



***Sciuscià (Shoeshine)* is an upcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion Collection dvd release of that landmark film.**

16 of a possible 20 points = ** = an outstanding film**

**Italy 1946 black-and-white 92 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Societa Cooperativa Alfa Cinematografica Producer: Paolo William Tamburella**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Vittorio De Sica***
- 2 Editing: Nicolò Lazzari***
- 2 Cinematography: Anchise Brizzi***
- 1 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Sergio Amidei, Adolfo Franci, Cesare Giulio Viola, and
Cesare Zavattini**
- 2 Music: Alessandro Cicognini***

1 Production Design: Ivo Battelli and Giulio Lombardozzi

2 Sound: Tullio Parmegiani

2 Acting

1 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Franco Interlenghi (j)* (Pasquale Maggi), Rinaldo Smordoni (j)* (Giuseppe Filippucci), Aniello Mele* (j) (Raffaele), Bruno Ortenzi* (Arcangeli), Anna Pedoni (j) (Nannarella), Emilio Cigoli (Staffera), Leo Garavaglia (Inspector), Antonio Nicotra (social worker Bartoli), Mario Volpicelli (prison governor), Peppino Spadaro (lawyer), Irene Smordoni (Giuseppe's mother), Gino Saltamerenda (Panza), Enrico De Silva (j) (Giorgio), Antonio Lo Nigro (Righetto), Pacifico Astrologo (Vittorio), Maria Campi (fortune teller), Antonio Cardino (j) (The Abruzzese), Angelo D'Amico (j) (Siciliano), Francisco De Nicola (Ciriola), Claudio Ermelli (nurse), Gino Marturano (j) (a boy), Quinto Urbano (j) (a shoeshine boy)

Sciusiá, a slang term in Rome for “shoeshine,” developed from a probe conducted by director Vittorio De Sica into the lives of two street urchins working in the Via Veneto. Euphemistically nicknamed “Little Monkey” and “Big Hat,” these two originals, like their eventual film counterparts, used money earned shining shoes to rent a horse for brief rides. “Little Monkey” even wore a cape, as Giuseppe does, and slept in an elevator, as Pasquale did for a while. However, in De Sica's opinion, neither was photogenic enough to pass muster as cast material.

Instead, he substituted Rinaldo Smordoni, a school dropout and slum resident who was neither practicing shoeshine boy nor orphan, to play one of the juvenile leads in a projected film about the impact of war and its aftermath on Italy's children. At least ten times he rejected teaming Smordoni with persistent auditioner Franco Interlenghi, a middle school student who had already acquired facility in French as well as his native Italian. Apparently De Sica regarded Interlenghi as less than ideally photogenic, while producer Tamburella interceded on the lad's behalf and finally triumphed. Not, however, before certain scenes were shot twice: once with Smordoni and Interlenghi together and once with Smordoni and another youngster – who unfortunately

has remained anonymous. According to Smordoni, he himself chose Interlenghi as a preferred acting partner. Their harmonious pairing produced two classic juvenile performances.

The film opens with Pasquale and Giuseppe riding a rented white horse down the Via Veneto to an enthusiastically appreciative audience of shoeshine youths. They are more than a bit haughty, with assumed aristocratic poses for the benefit of less fortunate peers. That arrogance is soon tempered by the realization Bersagliere's proposed purchase price far exceeds anything they could hope to collect from shoe shining earnings. After returning the equine to its current owner, the boys watch discouraged as that individual permits a young woman in jodhpurs to mount "their" favorite animal.

A bit of seeming fortune soon arrives because Giuseppe's elder brother and his partner in crime need smugglers to convey black market American blankets to a fortune-telling fence. Payment for this surreptitious activity would be substantial enough to afford them outright ownership of Bersagliere. There's overwhelming temptation to pocket the money, then race promptly to a nearby stable where their prize mount awaits them.

Not all goes according to plan. Attilio and partner Panza, pretending to be police, arrive just after the boys present their stolen merchandise to a huffy receiver. She claims innocence, trying to pin all blame on minor intermediaries. As if they were thieves rather than mere conveyors of stolen goods. For the moment, newer arrivals stay focused on the woman, threatening her with arrest. While disputation between Panza and clairvoyant continues, Attilio draws Giuseppe and Pasquale aside and thrusts a wad of money at them, simultaneously urging both to scam and tell no one about what has happened. This advice they rapidly heed.

After tallying up total assets, the two ragazzi hustle to Bersagliere's stable and waste no time assuming ownership of their four-legged treasure.

Meanwhile, an irate dupe presents her case to genuine police, assuring them she can identify the rascals who brought her stolen property. She can indeed, and does. Leading to Pasquale and Giuseppe being taken into custody for questioning. With no adult forthcoming to bail them out of trouble, the hapless duo are remanded to temporary detention pending fuller investigation.

Supposedly poor but honest parents of Giuseppe send detainees provisions, along with a warning to keep their mouths shut for Attilio's sake. Neither makes a personal appearance to rescue their son and his business partner.

