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An Unknown Captures The Illustrious

Illustrious Corpses, directed by Francesco Rosi.

Although he is virtually unknown in America, Francesco Rosi is one of Europe's most vital and distinguished filmmakers. After almost 10 years as a scriptwriter and assistant director for such major figures in Italian cinema as Visconti and Antonioni, Rosi directed his first feature (*La Sfida*) in 1958.

A product of the post-war neo-realist movement -- which also included De Sica, Fellini, and Rossellini -- Rosi is virtually the only filmmaker who remains close to the movement's original tenets, even while renewing this great tradition in contemporary terms.

^ *Illustrious Corpses*, Rosi's 10th feature, follows a pattern that recurs in almost all his films: a documentary-like reconstruction of a journalistic investigation. The "corpses" of the title refer to a series of high ranking judges who are being bumped off at steady intervals.

Is it the work of a madman? Or, more obviously and conven-

iently, one of those pesky gangs of extremists? The police inspector assigned to the case, an honest, diligent investigator, comes to sense an enormous, inexplicable conspiracy behind the assassinations and himself becomes a target for his trouble.

As with all Rosi's work, *Illustrious Corpses* is a relentless, rigorous, complex search for a political understanding of power. You can forget this film if you're looking for either easy laughs or easy answers. Rosi's unraveling of the web of power is cold and brilliant.

At no time does he opt for a facile connection; instead, he demands that his viewers work as hard as he does, to think through the dense thicket of "context" (the title of the novel by Leonardo Sciascia from which the film is taken) that is placed before us.

And such context it is! Few directors are as adept at presenting the conflicting forces of capitalist society as Rosi. It's all here, superbly photographed: the police bureaucracies (especially the intriguing "Political

Section"), the military, the criminal magistrates, the compromised politicians of both left and right, the artists, workers, students, rebels and rulers alike observed with subtlety and yet with force.

For example, Rogas, the police inspector, questions a suspect, an unemployed man that several of the murdered judges had wrongly sentenced. The inspector implies this fact could well be a motive for murder. The man replies carefully, sharply: "I've lived unjustly for 52 years; those four in prison didn't weigh on me." In that moment poverty itself stares nakedly into Rosi's camera.

So with virtually every character in the film. Max Von Sydow convincingly portrays a fascist-minded Chief Justice who argues that there is no such thing as a "miscarriage of justice": just as the host invariably becomes the body of Christ regardless of the worthiness of any particular priest, so justice is invariably done when a properly authorized judge pronounces a properly authorized

sentence. The rule of law necessarily precludes any such phantom as doubt!

I suspect that Rosi's main problem in finding an American audience is simply that he is too damned serious. In the first place, his work is unrelentingly political: his probable masterpiece, *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), was a dense study of organized banditry in Sicily, mafiosi as government; *Hands Over the City* (1963) exposed widespread political corruption in Naples; *The Mattei Affair* (1972) was an in-depth, many-sided examination of the politics of oil; *Lucky Luciano* (1973) was a virtual documentary on exactly who that fellow was and how he operated.

In the second place, Rosi refuses to dilute his politics with the humor and baroque imagination of Lina Wertmuller, or the slick thrills of Costa-Gavras. American film audiences -- even for political films -- dislike nothing more than thinking; that's assumed to be the director's job, while the audience relaxes and soaks up solutions like a sponge.

In a 1975 interview in *Cineaste* magazine (done shortly before he began *Illustrious Corpses*), Rosi described his method in these terms:

"I ... try to have the public collaborate in my search for a possible truth. The public should not be just passive spectators.... I pose questions and I conduct research, and this.... is quite often the very structure of the film... The research itself is the narrative structure."

Over the years Rosi has refined this method to a hard, crystalline brilliance. While his probing, disturbing films are often so dense as to be confusing on a first viewing, that very quality is their strength. By digging down to the roots, Rosi reveals the essence; his relevance is assured when other political films will become absurdly dated and forgotten.

--J.N. Thomas

Illustrious Corpses opens Feb. 1 at the Lumiere in San Francisco.