

Grazie, Zia

Film review

Dennis Raymond

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The work that's being done by the new Italian cinema continues to amaze me, and the latest entry proves no exception.

"Grazie, Zia" (Thank you, Aunt) was written and directed by Salvatore Samperi at the preposterous age of twenty-four. Yet it is a film of uncommon depth and shapeliness, so clearly the work of a mature, sophisticated artist.

I suggest you rush right out to the Studio One and see "Grazie, Zia" because I suspect it won't be there much longer, if it hasn't left already. The movie reviewer for *The Detroit News* completely missed the whole point of the picture and started off his review with a headline that read, "Another neurotic is on the loose." Try to match that for flippancy! With a headline like that, who'd want to read the review, much less see the movie?

"Grazie, Zia" is what might be termed a "depressing" or "difficult" picture. Difficult it is—one whose visual and aural elements are as accessible as its basic content is elusive. Depressing too—but simply because it does not come out of the wings like a chorus girl with a smile on her face does not mean that "Grazie, Zia" is an unpleasant or uninteresting experience. These facts should not keep anyone who is at all interested in what's being done today by our new young directors from seeing it. For to fail to see "Grazie, Zia" is to fail to see one of the boldest screen achievements of the new year.

Sexually and socially impotent, young Alvisè has found security and consolation in a wheelchair. His self-inflicted paralysis enables him to cope with the world on his own terms.

Alvisè is entrusted to the care of his beautiful Aunt Lea, a physician by profession, in the hopes that she might be able to release him from his tortured state. We watch with fascination as Samperi gradually traces what appears to be Lea's descent into her nephew's fantasy world of violence and psychosis. She casually ends an affair with her lover of fifteen years as she begins to devote all her energies to Alvisè. When the stubby little maids leave for good, her lovely country house and estate are abandoned to negligence and miscare.

Alvisè forces Lea to be the butt of his sadistic, frightening "games," and from this point on, the imagery grows richer and more chaotic, the angles wider and more distorted. Samperi seems particularly aware of the camera's ability to suggest an inner state of turmoil, torment and confusion.

It is in their final "game" that Lea provides the necessary release for her nephew. Suddenly, in a shock of recognition, we realize that Samperi has been manipulating us, that the relationship between the two relatives is not what we had perceived it to be on the surface level.

During the final, exquisite moments of the film, Lea demonstrates that it is she who has been the dominant force all along, that she has not been debasing herself, but, on the contrary, patronizing her nephew in order to discover the effective cure for his illness. It is that cure, plus this surprising shift of a focal point, that results in a shattering conclusion, one that will leave you gasping in amazement and admiration for Samperi.

Right from the onset, one is so overcome by the fierce, earthy beauty of Lisa Gastoni (Lea) that there may be a tendency to discredit her for the sensitivity, life, and dimension she brings to a demanding role. It might seem

illogical that a character who is introduced as being the very model of quiet intelligence and sensibility should be so subject to moral seduction but the surprise ending clarifies Lea's purpose and thinking, and everything falls so perfectly in its place. One can only wish that Samperi chose a more forceful personality to play Alvise than that of Lou Castel.

The new Italian directors have many things in common: an unflinching pessimism, the same mordant humor, a heightened social consciousness, even the use of the same actors and technicians. Samperi does not possess Bellochio's sarcastic impudence, nor Bertolucci's naive charm, but he does hold a greater control over his work than either. There is not one throw-away shot in "Grazie, Zia;" each image has something to contribute to the progression of the drama. And the drama is Samperi's, as beautifully and logically constructed as I have ever seen on the screen.

The first few scenes make it clear that "Grazie, Zia" is the work of a discerning, troubled, uniquely gifted artist who speaks to us through the refined center of his art. We may even "like" this film, but those first few scenes indicate that liking is not the primary point. We "like" "The Graduate," but do we "like" "L'Avventura" or "The Silence"? If so, all the better, but we must recognize from the start that liking certain movies is irrelevant to their effective being.

Despite the unrelieved pessimism of "Grazie, Zia," one leaves the theatre actually feeling elated at the discovery of a striking new film talent that, given time, will blossom into something unique and important and great.

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