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Artists in Love

The Cannes Film Festival climaxed last weekend amid ritual hand-wringing over the state of European art cinema. As if on cue, the home front's being treated to two recent examples of the mode by two vastly overrated, supremely solipsistic maestros. To judge from Theo Angelopoulos's *Eternity and a Day* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Besieged*, the Euro art film is not only deadlier than the dodo but dumber too.

Cannes's 1998 Palme d'Or laureate, the aptly named *Eternity and a Day*, is by far the weakest of the half-dozen or so Angelopoulos films I've sat through over the years, reveling as it does in its own intimations of mortality. The fun begins with a snatch of poetry, a burst of piano-doodling, the idyllic image of a child by the sea, and, preparing to check himself into the hospital, Euro-signifier Bruno Ganz as Alexandre—a great writer and an even greater cliché, who is now in late middle age and suffering from some unspecified terminal malady.

Call his illness delusions of grandeur. Angelopoulos insures that nothing Alexandre does will be without near world-historic import. The writer begins his last day trying to park his immaculately groomed and hilariously silent labrador with his grown daughter; he winds up rescuing an Albanian street urchin who has been abducted and brought to an abandoned motel full of wealthy pederasts (or worse). Thereafter, it's a glum and tedious recapitulation of Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*—although, hunching through the movie in what might be Peter Falk's old gray raincoat, the Ganz character is much too enervated to do more than beam benignly down at his little charge.

This symbolic symbiotic relationship between the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the kindly and the cute, civilization and its discontents, is given pseudohistorical depth with the introduction of Albanian concentration camps and Alexandre's fey meditations on the exiled 19th-century Greek poet whom he has taken as his soulmate. What pushes the movie past the point of endurance, however, is the filmmaker's ponderous style. Studied and humorless, the characteristic Angelopoulos movie is predicated on a series of somnolent takes, stately zooms, and slow white-outs. The effect is severely minimal, yet the mise-en-scène absurdly glamorous. Every pad is lit as if for an *Architectural Digest* shoot; a hospital exudes the inviting atmosphere of a well-kept provincial museum; the city morgue has the stainless-steel chic of a trendy four-star restaurant.

Eternity and a Day is so ostentatiously self-regarding that when Alexandre repeatedly muses on his late wife's fawning love letters, it's easy to imagine they were written by Angelopoulos to himself. It's hard to know which is more ridiculous—the scene in which Alexandre interrupts the faux folk wedding of his faithful servant's son in order to leave his dog with her, or the one in which a group of street kids solemnly burn a dead comrade's pitiful belongings, recit-

Eternity and a Day
Written and directed
by Theo Angelopoulos
A Merchant Ivory Films release
Opens May 28

