

LA STRADA (THE ROAD) ITALY, 1954 black-and-white live action feature drama
subtitled and in English

LA STRADA (THE ROAD) is the February, 2013 DVD donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

MATHEMATICAL RATING: 17 of a possible 20 points ****1/2 of a possible *****

POINTS KEY: 2 = superior 1 = satisfactory 0 = deficient

2 DIRECTION by Federico Fellini

1 EDITING by Leo Caffozo and Lina Caterini

2 CINEMATOGRAPHY by Otello Martelli*

1 ART DIRECTION by Mario Ravasco

1 SCREENPLAY by Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano

2 MUSIC by Nino Rota*

2 LIGHTING

2 SOUND (Italian Soundtrack Edition)

2 ACTING

2 CREATIVITY

*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

PRIMARY CAST: Anthony Quinn* ("Zampano"), Giulietta Masina* ("Gelsomina"), Richard Basehart ("El Matto, The Fool"), Aldo Silvani* ("Columbiani, the circus owner"), Marcella Rovere ("The Widow"), Livia Venturini* ("The Nun")

With his third solo outing as a director, Federico Fellini offered a worldwide audience the opportunity to share a favorite preoccupation: the circus. Circles abound in this film, from rings of spectators, to the interior circuits of the big top, to the wheels of the motorbike-caravan driven by Anthony Quinn's Zampano strongman character. Indeed, the film's theme is the circle of life. Note that LA STRADA precedes THE LION KING by four decades. There is a behavioral cycle which also seems to underlie what we observe in this film, which I will detail more thoroughly below.

Fellini introduces us to his personal brand of Italian neo-fantasy by showing us a naively optimistic eldest surviving daughter being sold by her mother to an itinerant performer named Zampano. Already we are involved inside a cycle, as Mama did the same deal at an earlier date with another daughter, Anna. It is the necessity of replacing his companion that has brought Zampano back to her family. How Anna died is kept a mystery from both them and us. We are only informed that she is no longer among the living. Mama will not be shown her final resting place.

According to their parent, second daughter Gelsomina looks like Anna. Perhaps Zampano agrees and is willing to accept her for that reason alone, although a cheap purchase price is certainly further inducement. We never see the older girl, so the question of sibling physical similarity can't be completely resolved. But her presence and absence hangs like a pall over the film, being not only the catalyst setting the plot in motion, but also suggesting a motive for the otherwise seemingly arbitrary conduct of Zampano in later stages of this story.

Gelsomina, a naïve young woman with no previous work or travel experience, is not reluctant to part from her oceanside village. As played by Fellini's wife, Giulietta Masina, she is a naïve, immature and mostly passive young woman ill-prepared to defend herself against physical punishments Zampano inflicts, sometimes camouflaging them as training routines.

For Zampano, women are pets to be enjoyed, mistreated, ignored, or commanded as whims dictate. Gelsomina is the latest in a succession of female assistants. Their sartorial souvenirs comprise a sizable inventory to select from in the course of outfitting her. Of course, some of this collection is simply a reflection of Zampano's resistance to change. The same introductory speech invariably prefaces his act, which itself never alters. We first hear a lecture on metal and muscle-lung coordination, followed by the snapping of a firmly locked chain encircling his massive chest. It is the task of Gelsomina to announce this wonder with a brief trumpet fanfare followed by a short series of drum rolls to reinforce suspense. Each time the music must be performed in an identical manner. Similarly, no variation in verbal presentation is countenanced, as Gelsomina learns painfully when Zampano applies a makeshift switch to her unprotected legs in silent reproof of mistakes. The only novelty allowed is in his selection of female companionship.

It soon becomes clear the new assistant is expected to serve as cook and concubine, as well as announcer and musical accompanist. The first two job requirements the strongman neglected to mention at their initial encounter. In the former role, Gelsomina is so inexperienced the soup she concocts is utterly inedible and furtively tossed aside in a wonderful comic scene. Though disenchanted with the latter, she initially shrugs off Zampano's crude manhandling as typically male. But when he abandons her unexpectedly in favor of a loud-mouthed hussy, her reaction is one of astonishment and disconsolateness. Is it satisfactory to play the wife only on alternate evenings? Was this the way he treated Anna? We wonder, too.

Amazingly, Gelsomina finds comfort in music, both in a nostalgic ballad and in the trumpet she sometimes cradles, rather than blows. But Zampano's cruelties multiply and become unendurable. Abandoning the brute, she becomes an easy mark for the insincere seductiveness of the film's third major player, El Matto.

Wandering one night into a crowded town square, Gelsomina is fascinated by the skill and courage of an angel-winged tightrope walker conducting a bantering conversation with a woman associate who refers to him as The Fool. When this astonishing aerialist is induced to invite spectators to join his lofty meal, complete lack of response amazes the guileless young traveller. What temptation, to balance overhead like something celestial from Heaven itself! But self-preservation restrains her from attempting to climb to the mock angel's star-spangled playground.

The Fool completes his performance, paying no heed to individual audience members until they block an anticipated speedy terrestrial egress. Then the acrobat's glance momentarily falls upon our film's sympathetic wanderer, upon whom he bestows a crumpled half-smile before vanishing into a jostling throng of admirers.

Poor Gelsomina. Not only does she lose an angel, but he is replaced by veritable devils. First she is tormented by loiterers ranged around the splashing musicality of the town fountain. Then Lucifer himself arrives in the person of Zampano, noisily roaring into the plaza on his motorcycle like a scruffier, more wrathful version of Marlon Brando's Johnny in *THE WILD ONE*. There is nothing "cool" about the

Italian cyclist, however. He angrily intimidates the malingerers and then cuffs his deserting messmate, evincing not the slightest sliver of mercy or conscience. Pardon is an equally alien concept.

