y." As he adapts to Neapolitan ways,

Marco finds he must take on local coloration to get things done, so--to rescue Raffaele's sick mother--he tries to steal a car, threatens hospital personnel, and attacks a domineering nun/nurse. Ultimately, he receives his transfer order and leaves his charges, but he is, of course, forever changed and illuminated.

As a film whose leitmotif is the contrast between Italy's North and South, *Ciao, Professore!* necessarily parades all manner of stereotypes, from the scruffy but lively alleys through the depiction of a string of colorful Italian "types." The film also raises the long-standing issue of the well-off Northern Italian's "racism" toward the relatively backward and "dark" Southerner, and Wertmüller seems, at least in one sense, to accept the patronizing northern view in that she has her Marco--to get things done among "these people"--become as uncivilized and savage as they apparently are. Lina Wertmüller has said that "this kind of story could take place in Washington, D.C. instead of Italy," and in its blatant stereotyping, one can indeed see parallels to some of our own urban experience.

Villaggio, a mild buffo presence, is a popular Italian film and television comedian but hardly any of his work has been seen in this country (he was in Federico Fellini's last film, *La Voce Della Luna*). In Italy, he appears most often as a character called Fantozzi, a kind of mix between Lou Costello and Jackie Gleason's "The Poor Soul." As the professore, he's genial enough, and he can be touching, as when he shows remorse over hitting Raffaele, but his mild persona doesn't carry enough contrast or dynamic to give the picture real bite. Wertmüller, too, can get awful treacly, as in one scene where we see the teacher sappily bonding with the cute kiddies, all out-of-focus and in too-tight close-ups. Worse is the use, to close the picture, of Louis Armstrong's overplayed and saccharine version of "What A Wonderful World." One can only assume the tune is not that trite to Italian audiences.

Any bite the movie has comes from the kids, many of whom are fun to watch. Wertmüller claims she interviewed 50,000 children around Naples to come up with 50 (all first-time actors) to use in the film. Even with this exhaustive selection, you sense that these *ragazzi* are sometimes too obviously rehearsed, too ready to look at Lina to get their lines right. Still, several do worthy work, like little Ciro Esposito as a spiteful tough who never goes soft. Mario Bianco is the chubby Nicola, who can't keep his hands off snacks, Maria Esposito is Rosinella, the class know-it-all who delivers a great Christmas tale, and tiny Adriano Pantaleo is Vincenzino, a toothless wonder who dips himself in ice cream. Then there is ultra-sleepy Gennarino (Dario Esposito) and ultra-dense Salvatore (Salvatore Terracciano) who can't remember his last name.

And, whoa, are these kids salty! Vintage Italian cuss-words and scatological cracks pour out of these kids' mouths in a stream (with their English equivalents fully displayed in subtitles). Thus, its fully deserved "R" rating; it is not a picture for the little ones--they might get all kinds of bad ideas!

(August 1994)