

Respiro

A world of azure blue water surrounds the picturesque island of Lampedusa, located off the south coast of Sicily, and a world of mood swings surrounds the flighty character of Grazia (Valeria Golino), wife of fisherman Pietro (Vincenzo Amato) and mother of three. She loves her husband and kids, teenage daughter Marinella (Veronica D'Agostino), and 13-year-old Pasquale (Francesco Casisa) and little Filippo (Filippo Pucillo) and her modest home and her whims of abandon...but she can't stand her live-in mother-in-law, her mucky job at the fish-packing factory, and anything that fences her in. She seems to want to breathe--and thus the title of *Respiro* ("Breath"), the new Italian film in town.

This world of island Italy has been evoked before (*Stromboli, The Long Blue Road, Padre, Padrone*), suggesting a pristine beauty that hosts a thwarted narrowness. Grazia, though, is not aching to escape her island; she just wants to have fun. But in a tight little world, her larger desires and gestures just look crazy. So, when she cavorts topless off the beach or decides to wash everything in the house or throws fish at her workmates, family and friends start talking about sending her to a "cure" in faraway Milan.

Grazia's big lug Pietro is a good fellow; he can be gentle when necessary, he tries to understand, he keeps her on her meds. Her two boys fiercely defend her, especially her Pasquale, the closest thing she has to a soul mate. When she decides to runaway from home, it is Pasquale who secretly looks out for her in a nearby cave as the entire village becomes a search party. Her discovery at the end of the picture ends in one gorgeous, intricate image in which the film surely earns its title: B-r-e-a-t-h.

Written and directed by Emanuele Crialese, *Respiro* is not just Grazia's story. In fact, her muddled life is just the centerpoint around which several other stories of the family are spun. Pasquale and Filippo's carefree days and growing pains are fully explored (with appropriate rawness), and their sister's attachment to a new young *carabinieri* is also featured. Other vignettes of town life abound. The film could be called--to coin a phrase--"It Takes a Village."

Golino, though still young-looking, has had a 20-year career, from ingenue roles in 1980's Italian cinema to Hollywood schlock (*Hot Shots!, Clean Slate*) and seriousness (*Rain Man, Leaving Las Vegas*) and then back to Italian drama. As the proverbial "free spirit," she makes Grazia (i.e. "Grace") palpable, vulnerable--believable. The two boy actors, newcomers to movies (as is most of the cast), get as much screen time as Grazia and deserve it; it is as much their story as hers.

Respiro is essentially plotless; it is not neat or tidy and it does not fully resolve itself. Still, if you could use a slice of Italian life, this is one you could squeeze some juice out of and savor.

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