Paired again, though involuntarily on her part, Gelsomina and Zampano resume their travels and master-slave relationship. Eventually they arrive in the outskirts of Rome, where Zampano makes the fateful decision to rejoin a family-operated circus troupe. To his chagrin, he discovers El Matto, an old nemesis, has previously engaged with the same performers. As soon as they encounter one another, The Fool begins to mock the newcomer for no reason we can determine. Each harbors an unspoken animosity toward the other, something which surprises both Gelsomina and the circus owner.

In the course of subsequent conversation between The Fool and Gelsomina we learn El Matto had met Anna. Like Zampano, for some private reason he does not wish to discuss their relationship. Is it just coincidence that he plays the tune loved by Gelsomina on his miniature violin? Or had Anna also responded to it emotionally? Might she be the hidden cause of his hostility towards Zampano? As The Fool first invites and then rebuffs a partnering with the muscleman's current auxiliary, is he possibly reenacting a scene initially staged with her sibling? If life is a circus, are its stars interchangeable?

Listen to The Fool's sermonette about the purpose of a pebble. Is every stone really unique? What is his own purpose? Is it simply to flirt with women? What if a rock becomes a boulder? How should you deal with obstacles that take you too seriously? Do you abrade them with belittlings until they erode into dust? Does the dust also play a meaningful role in the universe?

Go back to your boorish partner, The Fool advises his discouraged listener. That's your role. Help him become human. Don't trade hope for despair. Perhaps that same message was delivered to her sister. Or maybe the speaker is wiser now and has altered a cynical philosophy in light of Anna's fate.

Gelsomina disconsolately heeds the words of a fellow clown. She feels an obligation to attempt character molding on extremely unimpressionable clay, for her present wooer is no more dependable than her paramour, only glibber and better educated. Both men are devoid of familial commitment. Their vaunted independence is a lonely, loveless wasteland neither can escape.

Will the cycle that ended in Anna's death repeat itself? Can Gelsomina save an irritating artist from his own self-destructiveness? Can she succeed in teaching Zampano to care about others?

As the film nears its conclusion, its two chief performers trade roles. Zampano becomes chef, confessor and caregiver to Gelsomina, who is traumatized and insular. The transformation process may redeem one soul, but perhaps at the cost of annihilating another. These elements mirror Christian allegory. At the end is a new beginning. The circus moves forward by tearing itself down. Otherwise it would never progress at all. Is this what Fellini had in mind? Watch the entire film and decide for yourself.

Creation of the gentle clown Gelsomina, one of world cinema's most beloved characters, is a career-defining achievement of Giulietta Masina, offscreen wife of LA STRADA's director. Mingling elements of Italian buffoonery, Chaplin's Little Tramp, and Liliom's agonizingly loyal Julie, with the klutzy slapstick of Lucille Ball's Lucy persona, Masina and Fellini invent an irresistible audience magnet. Anthony Quinn is perfectly typecast as a chauvinist Atlas doubling in leisure hours as backwater Lothario. And who will ever forget the shrill, nervous tittering of Richard Basehart's Fool, ultimately ensnared by his own folly? Also turning in distinguished acting achievements are Aldo Silvani in the mediating role of circus owner Columbiani, Marcella Rovere as a libidinous farm widow with a bent toward earthy metaphor and Livia

Venturini as a worried young nun sympathetic to Gelsomina's plight but surprisingly willing to accept an offered ride with her uncouth employer.

Less successful is Fellini's handling of juveniles. Too often they either adopt operatic exaggeration or lapse into mechanical acquiescence to manual positioning by the director, clearly neither vital nor creative when doing so.

Superior lighting provides detailed, unobstructed views of landscapes, interiors and faces, all to the benefit of film and viewers.

Nino Rota's score oscillates between festive raucousness and heartrending piquancy, equally effective in both modes. Trumpet is foregrounded, a foreshadowing of his theme for *THE GODFATHER*.

While the art direction of Mario Ravasco is effective and unobtrusive, location shooting renders it secondary.

Considerable diversity is displayed in Otello Martelli's exemplary camera positionings: 360 degree pans, a memorable pullaway ascending crane shot to end the film, choice medium close-ups of individuals in the central acting trio, a breathtaking upward angle shot introducing The Fool's nocturnal high-wire act, and several inspired lateral trackings, as when Gelsomina, walking alongside a wall of the farm widow's house, elects to turn her face backwards to confront Zampano --- and slips into a gaping fodder pit. Vanishing from both his sight and ours, she still manages to get out the last word in their argument.

This type of opposition between humor and drama, light and dark, inhumanity and sensitivity, roaming and stability, sustains screen interest throughout the duration of *LA STRADA*. It also inspires us to ask complex questions rather than pursue facile answers.

Sound recording of the Italian original voices is as finely registered and wide-ranging as mono equipment would allow. But several speeches at the beginning of the film by the actress playing Gelsomina's mother are missing entirely from the English-language soundtrack. A minor shortcoming.

DVD bonuses include a personalized video introduction by Martin Scorsese and an hour-long documentary about Fellini examining his character, work style and additional films.

Despite a few glitches in the editing, which occasionally overextend scenes by a few seconds or rush you joltingly into new ones, *LA STRADA* is an enriching, humane and thought-provoking film experience unequivocally recommended for adult viewers. You need not be Italian to relish this masterwork, for an English-language soundtrack is provided as part of the Criterion DVD release. Outstanding film fare for character-centered viewers.