Bread and tulips

Director: **Silvio Soldini**
Country: **Italy**
Date: **2000**

A review by A. O. Scott of *The New York Times*:

At the beginning of "Bread and Tulips," a tour guide delivers a lecture on ancient history to a gaggle of Italian tourists gathered at a ruined temple. As he eloquently invokes the proud Greco-Roman heritage that is the birthright of all Italians -- "the greatest people in history" -- the camera quietly subverts his argument, presenting the modern-day heirs of Greece and Rome in all their noisy, materialistic vulgarity.

Silvio Soldini's amiable new comedy suggests that an older, better Italy of imagination, rationality and civility survives on the fringes of a modern nation obsessed, like most others, with consumerism, empty prosperity and easy pleasure. That other Italy exists, according to the film, in Venice, a city whose narrow streets and quiet canals make it the perfect home for gentle eccentrics and good-hearted bohemians. The city serves as a refuge for Rosalba Barretto (Licia Maglietta), an unhappy housewife from Pescara who, along with her husband and teenage sons, is one of the tourists in the first scene. After the tour bus leaves a highway rest area without her, Rosalba impulsively hitchhikes to Venice, where she finds kindness, mystery and opportunities for self-expression -- everything that had been missing from her ordinary life.

The blossoming of a bored, middle-class homemaker is hardly a new subject; "Bread and Tulips" calls to mind, among other things, at least a half-dozen episodes of "The Simpsons." But unlike Marge, who always returns, with relief as well as regret, to her husband and children, Rosalba provokes very little ambivalence with her flight. Mr. Soldini, who wrote the screenplay with Doriana Leondeff, has made Rosalba's husband, a plumbing-supply mogul named Mimmo (Antonio Catania), a hotheaded, narcissistic buffoon, and a philanderer to boot.

It is easy to see why she prefers the company of Fernando (Bruno Ganz), a melancholy waiter from Iceland who gives her a spare room in his cluttered Venice apartment and prepares her breakfast every morning.

The film's contrast between the warmth of bohemia and the sterile stultification of bourgeois life is sentimental and a little phony, expressed mostly by consumer and lifestyle choices. When Rosalba casts aside her maroon stretch pants, silver jacket and orange sneakers for a simple red-and-white dress and a pair of espadrilles with platform soles, we're meant to see that she has burst from her ugly tourist chrysalis and become a radiant bohemian butterfly.

But is buying a new dress really a liberation from materialism? And why should living in Venice and working as a florist (as Rosalba eventually does) or a massage therapist or a waiter represent an intrinsically more authentic and spiritually evolved way of life than selling bathroom fixtures in Pescara? Thankfully, Ms. Maglietta has a quiet charm and an understated sexiness that disarm your skepticism. The other actors -- Marina Massironi as her New Agey neighbor, Giuseppe Massironi as the plumber-cum-private detective dispatched by Mimmo to bring Rosalba home, and especially Mr. Ganz -- are equally sweet and soulful.

The Venice of "Bread and Tulips" is like a less threatening version of the SoHo in Martin Scorsese's "After Hours" -- a place that doesn't really exist but that nourishes our fantasy that somewhere, not too far from where we plod through our uninspiring routines, life is more varied, more intense, more genuine and

surprising. We traipse into this magical world as tourists, but Mr. Soldini, with graceful good humor, invites us to pretend that we're natives.

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An interview with the director from
http://iloveitalianmovies.com/2011/06/15/an-interview-with-silvio-soldini/

Where did you get the idea for the film and how did it develop?
There was a desire to tell about a female character that didn't have any existential dramas or frustrations. A simple character, whose choices weren't driven from a need to avoid things. A housewife that's happy in her role, that would have probably continued going on if it haven't been swept away by things that happened to her. And there's a part inside all of us that we didn't even know about that wants to make that trip with her and to be forgotten with her at the Autogrill.

The idea to tell the story of "rough lives" that get lighter through events won you over?
Yes, and I find unbearable the characters structured like little caricatures. I like to tell about characters that are penalized by their appearance, that don't show what they are really. Behind the southern Italian husband that brings the family to Pompei with an organized tour, behind the gruff waiter, behind the dreamer housewife there is a truth.

Why do you always tell stories about women?
Simply because women don't do it, and there's hardly anyone to tell the truth. I'm not doing anything but taking possession of free territory. I love to construct female characters because they fascinate me and because through their courage I can better tell some of the aspects of life. In reality in this film there are also strong male characters.

How did you manage to tie the the different stories together that go through the film?
I never really tried to do it myself. The key was to tell the truth about the characters in minimal details. In the end through their different energies, it directs you and it transforms you, and not the other way around. To join these different objectives the climate that you create around the work is also important; we rented a house that we divided into 40, living, cooking, and eating together. An energy was born from living together that is reflected in the work that we did on the set.

How did you come to meet Bruno Ganz?
We met a year and a half ago when Bruno was on a promotional tour for Angelopolus's film. When someone asked him which Italian director he'd like to work with he said my name, speaking about the film "Le Acrobate". I had just finished writing the screenplay and the character of Fernando seemed perfect for him. I went to see him in Zürich and to give him a script to read and he loved the idea of the Icelandic waiter with the bad Italian accent.

These days there's a return to Italian film with happy endings, like in your film. How do you explain "the times are changing"?
Sincerely 10 years ago I never would have made an end like that. I realized in the last few years the importance in what we leave for the audience at the end of a film. As a viewer I don't like to leave a theater with less of a will to live than when I went in.

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