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Flying down to Roma

Ginger & Fred *gets Fellini back off the ground*

by Scott Rosenberg

GINGER & FRED. Directed by Federico Fellini. Written by Fellini, Tonino Guerra, and Tullio Pinelli. With Giulietta Masina and Marcello Mastroianni. An MGM release. At the Cheri and the Harvard Square.

Ginger & Fred, the ads tell us, "watches television through the eyes of Federico Fellini." What they don't say is that the venerable director seems to own a black-and-white set. In his view, TV is evil triumphant — it plays anaesthetist and undertaker to our society, beaming concupiscent messages into every corner of cities that it has reduced to steaming heaps of trash. In the film's first half-hour, Fellini barrages us with salacious advertising (bare-breasted women hawking sausages, rubbery lipsticked mouths cooing sales pitches), and everywhere his camera lands there's a TV set on, showing soccer games, cooking demonstrations, pasta-eating contests. In one sequence, as the orchestra pounds out a variation on "In the Hall of the Mountain King," a motorcycle gang roars up to a disco through swirling smoke and one rider stops to stare defiantly at us through a ski mask. *This is your world, you videoholics!*, Fellini's roaring — *and you can have it!* It's the tirade of a tired, tuned-out old man.

Fellini doesn't have anything new to tell us about TV; his film lacks the lurid phantasms of *Videodrome*, the overheated rhetoric of *Network*. "I don't watch television," he admits in the film's production notes — "I'm not at all curious about it." *Ginger & Fred* gives us a TV-totaler's reaction to the medium: all revulsion and no insight. If this were all the film offered, it would be a sterile exercise in cultural malediction — and as dull as Fellini finds the subject. But ad copy, as TV's critics are the first to point out, can't be trusted. *Ginger & Fred* doesn't so much watch TV through Fellini's eyes as show us Fellini through TV's eyes. That picture, if somewhat smaller and less complex than the other self-portraits the director has given us over the years, demands our attention: it's an unsparing look in the mirror, with outbursts of childish spite and sentimental breakdowns and spurts of lyrical energy that make it Fellini's most vulnerably, revealingly human film since *Amarcord*. And in bringing his wife, Giulietta Masina, back onto the screen (her last Fellini performance was in 1965), the director makes an unexpected gift to his audience. She performs with such purity of tone that she drowns out Fellini's TV-phobic grousing — it becomes so much background noise.

Masina plays Amelia, a widow and grandmother who 30 years before had toured the country with Pippo (Marcello Mastroianni) in an Astaire-and-Rogers music-hall act. Now "Ginger e Fred" are reuniting to perform on a gala Christmas broadcast of a popular variety show. Amelia arrives before Pippo, and as a TV-equipped minivan spirits her through the rotting city she meets some of her fellow guests — a redheaded transvestite, a senile naval hero. At the hotel she's introduced to the other impersonators who'll unveil their acts — Clark Gable is across the hall with his roommate Marcel Proust, and Ronald Reagan chats in the lobby with Telly Savalas. There's a cow with 18 dugs and a troupe of singing midgets; a monk who heals by laying his hands on photos of the sick and a man who can make women pregnant with his gaze; a woman who records the voices of spirits and an infamous mafioso who merits a tight police escort. ("Why is he here?" someone on the bus asks. "He's a star too," a woman sagely answers.)

This great circus of life has visited Fellini's town before — and this time around the carnival of the grotesque is neither festive nor awesome, just wearying. Fortunately, Masina is staring along with us; in the middle of *Ginger & Fred*'s polluted human maelstrom we hang onto the actress's steady, open gaze like a lifebuoy, and she lifts us to a more serene vantage. No longer the pure incarnation of waif that was her Gelsomina in *La strada*, or even the plaintive perplexed spouse of *Juliet of the Spirits*, Masina has toughened with the years, yet not hardened. It's as if her ethereally clownish self had put down long roots that give her a more reliable purchase on life than the men around her have. Unchanged, however, are her impish eyes — black orbs playing hide-and-seek in white pools — and her flickering smile. Sitting on her hotel bed, she stares quizzically at a televised exercise class, following the teacher's orders to open her mouth wide, then to pucker to the left and right. The idea is to stave off wrinkles; the joke is that Masina's playfully mobile features, wrinkled or no, radiate youth. And it's their lively, undaunted reactions to the TV wasteland's twisted wildlife that cue hope for the viewer: in it, she sees less to despair over, more to laugh at, than Fellini. If the director demurs, having his surrogate Mastroianni keep up the sour raillery against the idiot box, at least he has the wisdom to let Masina's more mature response hold center stage.

