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CRITIC'S
CHOICE



Umberto D

Screenwriter Cesare Zavattini likely deserves as much credit as director Vittorio De Sica for such masterpieces of Italian neorealism as *The Bicycle Thief* (1947) and this 1952 feature about a retired civil servant (schoolteacher Carlo Battisti) who discovers that his meager pension won't pay the rent for his room. He's befriended by a maid in the same flat who's pregnant but unsure of the father's identity; apart from her the only creature he feels close to is his dog, and though he contemplates suicide, he has to find someone to care for it. This simple, almost Chaplinesque story of a man fighting to preserve

his dignity is even more moving for its firm grasp of everyday activities—such as the maid's skirmishes against ants in the kitchen. Clearly Zavattini's contribution, this fascination with the ordinary anticipates Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). This is truly a great film, recently celebrated at length in *My Voyage to Italy*, Martin Scorsese's documentary about Italian cinema. 89 min. Music Box, Friday through Thursday, April 26 through May 2.

—Jonathan Rosenbaum