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# La Dolce Video

BY ANDREW SARRIS

**GINGER & FRED.** Directed by Federico Fellini. Screenplay by Federico Fellini, Tonino Guerra, and Tullio Pinelli. Produced by Alberto Grimaldi. Released by MGM/UA Entertainment.

**TROUBLE IN MIND.** Written and directed by Alan Rudolph. Produced by Carolyn Pfeiffer & David Blocker. Released by Alive Films.

By Federico Fellini's own method of counting, *Ginger & Fred* is his 18th work in 35 years of filmmaking, which is to say the figure 18 is arrived at by adding 14 full-length features to four halves, the first three of which he commemorated in the title of *8½*, the most widely admired and frequently imitated of all his achievements. What then is *Ginger & Fred* about? What else? It's about Fellini himself. The apparent subject, though, is television, that gargantuan monster medium that gulps performers and spectators indiscriminately down the gullet of time. Fellini has constructed a phantasmagoria of a TV studio set in Cinecittà on which to parade a two-hour assemblage of freaks and loonies. We have been through this Dantesque delirium many times before, and I wonder how many of Fellini's erstwhile American admirers will joyously genuflect to the maestro on this occasion.

Actually, *Ginger & Fred* is graced with a more coherent narrative than any Fellini film in decades. Amelia (Giulietta Masina) and Pippo (Marcello Mastroianni), an old music-hall team, are reunited for a one-night television spectacular on which they are to revive their old Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire routine. In the 30-odd years that have elapsed since their break-up and retirement, Amelia has become a widowed grandmother with a small business, while Pippo has been in and out of mental institutions, has been abandoned by his wife, and is now a deteriorating drunkard reduced to toiling as a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman. Pippo is afflicted also with recurring premonitions of his own death.

Amelia appears on the scene first and is given the not-so-royal treatment meted out to the other freaks on the show. She is still the indomitable Gelsomina, Cabiria, and Giulietta we have known in the past, and for a time she acts as the audience's *raisonneur* in trying to cope with the casual callousness and cruelty of a hideously impersonal enterprise. When Pippo finally appears, he's nursing a hangover so debilitating that he fails to recognize Amelia at first sight.



Giulietta and Marcello: They rescue Fellini from witless wallowing in geriatric self-pity.

If I were reading this script without any knowledge of the eventual casting of the characters on the printed page, I would toss it aside as a witless wallowing in geriatric self-pity. On the screen, however, the sight of Giulietta Masina and Marcello Mastroianni warming up to perform as faded replicas of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire is enough to make me endure the interminable antics of Fellini's gargoyles over two hours of hellish pandemonium. Are the privileged moments of Ginger and Fred dancing to Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek," "Let's Face the Music and Dance," and "Top

Hat, Black Tie and Tails" truly a redemptive epiphany to erase all the off-target ridicule of a world that seems to have bypassed Fellini? Not quite. Fellini is quoted in the production notes as proclaiming that he never looks at television. So he reinvents it as a personal bugaboo. Even with Franco Fabrizi, so memorable as the callow, cowardly womanizer in *I Vitelloni* (still Fellini's best film), doing yeoman service as the hideously insincere master of ceremonies, Fellini cannot dredge up either humor or horror sufficient to justify all the strenuous grimaces and contortions.

Ginger and Fred: beyond mockery

Oddly, Masina and Mastroianni have never appeared together on the screen before, even though Mastroianni has acted as Fellini's alter ego three times on the screen and Masina is the director's wife off the screen. Hence, there is no mutual career resonance to call upon to enhance the empathy between the reunited troupers and lovers. The only intertextual electricity of any consequence here is the connection felt between the aging Mastroianni and the aging Fellini. For the first time Fellini has not assumed the role of the whip-cracking ringmaster of his own circus, but instead has settled inside the cocoon of his own conceits. Mastroianni's Pippo breaks out occasionally in harmless spasms of anarchic rebellion, but the film ends nonetheless on a note of despair and resignation. Still, Fellini remains a director to whom attention must be paid.

The cream of the non-jest is Ginger Rogers's threatened lawsuit against *Ginger & Fred* for holding the Rogers-Astaire team up to ridicule. Fellini mentioned Ginger Rogers once before, in *I Vitelloni*, as an icon of worship in a provincial Italian town. Furthermore, despite the intervention of Woody Allen on Fellini's behalf, Irving Berlin was very reluctant to grant the rights to his songs. All this vanity-filled intrigue over ego and economics is funnier than anything

conceived for *Ginger & Fred*. Art has a harder and harder time keeping up with life these days.