MOVIES

'Life is Beautiful": A fine work of cinematic poetry

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Is it possible to make a movie about fascism, set much of it inside a death camp and fill it with laughs, charm and utter magic?

Yes, it most definitely is possible. Look for the proof in Italian filmmaker Roberto Benigni's "Life Is Beautiful" ("La Vita E Bella").

Awarded the Grand Jury Prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival, the movie, in tickling the funny bone, sometimes breaks the heart, but it just may be one of the most memorable films you'll ever see.

It certainly resists classification. It's romance. It's drama. It's outright farce, at times (although moviegoers certainly shouldn't expect "Schindler's List" with pratfalls). It is remarkable, in fact, just how many different emotions this film can evoke at once. In that respect, I have never seen another movie like it.

The story, which occasionally feels like a fairy tale, begins on a sunny day in 1939, in pre-war Tuscany where, aside from some stony monuments praising Mussolini and "Fascista Perfetto," everything looks about as pretty as a storybook confection.

Guido (portrayed flawlessly by Benigni himself) and his friend, Ferruccio (Giustino Durano) hurtle down through the sun-dappled hills, headed for a date with destiny, since the brakes have failed on their car, and who knows where they will end up? At the end of their wild ride, Guido, an apolitical Italian Jew, encounters the beautiful Dora (a beautiful Nicoletta Braschi). Even through Dora is a schoolteacher, the playful, imaginative Guido sees her as a princess. Even though she has merely fallen from a barn loft and landed on top of the hapless Guido, he insists that she has plunged from the sky. Later, as their paths cross again and yet again, and the eventually ride away together (on a green-and-white horse), we gladly suspend our disbelief in a large set of highly unlikely circumstances, and "see" through Guido's enchanting imagination. (It's important to remember that this story is told through Guido's son's eyes and through memories of what his father has related.)

But, while this story may have about the aura of a fairy tale now and then, it is not a fairy tale. When the clown prince and his princess ride away together on their curiously colored horse, the story does not end. In a sense, it is just beginning.

A bit jarringly (one of the film's few rough spots), we jump ahead several years and find Guido and Dora married and the parents of a small son, Giosue (the elfin, rubbery faced Giorgio Cantarini). Guido has realized his dreams of owning a tiny bookshop, but fascism and war have thoroughly infected the land now and, one day, with horrific suddenness, he and his wife and son are hauled away, via a monstrous, nightmare train, to a nameless concentration camp. ("We'll take the bus back," he assures Giosue.)

Guido, being Guido, strives then to turn the unspeakable into the inventive, to "free" Giosue through his imagination. He insists to the boy that the camp it part of a never-ending game. "We're all players," he says. "It's well-organized." (In one of the film's most powerful scenes, he purposely mistranslates the rules of the so-called "game" as they are sternly spewed out by an unsuspecting German guard to Giosue and the other Italian-speaking prisoners. Among the rules: No asking for lollipops! No crying for mommy!)

To realize his film, Benigni (who co-wrote the script with Vincenzo Cerami) worked with famed cinematographer, Tonino Delli Colli ("Once Upon a Time in America," "The Name of the Rose"), and designer/costumer Danilo Donati. Both manage somehow to bring a kind of magic lushness, even to the more shadowy scenes of "Life Is Beautiful."

The sometimes playful, sometimes haunting music by Nicola Piovani interweaves imagery and tints mood, finely punctuating this glorious cinematic poem.

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NIGHT AT THE ROXBURY (PG13)
WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (PG13)
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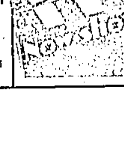

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CALL THEATRE FOR FEATURES AND TIMES

'Happiness' is sad comedy

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER
hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net

Writer-director Todd Solondz is the anti-Hollywood filmmaker.

His movies represent everything Hollywood tries desperately to ignore.

While Hollywood is about daring, glamour, beauty, glitter and fulfillment, even under the worst of circumstances; Solondz is about the homely, the alienated and the emotionally choked. While Hollywood can make a comedy where the "nerds" triumph, Solondz makes movies that know better.

Solondz's "Welcome to the Dollhouse" was a refreshing break from the usual gilded memories of childhood, with its dead accurate view of tacky New Jersey suburbia and geeky young people pushed aside by most of their peers and family.

"Happiness" follows some of those same themes into a disturbing look at dysfunctional adults.

This is a movie that will offend many people. In fact, parts of it will offend almost everyone. But there is no denying that Solondz's films generate the nervous laughter of recognition and evoke a strange sympathy for the lost souls he presents.

"Happiness" concerns three New Jersey sisters and the tangled lives they lead. Joy (Jane Adams) is 30, living in her parents house and going from one bad relationship to another. She is a sweet but very confused women with aspirations of being a singer.

Sister Helen (Lara Flynn Boyle) is a writer, with an outwardly high opinion of herself who is actually tormented by her shallow writing. Sister Trish (Cynthia Stevenson) seems to have it all -- big suburban house, three children, a professional psychologist husband. She is just happy, happy, happy.

Veteran actors Ben Gazzara and Louise Lasser play their divorcing parents with their own problems down in Florida.

Around the three sisters, Solondz takes us on a perverse view of suburbia under the mat. Helen is getting obscene phone calls from Allen (Philip Seymour Hoffman). Allen is an overweight, shambling, sexually repressed young man who lives a nowhere life in the apartment next door, going through the phone book and calling women at random to threaten them with sexual mayhem. Meanwhile, an overweight woman in the same apartment house with secrets of her own (Camyrn Manheim) seems attracted to Allen.

