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'1900': Gone

With the Winds of Change

BY CHARLES CHAMPLIN

CANNES—A special prize for endurance, borrowed from the Le Mans 24-hour race, will have to be given for this year's longest work. Bernardo Bertolucci's monumental Marxist-eye view of Italian history in this century, "1900."

The only question is whether the prize should go to Bertolucci and his remarkable cast and crew or collectively to the audiences who sit on numbing spines through its five hours and 24 minutes, plus intermission.

So great has been the interest that special tickets, in lieu of the regular press cards, were issued for the screenings. (The estimate on the number of accredited journalists has risen to a coincidental 1,900.) Even those with tickets lined up at the doors as much as an hour before the screening of part one at 9 Friday morning. Part two for the press resumed at 2 in the afternoon.

The black-tie evening screening began at 6, and the survivors did not emerge into the Mediterranean evening until after 1 in the morning.

Bertolucci, whose "The Conformist" and "Last Tango in Paris" were widely seen in the United States, is an uncontested master of film who proves, however, to be a pretentious, condescending and ham-fisted propagandist. His bold and epic-scale enterprise ranges from the absolutely brilliant to the absolutely silly. The silliness unfortunately clusters toward the end of the film, and it puts

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the patience of even the most dedicated faithful to a severe test.

It is by now liberation day at the end of World War II. All the plot lines are paying off, some of them impressively. Now, suddenly, the operatic feeling which the film has had from the start bursts into actual song. The happy peasants and the triumphant partisans sing the glories of the victory over fascism, which becomes lyrically synonymous with capitalism, private property and indeed everything except socialism itself.

As one witness noted with amusement, World War II turns out to have been a peasant uprising. The peasants break into a folk dance centering on a red flag the size of a tennis court. As drama it is somewhere between the tourist pageants at the Tower of London and other shrines and the didactic folk operas which are all the rage in Peking.

Yet the first half of "1900" is bold, swift and dazzling, aiming for the sweep of history and playing to the kind of mass audience that attended "Gone With the Wind," and you are tempted to see "1900" as gone with the winds of change.

The story Bertolucci wrote with his brother Giuseppe and Franco Arcalli follows two boys born the same day in 1900 on the same still-feudal estate. The one who grows up to be Robert De Niro is the grandson of the lord of the manor (Burt Lancaster). The other (later the fine French actor Gerard Depardieu) is the bastard son of a servant girl and the grandson of the father-figure of the estate's peasants (Sterling Hayden).

It is a simple, even banal, basis for the plot development but Bertolucci makes it work. The boys are pals, close but never unaware of the rocky chasm that separates their stations in life. Depardieu as Olmo the peasant has nothing of his grandfather's resignation. He is a go-getter, pushing against the status quo and quickly a recruit to Communism.

De Niro is the pleasantly ineffectual scion, dominated by his nasty father and the estate overseer, a deep-dyed Fascist villain and sexual psychopath (sustaining the equation of fascism and sexual aberration which ran through Visconti's "The Damned" as well as Berto-

lucci's "The Conformist"). Donald Sutherland plays the overseer and, even dubbed into Italian, it remains a chilling portrait, one of Sutherland's most effective roles. His grasping wife, equally perverse, is the distinguished Italian actress Laura Betti.

The boys go to war and return to their ever more divided lives—the peasant trying to stop the army from dispossessing tenant farmers, De Niro exploring cocaine, fast cars and Dominique Sanda, who had been his uncle's innocent plaything. Neither has heart for the Blackshirts, but De Niro doesn't lift a hand to stop a Fascist beating for his pal.

So it goes, schematic as a catechism, the look of the feudal splendors rivaling Visconti in its elegant detail, the dark energy of the violence suggesting that Bertolucci knows the American directors as well. He knows how to achieve impact on an audience and he does—with the ritual murder of a cat (experienced, not seen), a particularly horrifying child murder (seen and experienced), evil deeds sure to rile the blood, victories sure to raise the spirit.

At times the relationships—particularly between De Niro and Sanda, who understandably can't take the horror of the life—transcend the primer-simple styling of the plot. Sanda generates a character of great interest, sexy and sympathetic, seen by the story as a prisoner or a victim of her corrupted class and not unconvincing at all.

Yet in the end the dogma barks so loud that it is hard not to be angered that Bertolucci's attenuated singing commercial should so dim the luster of the earlier two-thirds, which may not be much better rounded and balanced as a look at history but which at least works as movie-making and as human drama.

At that, "1900" will probably find wide audiences in Europe, particularly at home in Italy where it will be seen with interest in the context of the upcoming elections. Whether this full version will ever be seen in the United States is not known but doubtful. A shorter version (running just under four hours) is already said to exist.

I have to hope and believe that the trims are from the last hour. Ennio Morricone did the emphatic and lyrical score.

It is a flawed achievement of a kind that is never really undertaken in the United States at all. And even as one winces at the particular and oversimplified view of historical process, one envies the passion and the opportunism. At less length, "1900" will be worth a look.

What is causing no little amusement and some anger here is the idea that no less than three major American distributors—Paramount, Fox and United Artists—should have contributed a large share of the cost of a pro-Communist film. Paramount has the United States distribution, Fox the Italian, UA the balance of Europe.

The attraction was not the message, but the maker of the message. Off the box-office success of "Last Tango," Bertolucci was a hot director. It is obvious that the American companies knew only in the vaguest story terms what they were getting. They know now, and what they've got is a hot director's hot potato.