But they do hire a defense attorney, who counsels Giuseppe to claim Pasquale led him astray into a life of crime. The younger lad has no idea what the man is talking about. Obviously the Filippuccis mean to extricate their own child from a prison sentence at the expense of orphaned Pasquale.

The older ragazzo is saddled with a court-appointed public defender who merely cites the times as excuse for Pasquale's delinquency. He tells the judge he's had no time to familiarize himself with details of the charges or crime. His co-counselor, considerably more eloquent, pleads for complete exoneration of Giuseppe as a patsy being punished for society's failings. Nonetheless, the presiding judge is unimpressed and sentences both teens to a reformatory, while also convicting Attilio of robbery (and probably also of impersonating an officer).

From this point on, the scene shifts to juvenile prison, where Pasquale and Giuseppe are separated. Each is compelled to associate with a motley bunch of other children jailed for offenses ranging from vagrancy to parricide. Interrogated separately under threat of physical torture, the junior partner of the shoe shining business stays mum. However, his senior chum "squeals" when he mistakenly believes Giuseppe is being whipped mercilessly in an adjoining room. Later, the Filippucci youngster learns in a roundabout manner from his mother that Pasquale Maggi confessed to criminal activity. So he determines to wreak vengeance on him for betrayal.

The film then moves from depressing drama to outright tragedy as two underage inmates experience premature deaths while a survivor must endure lifelong regret for administering ill-conceived payback.

Sciusciá benefits enormously from stunningly realistic performances, especially from a quartet of adolescent amateurs. Franco Interlenghi launches a professional acting career here as ultimately penitent Pasquale. Rinaldo Smordoni delivers an equally riveting performance in the role of naively manipulated Giuseppe, winning and keeping audience sympathy as his character's arc descends into inescapable doom. Equally notable is Aniello Mele's playing of tubercular Raffaele, an unsupervised, coastal-dwelling street kid institutionalized on an absurd indictment for "vagrancy." And who will ever

forget Bruno Ortenti's disgustingly tyrannical bullying and contraband frame-up of Pasquale?

Alessandro Cicognini's main theme for the film's protagonists, closely paralleling Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of the Villa Borghese," is a perfect playful fit for *Sciusciá's* introductory scene featuring Giuseppe and Pasquale astride galloping horses, enjoying a precious few moments of total freedom.

Tullio Parmegiani handled sound recording chores exceptionally well, particularly those capturing the chaotic noise of rebellious inmates and clapping of horse hooves on stony streets.

Anchises Brizzi used effective noirish lighting with emphases throughout on dark bars, with frequent lightless pools suggestive of captivity and physical darkness. These mirrored emotional grimness of a childhood trapped by adult maneuvers in a public cage from which no early release would be forthcoming.

Reconstructing on sound stages the interior of an infamous Rome juvenile detention center and a decrepit stone bridge, Ivo Battelli and Giulio Lombardozzi's production design served its purpose effectively. Yet it contrasts sharply with the far less picturesque and uniform exterior of an actual Roman court. Location photography appears not as well defined as studio shots, a problem surfacing again when excerpts from contemporary film comedies and newsreel footage was inserted into the larger framing narrative.

Brisk editing by Nicolò Lazzari kept a strong forward momentum surging through the film. Dialogues were trimmed to optimal minimums. Scenes seamlessly succeed each other with non-essential backgrounds and snippets of extraneous chatter strictly excised.

Direction, probably through precision modeling by De Sica himself of gesture, pose, is masterful. No actor exhibits the least insensitivity to nuances of speech or motion. An actor by vocation himself, the director had no difficulty communicating exactly what he desired to all performers, regardless of their ages or previous acting experiences.

Because of graphic violence, teen nudity, profanity, and occasional obscene language, *Sciusciá* is strictly appropriate only for adult audiences. It's a classic of world cinema, deservedly restored for future generations to admire and analyze.

This Criterion Collection dvd release offers a theatrical trailer for the restoration. It has a runtime of one minute, twenty-two seconds. Special

features of this release include an incisive essay by film scholar David Forgacs treating both *Shoeshine* and its place in Italian neo-realist cinema. Another supplement here is a three minute, twenty-three second 1946 subtitled radio broadcast by Vittorio De Sica outlining the plight of Rome's postwar shoeshine boys. Even better is Mimmo Verdesca's commemorative 2016 documentary on the occasion of *Sciusciá*'s seventieth anniversary. Titled *Sciusciá*, Verdesca's sixty-two minute feature includes footage of reminiscences about De Sica and casting for that film by eighty-three-year-old Rinaldo Smordoni and comments from a latter-day version of Franco Interlenghi. It's highly recommended. A fifth bonus is a nineteen minute overview of how *Sciusciá* fit into the larger framework of De Sica's career and the course of so-called Italian neo-realism. This is narrated by film historians Paola Bonifazio and Catherine O'Rawe.

Shoeshine is an early Spring 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library and will be added to its Classic Cinema Collection holdings.

