



LADRI DI BICICLETTE (THE BICYCLE THIEF) is the May, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

11 of a possible 20 points

***** of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) = juvenile performer

Italy 1947 black-and-white 89 minutes both Italian with English subtitles and dubbed in English versions live action feature drama

Produzioni De Sica Producers: Giuseppe Amato, Vittorio De Sica

Points:

- 1 Direction: Vittorio De Sica**
- 1 Editing: Eraldo Da Roma**
- 2 Cinematography: Carlo Montuori**
- 1 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Cesare Zavattini, Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Vittorio De Sica, Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci, Gerardo Guerrieri based on a novel by Luigi Bartolini**
- 2 Music: Alessandro Cicognini***
- 1 Production Design / Art Direction: Antonio Traverso**
- 0 Sound: Biagio Fiorelli, Bruno Brunacci**
- 1 Acting**
- 1 Creativity**
- 11 total points**

Cast: Lamberto Maggiorani (Antonio Ricci), Enzo Staiola (j) (Bruno Ricci), Lianella Carell* (Maria Ricci), Gino Saltamerenda* (Baiocco), Vittorio Antonucci (The Thief), Giulio Chiari (The Beggar), Elena Altieri (The Charitable Lady), Carlo Jachino (A Beggar), Michele Sakara (Secretary of the Charity Organization), Fausto Guerzoni (Amateur Actor), Giulio Battiferri (Citizen Who Protects the Real Thief), Ida Bracci Dorati* (La Santona, a fortuneteller), Sergio Leone (Seminary Student), Mario Meniconi (Meniconi, the street sweeper), Massimo Randisi (j)* (Rich Kid in Restaurant), Checco Rissone (Guard in Piazza Vittorio), Peppino Spadaro (Police Officer),
Note: In the English-dubbed version you can hear the voice of well-known actor Alberto Sordi.

Now more than sixty-five years old, LADRI DI BICICLETTE (THE BICYCLE THIEF) continues to influence equally critics, directors, and audiences worldwide. Why?

Examining various elements of the film's construction yields little to account for continuing popularity. A script once hailed as a masterpiece of social realism today looks provincial and dated. Editing by Eraldo Da Roma displays serious defects of timing, overextending some scenes, assaulting viewers with precipitous histrionics in others. With a soundtrack alternately spitting out cracklings and trailing off into smears of off-key lugubriousness, the drama demands complete sonic overhaul, something it certainly did not get from Image Entertainment for its NTSC release on dvd. An irresolute ending which might have seemed a provocative novelty in the late 1940s appears now to be simply a contrivance for distraction, in no way comparable to the tragic conclusion of SCIUSCIA (SHOESHINE), or the final scene of I BAMBINI CI GUARDANO (THE CHILDREN ARE WATCHING US) in which the young boy Prico, whose father has recently committed suicide, rejects an offer of love from his adulterous mother, giving her wrenching payback for previously preferring a lover over her neglected son. Those films provide authentic, powerful terminations due to utter immersion of cast members in the ongoing lives of their characters. No director is modelling them into artficed simulations

of emotional climaxes. Nor are they bound tightly to fatalistic, schematic screenplays.

Here the last scene appears tenuous. New bonding between father and son, based on shared knowledge of the elder's desperate abortive fling at thievery and subsequent public apprehension by fellow citizens, was suggested by associate screenwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico, according to her obituary in *The Guardian*. This reversed relationship with son extending forgiveness to father is developed in a rushed, unpersuasive manner. Son Bruno would need more time than is permitted to accept such a transformation from lionized parent to despised common criminal.

Despite these failings, viewer interest is maintained throughout. There is no reason to feel ninety minutes of viewing have been wasted.

Is the story plot universal in appeal? Certainly it's simple enough for foreigners to follow in general outline. Problems of crime and unemployment are by no means unique to postwar Italy. Vividly contrasted conduct and dress of two boys eating in a restaurant, one from a wealthy family, the other part of a poor one, still register strongly in memory. Likewise Maria's resort to guidance from a fortuneteller, incomprehensible to her spouse. Adulation of athletes hasn't diminished one bit either, contemporary footballers receiving just as much attention from enthusiastic fans as did cinematic predecessors. Bicycles themselves are still around and those on the streets of slums remain, when unguarded, fair game for expropriation. Unaccompanied urchins shining shoes to obtain food money are no rarities these days on urban streets in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Nor have pawn shops been relegated to museums.

