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# On the Road Again

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FILM

By J. Hoberman

## La Strada

Directed by Federico Fellini  
Written by Fellini and  
Tullio Pinelli  
Produced by Dino De Laurentiis  
and Carlo Ponti  
Released by Kino International  
At Film Forum  
Through November 7

## Wild West

Directed by David Attwood  
Written by Harwant Bains  
Produced by Eric Fellner  
Released by the Samuel  
Goldwyn Company  
Opens November 5

The classic qualification for auteur status was to be a movie director whose combination of visual style and thematic obsession projected an unmistakable worldview. Federico Fellini, who died this past weekend, even as his complete oeuvre began screening in New York, was one of the few whose particular vision transcends the screen and seems destined for the dictionary.

Fellow -esque Frank Capra titled his autobiography *The Name Above the Title*; at the height of his fame, Fellini's name was the title: *Fellini Satyricon*, *Fellini's Roma*, *Fellini's Casanova*. In popular usage, the term *Fellini-esque* came to signify not so much a mode of filmmaking—movies about show people ending as day breaks upon a desolate beach, sequences sutured together with mild shock cuts and Nino Rota's neo-hurdy-gurdy music—as it did a gaudy and grotesque allegorical realm populated by soulful clowns and sexy angels, dazzling freaks and garishly costumed women turning to waggle their tongues or mouth the word "ciao."

At its most vulgar, the Fellini-esque was Las Vegas with a human face, a permanent Mardi Gras, the state to which all night-life and half the commercials on TV aspired. At its most refined, it was very nearly the same thing. Fellini-esque meant the modern world as circus with the movie director as ringmaster, and, as such, it captivated wannabes from Moscow to Mexico City and, in the U.S., from Elaine's to Spago.

*La Strada*—at Film Forum through this weekend as a prelude to a complete Fellini retro (all new 35mm prints, courtesy of Cinécittà)—may not be *Fellini Masterpiece* (I prefer *The White Sheik*, *8½*, and *Ginger and Fred*, to name three). But the story of the simpleminded peasant Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina), bought from her impoverished mother to serve as servant-fool-concubine for the itinerant strongman Zampano (Anthony Quinn), was the movie that broadcast Fellini's wavelength into the cosmos. A runner-up at the 1954 Venice Film Festival, *La Strada* opened in New York City during the summer of 1956 and subsequently won both the New York Film Critics Circle award and the first-ever Oscar for the year's best foreign film.

There was something in Fellini that suggested a new Chaplin smiling through his tears and frisking down the road. *The New*



Giulietta of the Spirits: Masina in Federico Fellini's road movie, *La Strada*

York Times movie critic Bosley Crowther, then the arbiter of all films foreign, called *La Strada* "the simplest and fullest manifestation by Fellini of his lyrical power to express the deep pathos in people," and, by and large, the People responded in kind.

Italian neorealism was still considered the international cutting edge, but *La Strada* was more than an art-house hit. Anthony Quinn was then a major Hollywood star—in Rome to make *Attila*, he worked on *La Strada* during the mornings—as well as an alternate version of Marlon Brando, whom he'd replaced in the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. (Once regarded as American "neorealism," the film *Streetcar*—currently in rerelease—is a suggestive precursor to *La Strada* as a spectacle of the poetic female battered into submission by the masculine life force.) Quinn aside and unlike the films Fellini made from *La Dolce Vita* on, *La Strada* unfolds on the outskirts of everything. Its milieu is one of empty piazzas garnished with lone strings of electric lights, half-built housing projects in the middle of nowhere, threadbare sideshows pitched by the sea.

As its title (meaning "The Road") suggests, *La Strada* also transported Italian neorealism to a new place. A key sequence has wooden-headed Gelsomina sitting by the road as three musicians

materialize. Her mood magically altered, she prances after them and, via the miracle of editing, into a religious procession that climaxes with a performance by the aerialist known as the Fool (Richard Basehart). It is this sardonic-celestial creature, the most ambiguous in the movie, who teaches Gelsomina her trademark musical refrain and suggests to her that even she has a purpose on earth. The war waged by the Strongman and the Fool over the soul of this Sad Clown has the knockabout quality of commedia dell'arte; although *La Strada* was attacked by Italian Marxists for its deficient social thematics, its three-character parable was elsewhere received as though it were a Catholic version of *Waiting for Godot*.

Indeed, Fellini may have taken slapstick more seriously than Beckett. Alberto Sordi had already been declared "Chaplin-esque" in *I Vitelloni*, the 1953 Fellini opus in which he made his debut. As the protagonist of *La Strada*, however, the moon-faced Masina all but patented the adjective (as well as garnering comparisons to silent comics Stan Laurel, Harry Langdon, and Harpo Marx) with her repertoire of cute frowns and alert smiles, hopeful eye-rolls, and pantomimed wonder. Her main precursor as a female manifestation of the Chaplin-esque is Molly Picon in the 1936 Polish Yiddish talkie *Yiddl Mitn Fidl*, but Masina is far more a precocious

toddler. Once Zampano outfits Gelsomina with an old derby and teaches her how to beat a fanfare on the drum, she's almost a subject for Walter Keane; after he leaves her sleeping on the road, she haunts him like the memory of an abandoned child.

The laconic account of Gelsomina's offscreen death sets up *La Strada*'s indelible final image of utter desolation—a loss of imagined innocence that the movie, and Fellini, refuse to assuage. "After *La Strada* I had scores of offers," he once told a British film magazine. "[Were they] to make *Il Bidone*, which I was then planning? No. To make *Gelsomina on a Bicycle* or anything with Gelsomina in the title. They didn't realize that in *La Strada* I had already said all I wanted to say about Gelsomina. They all wanted Gelsomina.

"I could have earned a fortune selling her name to doll manufacturers, to sweet firms; even Walt Disney wanted to make an animated cartoon about her. I could have lived on Gelsomina for twenty years." Fellini was, in a sense, unduly modest.