

Blundering Italian in Seven Beauties

Wertmuller makes worm's life laughable

By MICHELINA TRIGIANI
 Seven Beauties, Lina Wertmuller's (Love and Anarchy, Swept Away) latest offering, plays with the idea of survival by tracing the ordeal of a Neapolitan simpleton during World War II.
 Pasqualino Frafuso (Giancarlo Giannini) struts about his neighbourhood in Naples, holding his head high, smoking a long cigarette and glowing in his rank of honoured and respected citizen.

Discovering that his older sister Concettina, who has an admirable wart on her cheek, has been led astray by a pimp named Totonno, he decides to avenge the family's honour by giving the man an ultimatum: marriage or death.
 Bungling the whole affair by accidentally shooting Totonno, on the advice of the town don, Pasqualino seeks to recapture lost respect by "making others tremble."

Using every ploy in the book, tiny, weak, exhausted Pasqualino sings, hums, whistles, blunders and chatters his way to gaining her attention. The commandant, played excellently cold-heartedly by Shirley Stoler, accepts his pathetic advances out of curiosity, yawning at his efforts and warning him, "if you don't fuck, kaput!"
 Pasqualino, prostituting himself, succeeds in the task. Stoler, machine-like and realistic, tells him mechanically, "your thirst for life disgusts me."

Many of the hero's experiences are indeed disgusting and many expose the ugliness and atrocities of the human conditions. But Wertmuller's story, in spite of the alarming and grave implications of the whole question of survival, is presented in a rather light manner.
 There are very few serious scenes in the film that are not rendered funny by an unexpected turn of events. And if we become depressed by the brutalities of the war, Wertmuller quickly whisks us back to the sunny streets of Naples where life and flowers and

mandolin strings meet and emit a certain nostalgia and joie de vivre.
 With Seven Beauties, Wertmuller examines a poor worm with no "ideas or ideals". Pasqualino's greatest wish is "to live and have children" and if he doesn't understand why and blunders through life in an attempt to survive, Wertmuller makes his story laughable so that we may step back, laugh, then stop and ask ourselves why.

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So he hacks up the pimp's body into many tiny pieces, stuffs the morsels into three different suitcases and ships them off to three different cities as provolone cheese.
 His ingenious plan fails when Concettina, upset at losing her man, turns him in. Screaming "you'll never get me alive," Pasqualino is quickly apprehended by police.

He never utters a more ironic phrase. The remainder of the story concerns Pasqualino's unfortunately common, often appalling passion to survive.
 On the advice of his lawyer ("Your life or your honour"), he feigns insanity by suddenly becoming "il duce" and lands a 12-year sentence in a mental hospital. There, a stagnant,

clinically white existence culminated by a daily chore of cleaning bed-pans drives him near lunacy. To escape, he agrees to the army saying, "I'll do anything to get out."
 Determined to live and finding the Italian army an unlikely place for this, he deserts by concealing himself in the bandages stolen from a wounded soldier.
 As the movie opens, we see Pasqualino wrapped like a mummy zig-zagging through a forest somewhere in Germany. He is ultimately captured and ends up in a German Prisoner of war camp where men are eliminated in orderly fashion following a well-kept schedule. His death now seems inevitable.

He sees men massacred, gapes in wonderment and then whispers, "How did the world get like this — we all get killed and no one says anything."
 But the deaths around him only arouse fear for his own existence as he concludes, "my life has been disgusting, but I don't want to die."

In a final, grotesque attempt to save himself, he embarks on a massive campaign to woo the camp's gargantuan female commandant.

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