



STRAINED RELATIONS

TWENTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART'S revelatory series "Comedy Italian Style, 1950–1980" proposed the subversive idea that postwar Italian cinema was blessed with two great strands: the high road of art-film auteurs (Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, Fellini, and Antonioni) and the low road of popular, critically neglected comedies by such directors as Pietro Germi,

Alberto Lattuada, and Dino Risi. Since then, we have inched closer to recognizing that "commercial" comedies such as Germi's *Divorce Italian Style*, Lattuada's *Mafioso* and Risi's *The Easy Life* are indeed complex, formally exciting masterworks. Of these, *Mafioso* (62) has always been the hardest for North Americans to see. That situation has been rectified by Rialto Pictures, which is releasing a lustrously restored and newly subtitled version of Lattuada's supremely grim, hard-nosed comedy.

The plot centers on Nino, a go-getter foreman in a Milanese car factory, played by Alberto Sordi in one of his greatest performances. Though he grew up in Sicily, Nino has become, for all intents and purposes, a Northerner, pacing the factory floor with stopwatch in hand, hawk-eyed against malingeringers, thinking himself shrewd, nobody's fool (ha!). He takes his family on vacation back to his native Sicily. It is the first time his slim, sophisticated, blonde wife

(Norma Bengell) will be meeting her in-laws; and Nino, who has been away from his homeland for years, tries to counter her lack of enthusiasm by singing the praises of Sicily as a joyous place filled with scented oranges. What they encounter instead is a dour, suspicious populace who are wily and cretinous, and uphold a bloody code of honor. Nino's wife offends by lighting up a cigarette and by bringing gloves as a gift to her father-in-law who, unbeknownst to her, has lost a hand through gunplay. Half the townsmen are unemployed lechers; the other half work for the Mafia.

The film can be seen as a parable of regional and class tensions: between the gullibly optimistic modern Northern Italy of the economic boom, and the poor, backward, fatalistic South, still ruled by bandits and gangsters, the embodiment of a corrupt past that has never gone away. Nino tries to bridge these two worlds with an increasingly desperate bonhomie and gregarious flattery, but no one is fooled,

least of all the old Mafia chieftain, Don Vincenzo, who calls in a favor and reenlists Nino as hit man. Nino thus enters a world where even glib words have consequences. In its pre-*Godfather*, unromantic treatment of the mob, we see how the Mafia plot usefully imposes implacability on an otherwise random, frivolous world. Like *Divorce Italian Style*, this is a comedy that does not flinch at murder.

No one could better embody the "average Italian" in all his swagger, cowardice, hypocritical geniality, and reluctant nobility than Alberto Sordi. Known to his fans and detractors as "The Emperor," he was almost handsome enough to be a matinee idol, had not a certain pudginess of cheek and largesse of nose gotten in the way. Sordi's Nino is essentially a conceited boy who has never grown up; his vanity prevents him from understanding the iron forces arrayed against him. Yet we can't help liking him, partly because, as the actor himself put it, "Impulsiveness and vitality are part of my character," and partly because Nino takes such tender, touching pride in his little family. He is not a macho, even going so far as to correct one of the Sicilian toughs: "It's not a sign of weakness to go along with what your wife wants." Yet even here, city-dude smugness undermines his enlightened message, so you're not sure whether to applaud or laugh at him.

One peculiarity of this golden age of Italian screen comedy was that it grew out of neorealism and never abandoned realist settings or gritty social facts, meanwhile drawing its emotional conclusions by substituting mockery for pity. In fact, it can be argued that the best Italian comedies elicit a deeper sympathy than, say, the manipulated-naïve bathos of "serious"



Rebel yell: Alberto Sordi makes a point

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encore films like *La Strada*, by showing their protagonists' craven flaws and still regarding them with affection.

Mafioso is filled with delicious touches, such as the discussion about alienation between several Sicilian beach bums, or the dilemma surrounding Nino's unmarried sister's mustache. The bedrock of Italian film comedy was its fabulous screenwriters, and this film boasted not only the great team of Age and Scarpelli but also Marco Ferreri (who went on to direct his own comedies) and Rafael Azcona.

When you have subtracted the contributions of great comic acting, brilliant scriptwriting, and a terrific music score by Piero Piccioni, what is there left to say about Lattuada's direction? Are we doing a disservice to this agile craftsman by trying to pin auteurist ambitions on him? He



keeps the action moving by any means necessary: sometimes tracking, sometimes employing enormous close-ups or through cutaways to the landscape, zooms, and stylized lighting. In short, he eschews any signature style, but draws eclectically on every technique to create a vibrant yet calmly proportioned whole. The alluring aesthetic of Sixties widescreen black-and-white has never looked better: Lattuada uses it both for a fluid *mise en scène* that embeds his characters in detailed social environments and for expressionistic effect, as when he floods the screen with noirish shadows in night sequences. As for personal themes, Lattuada said that his one constant was to show "the state of solitude of the individual faced with society." *Mafioso* certainly does so, by shuttling Nino between the dehumanizing, regimented factory and the vulpine Mafia, and suggesting a rough equivalency between the two systems. □

Mafioso will open in January at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas in New York. Additional cities are scheduled to follow.