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AT THE FIRST BREATH

OF WIND

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(AL PRIMO SOFFIO DI VENTO)

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An Istituto Luce release of a Zefiro Film/Meta Film production. Produced by Franco Piavoli, Laura Cafiero.

Directed, written by Franco Piavoli. Camera (color), Piavoli; editor, sound, Mario Piavoli; production, costume designer, Neria Poli. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (competing), Aug. 5, 2002. Running time: 85 MIN.

With: Primo Gaburri, Mariella Fabbris, Ida Carnevali, Alessandra Agosti, Bianca Galeazzi, Lucky Ben Dele, Guglielmo Dal Corso.

By DEBORAH YOUNG

Every seven years or so, a new Franco Piavoli film appears that strongly divides audiences between admiration (the few) and sleep (the many). No exception is "At the First Breath of Wind," a wordless, non-narrative evocation of a bucolic summer's day on a country estate in Lombardy, which in many ways is the director's most successful work yet. His melancholy artist's eye paints a lovely fantasy world with the brushstrokes of culture, myth and learning. Predictably, film's stately rhythm and refusal to approach anything resembling a story will relegate it to latenight pubcaster slots and brief runs at the artiest cinemas in town.

As Italy's best-known experimental filmmaker, whose features "The Blue Planet," "Nostos, the Return" and "Voices in Time" have a cult following on home turf, Piavoli has often found true admirers at festivals. Here, he is more distanced from his documentary beginnings that focused on nature, and a step closer to examining the humans who inhabit this world.

A family, played by actors, lives together in a magnificent house but they seem totally isolated from each other. The man (Primo Gaburri) reads books in his study, writes about the world's diversity and similarity, and falls asleep in his chair. His wife wanders around the house, poignantly remembering a lost love.

The elder daughter plays melancholy music by Satie and Ravel on the piano, while a young daughter runs through the woods like a nymph, troubled by her first feelings of attraction to the opposite sex. An ailing grandfather lies helplessly in bed; yet another female relative calls out plaintively and rather madly to an absent "Jean."

For those who follow it closely, the film creates an atmosphere of meditation and stillness in which each image has multiple meanings. An example of this ambiguity is the mental leap viewers have to make to integrate into this genteel, aristocratic world a group of seasonal African workers baling hay and dancing by the riverside. The man, who spies on them, dreams of the Africans walking around his study, reading his books. Film offers no explicit interpretation, but instead leaves associations up to the audience.

Piavoli's artistic camerawork combines with a strong use of sound, handled by editor and sound recordist Mario Piavoli.



WIND CHIMES: Italian filmmaker Franco Piavoli creates a summer day on a country estate in "At the First Breath of Wind."