Other features of De Sica's production retain their attractiveness, notably the plangent music score by Alessandro Cicognini, a theme of which was prominently resurrected for *LA VITA E BELLA (LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL)*, and admirable cinematography by Carlo Montuori. Every closeup generates an intense emotional payoff. Crowd scenes are handled with judicious inserts of faces too irregular for professional models coupled to figures unconstrained by health and fitness directives. *THE BICYCLE THIEF*'s parent and child famous curbside scene received deserved homage through an equally unforgettable one

featured in *SEARCHING FOR BOBBY FISCHER*. Most oddly, the episode in which the bicycle itself is seized became a visual guide for two ragamuffins of Kabul in the 2004 motion picture *SAG-HAYE VELGARD (STRAY DOGS)* directed by Marzieh Meshkini (now Makhmalbaf) in Afghanistan. Wretchedly impoverished due to an improvident Taliban father and pariah mother, son and daughter ponder a way to get themselves arrested so they can remain overnight in prison with mama. The concept of stealing a bicycle for that purpose is enticing, with De Sica's amateurs inadvertently providing instruction.

For anyone who has not yet encountered it, *LADRI DI BICICLETTA* concerns a chronically unemployed laborer with a pawned bicycle who receives word of a job opening requiring possession of, or access to, a personal bike. Antonio Ricci, a glum sad sack effectively realized by Lamberto Maggiorani, despairs of recovering his treasure. More resourceful wife Maria, played with charming grace and considerable energy by reporter Lianella Carell, strips their bed of sheets, adds two more from a dowry chest, then bundles them together for presentation to the pawnbroker. Money acquired from him is used to redeem Antonio's vehicle. After overnight restoration lovingly provided by son Bruno, embodied in an overly histrionic and calculating performance by location spectator Enzo Staiola, and himself, the duo wheel off in the morning to work. Bruno has a shoe shine stand, father a wall poster to cover with new product, in this case an advertisement for the Hollywood movie *GILDA*, starring Rita Hayworth. She's obvious box office temptation on both sides of the Atlantic. While ascending a ladder to plaster down top corners of the ad, Antonio observes a thief making off with his cycle, which had been left propped nearby against a wall. Quickly converting to pursuit mode, he is first obstructed and then misguided by a confederate of the cyclist. This results in failure to recover the stolen property. The victimized man returns in foul humor to his task. In a humorously engaging scene, Antonio resolves to abandon his work, first throwing down brush and kicking pail over in disgust, next retrieving them long enough for one final pressing of the poster, then repeating the destructive actions. With no sensible way left to move on to further assignments, he devotes himself fully and fruitlessly to searching for the bicycle. As dusk approaches he retrieves Bruno, who wonders about the downcast appearance

of his papa and the absence of their beloved set of wheels. Depositing the boy at home, Antonio makes his way to where a friend, played with gusto and expertly timed facial responses by Gino Saltamerenda, named Baiocco is supervising an extremely unpolished acting sketch. Pouring out his tale of woe into a sympathetic ear, the again jobless parent gets encouragement from his listener, who advises him to check the market at Porta Portese the next morning. A stolen vehicle would be sure to show up there, most likely in separate pieces.

Baiocco, who seems to be affiliated with the city of Rome's sanitation department in some capacity, enlists the aid of several fellow employees the next morning about daybreak. They comb through yard after yard, meter after meter of bicycle parts: frames, bells, horns, tires, gear chains. Bruno and his dad accompany them, though the boy is occasionally distracted by appealing horns to honk and bells to ring. He is the only one who remembers the frame number of the missing two-wheeler.

Not that it proves useful. Unwarranted accusation against a suspicious vendor either repainting or overpainting some tubes does nothing to ingratiate comically inept detectives with market personnel and security. Another dead end. Just like a trip the day before to the authorities, where an overworked officer assures Antonio that all his associates can do is confirm serial numbers of stolen goods according to registered reports.

By chance in his roamings coming once more upon the actual lawbreaker, Antonio gives chase. His chief quarry escapes. So he has to settle for following a secondary one, an old man he had spotted conversing with the suspect. This character refuses to divulge information, even under pressure, other than a general address for the young man Antonio has been seeking. Convinced a more specific one is necessary, Antonio, with son in tow, escorts the elder beggar to a handout center operated by a Catholic charity. There he disrupts Mass, making himself thoroughly disagreeable to worshippers and clergy alike. Using as an alibi a trip to soup tables, the beggar sidles off undetected.

