

A New Italian Movie with a Different Accent

BY MIKE CANNING

I Am Love

For casual consumers of Italian movies over the years, some solid stereotypes prevail. Think of the post-war era of giddy comedy-dramas with Lollabrigida, Gassman, Loren and Mastroianni, Manfredi and many others, plus all the grotesques of Fellini in his 50-year career. More recently, Italian films have continued to highlight either the carefree, sentimental side of the peninsula's denizens ("Cinema Paradiso" and its spawn) or to focus – very unsentimentally – on the crime-ridden, mafioso element in Italian politics and life ("Il Divo" and "Gomorra").

Still, there has always been a concurrent strain in Italian cinema to counter-balance the pasta and pulchritude that many see as characterizing Italy from Rome to Sicily, i.e., a strain that shows a cooler, more earnest world of the country's northern climes. That world can still be lush, as in the films of Luchino Visconti, or stark, as in the works of Michelangelo Antonioni, but it is one which scrutinizes contemporary urban environments rather than sunny, picturesque settings. A new example of this more serious Italian product opened in Washington on June 25 with "I Am Love" (Io Sono L'Amore), a story of cool passions and family values which bears comparison to the films of the earlier northern masters. (Rated "R," the film runs 120 minutes.)

"I Am Love" tells the story of the family Recchi, a textile-making dynasty based in Milan whose patriarch, Edoardo (Gabrielle Ferzetti, remembered from Antonioni's "L'Avventura"), at a family feast, passes on leadership of the firm to his son, Tancredi (Pippo Delbono), and his grandson, Edoardo Jr. or "Edo" (Flavio Parenti). Tancredi is married to the loyal and striking



Edoardo Gabbriellini and Tilda Swinton star in "I am Love." Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

Emma (Tilda Swinton), a Russian émigré who has become so Italianized that she has forgotten her Russian and is immersed in her upper-class life. Edo's friendly rowing rival, Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini), an aspiring chef, enters the family's life and eventually generates inexplicable longings from Emma. The two strive to hide their trysts from the family, but their affair is ultimately revealed, and this revelation, together with an accidental death and other internal stresses, breaks up the Recchi clan.

In the hands of writer/director Luca Guadagnino, "I Am Love" is a stylish, sumptuous melodrama, graced by an alert but restrained cast, spare but pithy dialogue, elegant production design and lighting, and, notably too, a striking score cobbled together from the music of American contemporary composer John Adams (see related item below). It skirts melodrama to edge into the operatic.

The project was long fostered by Guadagnino who had signed on Tilda Swinton as his lead years before, and she eventually became a co-producer.

The English actress, with her otherworldly beauty, has starred in some of the last two decade's most experimental and off-beat films (beginning with Derek Jarman films 25 years ago) while also performing solid featured roles in more commercial pictures, like 2007's "Michael Clayton." Here she has one of her best parts ever, and she pulls it off with aplomb. Her puzzled, often tense features are perfect for a woman falling under the spell of another and pursuing her love against all reason. Her passion may seem insane, but she makes you believe it. Always good with accents, she here pulls off another by speaking a grammatically correct and careful Italian over a gentle Eastern burr.

Swinton is seconded nicely by the young Gabbriellini, a perfectly affable, earnest young man who can't believe his luck, both in pursuing and winning an aristocratic older woman and exercising his cooking muse. Most appropriate, too, is Delbono as the too-correct Tancredi, an icy man who wants everything in order and everyone in their place and cannot countenance it

when they roam free.

The film is also an intriguing depiction of the urban Italian ruling class, these days commercial rather than familial, confident of their place and living in an exquisitely tasteful contemporary manse, all smooth, burnished surfaces adorned almost casually with tasteful art (Morandis on the wall). Supremely representative of the Recchi's status are Edoardo Sr. and his impeccable wife, Allegra, played with easy insouciance by Marisa Berenson. They are all, of course, attended by staff, which we see flutter and float among them.

Among the Recchis, only the outsider Emma seems not entirely at ease, not always sure of her place. Her closest confidante in the house, in fact, is her housekeeper, Ida (Maria Palato), a sweet-hearted woman whose mission in life is service to the family. One of the best scenes in the picture, in fact, tenderly highlights their class divide. Alone together one evening with the rest of the Recchis out, Emma invites Ida, patiently keeping her company, to dine with her in the family dining room. The housemaid demurs, embarrassed, unable to break bread with her matron, no matter how sympathetic she is. These are the kinds of nuances that "I Am Love" gets right time and again.

A Singular Sound Track

One of the strongest elements of Luca Guadagnino's film "I Am Love" is its music, which, according to the director, was an essential part of its making. And almost all the music is the work of the contemporary American composer John Adams (b. 1949). Adams himself, who was recently in DC to conduct the Washington National Symphony, spoke about the music of

the film at a colloquium at the Goethe Institute in town.

The music track, Adams insisted, was definitely not a film “score,” i.e., music specifically crafted to meld with a completed motion picture. Guadagnino pointedly had Adams’ work in mind when directing scenes, and only after matching those scenes to the music in editing did he approach Adams about using his compositions.

Adams was contacted by producer/actor Tilda Swinton, who, he said, “wrote me the most beautiful and articulate e-mail,” describing the filmmakers’ intention to use his music and asking for permission for its use. He agreed to meet Swinton and her director in London where an arrangement was made to grant the rights. Adams felt some of his compositions were ill or oddly used, such as his dramatic orchestral piece “Harmonielehre” at the end, but found others effective in the context of the picture once he screened it.

To this critic’s ear, the Adams pieces are most effective when their urgent, repetitive style underscores scenes of tension or menace, such as during a long, unscripted sequence where Emma, coming upon Antonio in the tourist town of San Remo, both stalks him and contrives to “accidentally” meet him. The steady pulsing of the score rightly conveys her knit-browed intensity and nervous focus.

Ruminating about music in film, Adams opined generally that “music is used really badly in movies,” adding that feature films now typically use “music consultants” to piece together resonant pop tunes rather than creating a true score. He said that “the problem (for him) with film writing is one of timing”; his own writing projects have long lead times, often years, whereas movie productions leave the music element to the end, then ask the composer to step in and do the job right away—not his style. ★

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