Joy breaks off a relationship with one man (Jon Lovitz, in a brutally blunt opening scene) to take up with a Russian gangster emigre (Jared Harris).

But the most disturbing of all is Trish. Her husband Bill, Allen's therapist, is a pedophile.

Dylan Baker gives an emotionally draining performance as the *compulsive, obsessed* child molester who stakes out his son Billy's friends as victims, going so far as to drug their food.

A devastating scene near the end has attracted the most attention and is one of the most uncomfortable scenes you're likely to see in a major film release. Bill explains in bitter and blunt language his obsession to his troubled 11-year-old son, who is struggling with his own sexuality. Baker and young Rufus Read bring depth and sorrow to this scene, but it is almost too painful to watch.

The strange thing about Solondz films is that they are so hilariously funny. He has an ear for inanity, an eye for tackiness and a sense that our worst nightmares and hangups are funny to everyone but us. His portrayal of New Jersey as an outpost of bad taste Hell should help keep down the population of the misnomered "Garden State."

The sexual scenes are distasteful more than pornographic but they take up too much of the film's focus. Though sexual hangups are certainly a core part of our existence.

Still, Solondz is an interesting director who seems to have a strong ethical point of view under all the dark humor and perverse behavior. His films seem to say, "Hey, look at us, we're human, too!"

Nobody in Hollywood is making movies like that.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 23

"SLAM"
Drama about a gifted young rapper/poet who, with help, finds salvation in his art. Stars Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn.

"SOLDIER"
An itinerant warrior of the future, trained exclusively for combat, but now made obsolete by a new generation of specially bred fighters, defends a band of settlers on a remote planet and discovers his own humanity in the process. Stars Kurt Russell.

"ORGAZMO"
Exclusively at the Main Art Theatre. Comedy about a down-on-his-luck Mormon actor who is introduced to the world of adult movies. Stars Trey Parker.

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 30

"CITIZEN KANE"
Exclusively at the Landmark Maple Theatre. A special reissue of the 1941 film that has been acclaimed widely, including most recently by the American Film Institute, as the greatest movie of all time. Stars Orson Welles, who also cowrote with Herman Mankiewicz.

Scheduled to open Friday, Nov. 6

"THE SIEGE"
An FBI agent teams up with a mysterious female CIA operative to investigate a group of Middle Eastern terrorists who are bombing New York City targets. As the bombings continue, U.S. troops are deployed and civil liberties are curtailed. Stars Denzel Washington, Annette Bening, Bruce Willis.

"VELVET GOLDMINE"
Set in London in the early '70s during the emergence of the glam-rock scene, the story follows the rise of a mythical rock icon who finds himself at the epicenter of the pleasures and decadence of the day.'

"THE WIZARD OF OZ"
Special edition re-release of the beloved classic on the eve of the film's 60th anniversary.

Scheduled to open Wednesday, Nov. 25

"HOME FRIES"
An offbeat comedy about two brothers obsessed with the same woman, one wants to marry her,the other kill her.

Backstage Pass gets scary!!!

BACKSTAGE PASS

ANN DELISI

Ehhh heee heee heee!

I am guessing that that was probably a really sad interpretation of a witch's laugh, but it is the Halloween season so I had to try something festive. Now I know last year for Backstage Pass on Detroit Public Television, I wanted to dress up as an imaginary bunny named Harvey. But the producers thought it might seem a little odd, to say the least. Let me assure you readers I am over that, well pretty much anyway.

Tonight on Backstage Pass, segment host Gerry Craig visits Elmwood Cemetery, now try and tell me that is not all about Halloween. The 3-D Invisibles will be giving us a spooky song to hum on the 31st and beyond. Also we will be seeing a demonstration by premiere glass blower Dale Chihuly, and of course there will be more!

Dale Chihuly has been called "Washington's best known native son." Chihuly has been said to be the world's premiere artist in the glass medium. He recently visited the campus of the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit to give a demonstration of his techniques. Although Chihuly himself is no longer able to create his pieces alone, he works through teamwork, but that is not something new to him. While studying in Venice, Chihuly has been said to have, "Absorbed the single technique that the Venetians has guarded so jealously for so very long, one that would revolutionize the new American glass movement: teamwork." While using teamwork it has been said Chihuly has created some of his best work yet.

Now on to the jamming 3-D Invisibles, the group that promises to scare us into singing along. This group has been described as, "Combining classic movie monster fandom with punk rock energy and a '60s pop sensibility." They day their song lyrics are the result of too many Creature Feature movies and brain-rotting comic books. The band consists of "Billy Bones" Bowen on drums, "Crypt-Rocker Chris" Flanagan on bass guitar and backing vocals and songwriter "Creepy Rick" Mills on guitar and lead vocal. These guys will all be rockin' tonight on Backstage Pass.

The Elmwood Cemetery is one of Detroit's oldest and most famous cemeterys. Backstage Pass's Gerry Craig takes us all on a tour with caretaker Chance Miller. When I asked Gerry what she thought of Elmwood, she quickly commented, "Elmwood has some of the finest examples of monument statuary. The cemetery itself is incredible, it contains wonderful pieces of history. It becomes very easy to see the different periods of art by the way families decided to memorialize their loved ones. This cemetery is not creepy as most people expect a place such as this to be. Elmwood is actually a very beautiful, tranquil setting with wonderful pieces of art."

All this and more on Backstage Pass, airing tonight at 7:30 and again tomorrow at midnight on Detroit Public Television.