

## The Best of Youth

To be right up front about it: a more-than-six-hour commitment to *one* movie is surely excessive, no? Except, except when it is as superb, as compelling as *The Best of Youth* (“La Meglio Gioventu”), a film that dissects the last 40 years of Italian life through the stories of two once-young men and the people that intersect their existences.

This sweeping, generous film, directed by Marco Tullio Giordana (maker of the fine 2000 anti-Mafia film *One Hundred Steps*), was conceived and shown as a miniseries for National Italian Television (RAI) and aired in 2003. The scope and duration of the film, as a cinematic experience, allows for a leisurely and involving narrative (co-scripted by Stefano Rulli and Sandro Petraglia) that gives a pure sense of life unfolding, honestly and tellingly.

The grandeur of this film epic (“epic” in the classic sense of a “poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of historical heroes”) sent this reviewer to his memory bank to try and recall any similar American motion picture that approaches *The Best of Youth* in ambition and quality. Only *The Godfather* series comes to mind, though its Italian-American crowd is completely nefarious, while this, perhaps ordinary, Italian family, seen so close, is full of a whole range of human drama. Would that our own series television had just a modicum of this show’s depth.

The story begins in 1966 when two Roman youths, older brother Matteo Carati (Alessio Boni) and younger Nicola (Luigi Lo Cascio), are primed to complete university studies and attain potential success when brilliant Matteo abruptly rejects his literary studies to help a damaged mental patient Giorgia (Jasmine Trinca) and involves Nicola in her abduction from the mental institution that mistreats her. This rash act results in dramatic changes in direction for both brothers, as the tightly-wound Matteo, seeking order in his life, joins the army and, eventually, law enforcement, while the empathetic Nicola, studying medicine, opts for psychiatry and work with the mentally ill.

A full-blown plot summary is pointless; what the elaborate plot does, among other things, is graze against many mileposts in post-war Italian life: the horrendous Florence flood of 1966, student uprisings in the late Sixties, the rise of the Red Brigades in the 1970’s, Italy’s World Cup victory in 1982, the terror of the Mafia in Sicily into the 1990’s. Such events are not intrusively signaled but rather form a kind of background music to the ongoing and fully realized complexity of the Caratis’ evolving life.

The brothers’ parents, jobs, wives and children, friends and girlfriends, and the different settings of their lives--Rome, Turin, Sicily, Tuscany--are all given their due, and the developments in those lives are in turn, knotty, romantic, tense, lustrous, touching, and tragic. The bottom line is that, slowly--but never tediously--you come to identify and root for these fellows and their life companions. You come to care for them like you do for your own friends and family. Just as importantly, you get involved in these lives, and you don’t want their story to end.

If you are can commit to true quality cinema by spending a long time in the dark and (perhaps) suffering numb bums, stay alert to the local screening pattern for *The Best of Youth*. I personally wish the film a long life, but I’m practical enough to know that it is likely to be on local screens only fleetingly (it certainly would be worth waiting for when it comes out in video). If you can catch it, it will stay with you a long time. *The Best of Youth* is among the Best of Films.

(July 2005)