

La Vacanza

Featuring and co-produced by Vanessa Redgrave and Franco Nero, and directed by Tinto Brass, this cinematic gem was awarded the film critics award for “Best Italian Film” at Venice Film Festival 1971. Since then, “La Vacanza” has waited to be discovered by American audiences. For the first time in four decades, the film can finally be seen with English subtitles at Hollywood Reel Independent Film Festival 2012.

The film tells the story of a young woman (played by Vanessa Redgrave) released for a “vacation” from an insane asylum. She encounters lots of different – often bizarre and comical – characters and situations, which are often very surprising and unconventional, only to lead to an unexpected conclusion.

Years before doing erotic films, director Tinto Brass was already well-known in the early 1970s. His films at that time were noted for their extremely experimental editing- and camera-style, and their often political and satirical elements. This even got Tinto Brass an offer to direct “A Clockwork Orange” – which he declined in order to produce his more personal project “L’Urlo”.

Before “La Vacanza”, Brass had already collaborated with Vanessa Redgrave and Franco Nero on the film “Dropout”. They enjoyed working on that film so much that they teamed up again to do “La Vacanza” – which became one of Tinto Brass’ most noteworthy films. Strikingly, Tinto Brass himself describes “La Vacanza” as his second-favorite film of all the films he ever did – Right after “L’Urlo”.

The film can probably be described as a surrealist fairy-tale that feels a little like Buñuel’s best works – but featuring editing, cinematography and messages in-line with Brass’ early films.

Watching “La Vacanza” and “Dropout”, we immediately notice changes in style compared to Tinto Brass’ earlier works: While the cinematography is similar, he sometimes employs a different editing-style in these two films.

Brass’ earlier works mostly feature extremely quick, experimental editing. His two Redgrave/Nero-films, on the other hand, in many places seem more “grounded” and less experimental in that area. This new style creates a calmer, more reflecting mood in many scenes, which gets enhanced by Fiorenzo Carpi’s fascinating original music for “La Vacanza”, that reminds us of Italian folk-songs. But still, we find Brass’ trademark quick editing and elegant zoom-shots throughout – only less prominently than in his earlier works.

The style of the film (i.e. editing, acting, cinematography) is as important as the storyline itself: In many parts, there is a deliberate contrast between intellectual meaning (i.e. the message) and the emotional impact (i.e. the “feeling” achieved due to filmmaking techniques) of a scene: A sequence may tell us very sad and serious events – but due to editing, music and directing ideas, it feels light-hearted. This keeps the viewer thinking afterwards: The same scene that seemed simple and funny at first can suddenly become food for thought as the viewer realizes the actual meaning of the actions he just saw.

That’s a very important element in “La Vacanza”: The film continues to address a lot of political topics from Tinto Brass’ earlier films, but never does so in a “preachy” way, always distancing the viewer from the events depicted because of its style. An unfair, staged trial in one sequence becomes an absurd, rhymed comedic event that is sure to get laughs in the audience – but still, it is an unfair trial, showing a poor woman being convicted because a rich man has more influence with the law. In the end of the sequence, we may recognize a very Brechtian approach: Any illusion of “reality” is removed by a funny music-number performed in the court-room– which is in stark contrast to the serious events portrayed. Thus, the viewer gets an emotional distance from the portrayed event, which in Brecht’s ideas was meant to get him start thinking about the general ideas and messages behind the scenes he just saw.

But, with all serious topics addressed, the film can be regarded as a fast-moving, surprising, often comical, sometimes tragical modern fairy-tale that surprises the viewer almost constantly.

Both as a film-scholar and as a personal friend of Tinto Brass, I am very happy that “La Vacanza” will screen in Hollywood in December. When I first watched Tinto Brass’ personal copy of the film, I was stunned: Knowing “La Vacanza”, you get a whole new perspective on his oeuvre and ideas. It is one of his key-works which, until now, only has been available on an Italian VHS from the 1990s.

Its 1971 Venice Film Festival screening was certainly polarizing: While the critics loved it, the film also nearly provoked a riot, and audience-members tried beating up Tinto Brass afterwards. Why was it so controversial? Is it still so polarizing?

Hollywood audiences are about to find out in December 2012.

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