Scouting the neighborhood with Bruno's assistance yields no favoring results. Antonio disparages both Maria's prayers and her cash presents to alleged seers. When Bruno complains of tiredness and hunger, Antonio slaps him, an action by

no means habitual. His faithful little shadow, aggrieved, withdraws to a safe distance. Then he proceeds to make defensive accusations against the man of violence. The two start to reconcile, however, after a river accident nearby which at first leads Antonio to believe the youngster he had left behind at the bridge had somehow drowned while he canvassed nearby streets looking for the vanished beggar. So relieved is he to discover his son is not the victim of waterlogging that dissatisfaction is replaced with returning love and devotion. The boy, not yet completely won over, elects to stay a bit to the rear of papa, just out of immediate reach, playing it safe.

Hungry, tired, disheveled, Bruno is nearly wiped out twice by cars while attempting safe passage across a street. This compels Antonio to consider his condition more carefully. To stave off tears, or an even worse calamity, Antonio asks his son if he would like to eat a pizza. Of course. They enter a café, sit down, enjoy a respite from walking. Antonio has goofed again. This establishment does not serving the promised food. The Riccis will have to accept substitutes. A decidedly more upscale family dines at a table close by. It includes a boy about Bruno's age, played with a perfect mix of silent curiosity and refined contempt by Massimo Randisi. With bellies full, but no lead to direct them, the Ricci duo remove once more to the streets. Antonio, at the moment clueless, decides to visit the fortuneteller patronized by Maria. She tells him his loss will either be recovered that day or not at all. Perhaps galvanized by such a dismal warning, Antonio drags his son off to the area the beggar indicated was home to his nemesis. Here Mr. Ricci catches a glimpse of the man he seeks. Chase is renewed, but this time Antonio gets his suspect. There is no advantage gained, for the youth persists in arrogantly declaring innocence while locals stand by ready to supply both muscle and alibis. As residents close around Antonio and threaten him, Bruno detaches himself, racing off to find a policeman. Returning with the law, the boy rejoins his parent. The muttering mob withdraws, opening a pathway. Meanwhile, the accused feigns an epileptic seizure. Ignoring the street spectacle, law enforcement conducts an unavailing search of the afflicted one's apartment. Antonio's advised to back off, unless he can provide a second eyewitness to the theft. Faced with antagonistic friends of the thief and a policeman torn between

keeping order at any cost and duty to remain impartial and objective, Antonio decides grudgingly and gracelessly to depart.

Later, he and Bruno hear a soccer game in progress, one they cannot afford tickets to watch. Dozens of cyclists pass them, unintentionally rubbing salt in open wounds. Back and forth Antonio paces, eyes drawn repeatedly to an unwatched machine tilted against a nearby wall. Should he take it? Or not? He orders Bruno to stay behind, rounds a corner, approaches that irresistible object. And then? Another disastrous adventure and confrontation, one which will lead to irrevocable loss.

LADRI DI BICICLETTA has won an abundance of awards including an Honorary Oscar® in 1950 for Most Outstanding Foreign Language Film of Year, an Oscar® nomination for Best Screenplay that year, a 1950 Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film, a 1950 BAFTA Award for Best Film From Any Source, a Bodil Award for Best European Film, a Cinema Writers Circle Award from Spain for Best Foreign Film, six awards in 1949 from the Italian National Syndicate of Film Journalists, a 1951 Kinema Junpo Award from Japan for Best Foreign Language Film, a Special Prize of the Jury in 1949 at the Locarno International Film Festival, 1949 National Board of Review Awards from the United States for Best Film and Best Director and the 1949 New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It also ranked tenth in the 2012 *Sight and Sound* Magazine Directors' Poll of the Greatest Films of All Time and thirty-third in their 2012 Critics' Poll.

The Image Entertainment dvd also includes a four minute American release trailer of the film which it is strongly recommended you view and hear, a short essay by Arthur Miller about De Sica's classic, and scene selections. It's essential viewing for any teens or adults interested in cinema history, Italian cinema, Italian neo-realism in film, or the work of director Vittorio De Sica. The film is not recommended for preteens, due to its pessimistic outlook.