Most of Fellini's films are autobiographies, whether fanciful or direct, and *Ginger & Fred* is no exception. One can't help reading the dancing team as a version of Mr. and Mrs. Fellini: Mastroianni has been playing the director on screen for decades now, and Masina's sabbatical from her husband's films has been almost as long as Amelia's absence from the stage. And yet if "Ginger e Fred" equals "Giulietta e Federico," there's no denying that Ginger/Giulietta has the more attractive, flattering part. Pippo is portrayed as a hoofer gone to seed, soured by drink and misanthropy, with only a little glint of style left to recall his heyday. His arrival in the film is heralded by loud snoring, and he slouches unshaven through his time on the screen, reciting obscene doggerel. He sucks up to the intelligentsia, as represented by a novelist and his entourage, and serves as Fellini's mouthpiece in denouncing the video monster. He still has his wiles about him, though, and when he launches into an impromptu lecture on how tap dancing evolved as "the black slaves' Morse code" — slapping his thighs to demonstrate — he recovers a sort of mesmeric power: for a rare moment you can sense the entertainer behind the wreck. Then again, you can't know whether he's making the story up.

Fellini gives the couple two long scenes together. In the first, they rehearse their act in a cavernous decommissioned bathroom deep in the TV-station complex. The film switches from its gaudy, glowing reds and oranges to pristine black and white as "Fred" dons his tux and "Ginger" her gown; but instead of dancing, they reminisce and squabble. Pippo threatens to use their TV moment to curse the Italians as sheep, but you can tell he's just letting off foul steam. Earlier he expressed his admiration for the mobster as a "young man who refused to be exploited." His speeches are like those of an adolescent trying to rile his parents, and though the rhetoric is delivered in Fellini's voice, Fellini's camera — lingering on Mastroianni's stubble or uncovering Masina's faint disgust — shows it to be perverse.

When the TV extravaganza finally rolls, the film moves out from the cramped backstage green rooms onto a cool, airy, polished-black stage, with reflecting walls and blue-and-pink neon colonnades. (Ironically, and doubtless deliberately, it's more like a Fellini set than anything else.) Here Amelia and Pippo take their place in the celebrity cavalcade — but a last-minute

Continued on page 12

Marcello Mastroianni and Giulietta Masina: swing time again

Ginger & Fred

Continued from page 5

mishap gives them a reprieve right before they're ready to dance and, in an intimate dialogue whispered in the darkness, they debate whether to run for it, to give up trying to resurrect their old-fashioned art for an audience that worships strange new gods. Again Mastroianni speaks for Fellini: the filmmaker, with more than a touch of self-pity, seems to be blaming TV for the failure of so many of his films in the past decade. But in the end the duo present their act and, despite a flub or two, make a hit. TV may vulgarize the world, but it also turns us all into cultural omnivores. "We're phantoms," says Pippo bitterly. "Only these fools would remember us." But remember them the medium does, and after their performance kids who probably never heard of Astaire and Rogers beg for the impersonators' autographs.

Ginger & Fred finally arrives at a humble perspective on filmmaking a departure for the maker of *8½*, which glorified the director as questing artist, and *Orchestra Rehearsal,* which depicted the director as struggling leader of men. Amelia and Pippo were imitations to begin with, after all; they may have been skilled practitioners of a craft, but they can hardly claim a moral high ground from which to sneer at TV. Fellini applies the same arguments to himself in *Ginger & Fred*: a serious filmmaker may feel superior to a music-video director, but don't the two traffic in the same commodity, only at different price ranges? Didn't Fellini himself pack his films with the circus grotesques he's censuring TV for exploiting? This sort of self-judgment isn't always fun to watch, and *Ginger & Fred* does slide off at times into desultory pathos or brittle sarcasm. That may be the price at this late stage in his career of getting Fellini to face the problems of his life and art head-on, an act he was once able to perform with less visible strain. Still, it's easy to see what enabled the director to kick up his heels one more time — perhaps one last time — after such a long spell of klutziness. When "Ginger e Fred" wheel out onto the dance floor, it's Amelia who leads Pippo, whispering the steps into his ears and bringing his stiff frame to life with her eyes. Masina does the same for Fellini in this autumnal film: she breathes feeling back into his work. □