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INSIGHT...

Presented By
UCLA COMMITTEE ON FINE ARTS PRODUCTIONS



LUCHINO VISCONTI'S

WHITE NIGHTS



NOTTI BIANCHE (WHITE NIGHTS)

Natalia..... Maria Schell
 Mario..... Marcello Mastroianni
 The Lodger..... Jean Marais
 The Prostitute..... Clara Calamai
 The Householder..... Marcella Rovena
 The Dancer..... Dick Sanders
 The Caretaker..... Maria Zanoli

and

Corrado Pani, Elena Fancera, Alfranco Ceccarelli, Angelo Galassi.

Screenplay by *Suso Cecchi D'Amico* and *Luchino Visconti* from the novel by Feodor Dostoyevsky. Photography by *Giuseppe Rotunno*. Sets by *Mario Chiari*. Costumes by *Piero Tosi*. Music by *Nino Rota*. Produced by CIAS under *Franco Cristaldi* for VIDES at Cinecitta.

Directed by *LUCHINO VISCONTI*

For some unaccountable reason, the films of Luchino Visconti are virtually unknown in America. However, in Europe, he is rightfully regarded as one of the great directors of our time.

A sort of Renaissance man, Visconti is a member of a very old and titled family and has an enormous personal fortune. He can afford to bide his time waiting for just the right script and actors before he makes a film, which partially explains the reason that he has made only seven features in twenty years. In the interim he directs for the stage (including everything from *The Marriage of Figaro* to *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *La Somnambula*, *Anna Bolena*, *Don Carlos*!

After deciding he was more interested in films than raising horses (a difficult decision, he relates) he was introduced to Jean Renoir by Coco Chanel and began his career as assistant, along with Jacques Becker, in the filming of the incomplete *PARTIE DE CAMPAGNE* (1936). His solo debut occurred in one of the most amazing first performances on record, *OSSESSIONE* (1942), an adaption of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Blithely completing the film without getting the author's permission the film was banned by the fascists for its supposed immorality. To date the film has not been seen in America due to another film company owning rights to the Cain book.

In 1948, with no less than Franco Zeffirelli and Franco Rossi as his assistant directors, he made his masterpiece, *LA TERRA TREMA*. Originally planned as the first part of a trilogy, the film stands alone as the strongest piece of social criticism ever put on film. American audiences will have a chance to judge for themselves when the film is released in a few months. In the recent *Sight and Sound* poll of the greatest films, it placed in the top ten, the only work on the list unseen in America.

Visconti had to wait until 1951 to make his next film, for *LA TERRA TREMA* had run into so much trouble, financial and political, that no company was anxious to back one of his lavish experiments. However, a rather modest comedy, *BELLISSIMA*, which had the box office appeal of Anna Magnani, put him back in good graces. This film, which also introduced Walter Chiari as a serious actor, is one of the three Visconti films seen in America to date.

In 1954, Lux Film signed him to direct a lavish color spectacle, *SENSO*, which starred Farley Granger and Alida Valli. Set in Venice in 1861, the film tells of the love of a married woman for a good-for-nothing young officer in the Austrian army of occupation. So sumptuous was the production that the producers found it necessary to remove Visconti from the film and the final scene was completed by another director. *SENSO* will be remembered in the future as one of the greatest examples of the use of color and decor to underline a story; it has yet to be seen in America although a dubbed and mutilated English version exists called *THE WANTON CONTESSA*.

Three years later, *NOTTI BIANCHE* appeared, highly successful at the box office. In 1960, *ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS* made his name virtually a household word, and *THE LEOPARD*, now nearing completion in Sicily, to star Burt Lancaster, Claudia Cardinale and Alain Delon, promises to be another enormous critical and popular success.

WHITE NIGHTS is perhaps Visconti's easiest film to appreciate at first viewing. The story is simple and clearly told, the actors are familiar to American audiences, and the visuals are overwhelming without becoming obnoxious. As Dilys Powell wrote in the *Sunday Times* (London):

"Now comes Visconti's latest film, and unlike his former work, it is not realistic at all. Played by skilled actors against an elaborate studio background, it is deliberately artificial and stylized. Not neo-realist, says Visconti, but neo-romantic ... *WHITE NIGHTS* has on the screen the shape and movement, rightly, of a short story. I find this a strange and beautiful film. The acting, under Visconti's strong, elegant direction, makes it a film with a great deal of feeling, too. Marcello Mastroianni as the bewildered young man, distraught between pathos and comedy, struggling with delicate, urgent gestures to understand the dream in which he is entangled; Jean Marais, the taciturn figure of romance whom we see through the eyes of the desperate girl — I cannot imagine these two characters otherwise played. As for the girl herself, maddeningly vagabond in her moods, a character whom extreme simplicity makes enigmatic, Maria Schell with her air of roguish innocence gives the mysterious, butterfly creature pausibility. *White Nights*, is far from being the turn-tail which some have thought they saw. It is, for all its delicacy, a bold experiment."

The Dostoevsky story is certainly not new to the screen. It has been made twice by the Russians, as *St. Petersburg Nights* in 1934 and as *White Nights* in 1959. The latter film was made by Ivan Pyriev who was reportedly so incensed at Visconti's treatment that he demanded the Russian equivalent of equal time to make his own. Oddly enough, it is also excellent in its own wildly different manner and why *that* film hasn't been seen in America is another puzzle of quite a different sort.

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