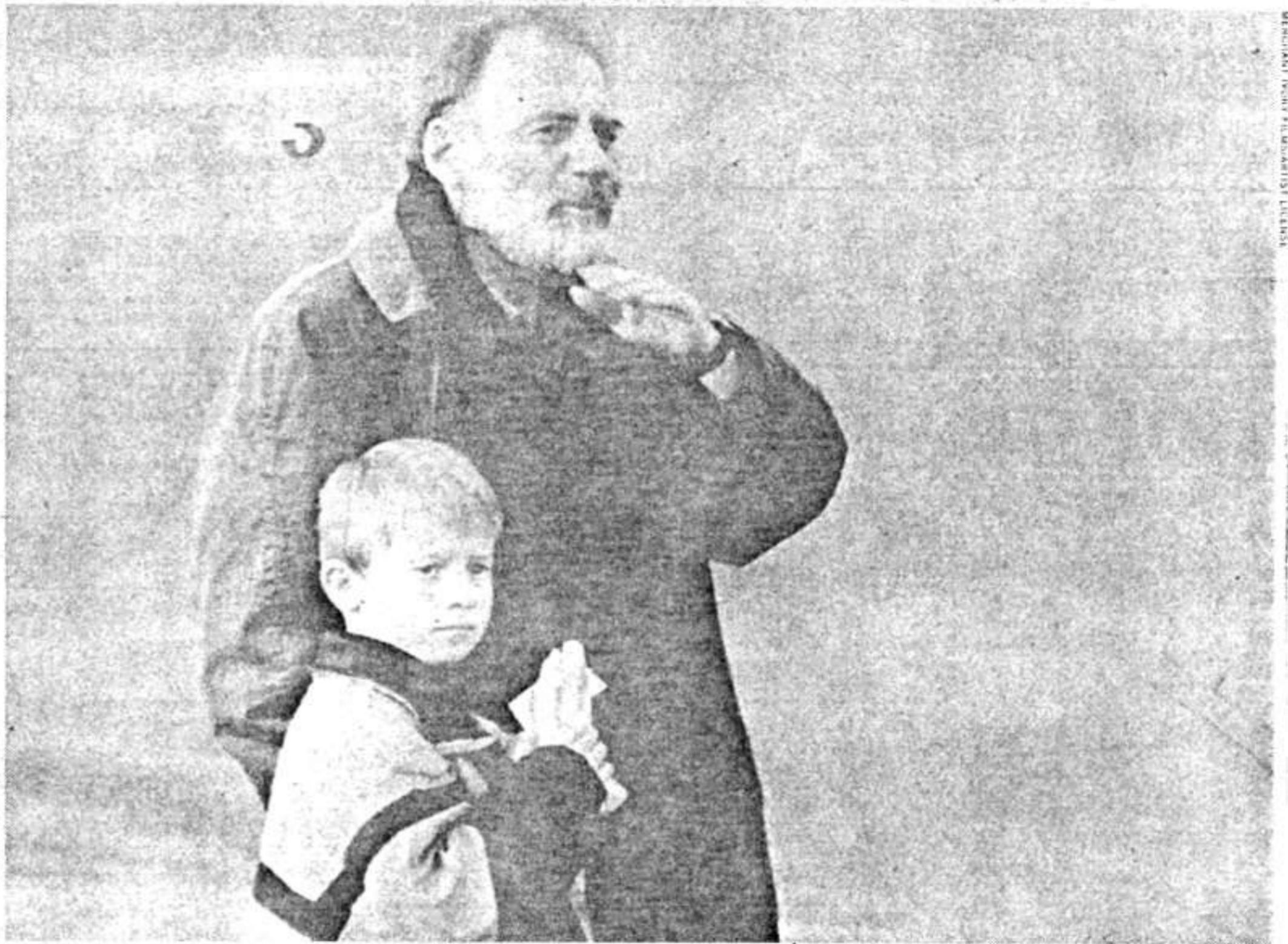
Besieged
Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci
Written by Bertolucci and Clare Peploe
A Fine Line Features release

BY J. HOBERMAN

despair, crowns himself with Andrei Tarkovsky's moral anguish, affects Miklós Jancsó's virtuoso formalism in search of Michelangelo Antonioni's allegorical landscapes only to wind up in the grand finale dancing by the sea like a stiff-jointed, tone-deaf Federico Fellini.

LIKE *ETERNITY AND A DAY*, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Besieged* should come with the disclaimer "Danger: Artiste at

tidies up his objets d'art-crammed palazzo before rushing off to her class in human anatomy. Nor can Bertolucci's camera resist feasting on Shandurai's lissome vulnerability. Much of the movie is a prolonged, spastic flirtation in which Shandurai is drawn to Mr. Kinsky's music (supposedly the very essence of European culture) but repelled when he jumps her with a gulping, snuffling proposal of marriage.



Recapping *The Kid*: Ganz and Achilles Skevis in the glum and tedious *Eternity and a Day*

ing blank verse as the background oboe dirges and the camera inexorably moves in. A proponent of what might be termed abstract non-expressionism, Angelopoulos has no particular facility for imagining characters or directing actors. *Eternity and a Day* might have been more fluidly performed by a cast of statues—or even Wookies. Indeed, this is the art-house *Phantom Menace*—stilted, arid, pompous, at once enthralled by its own effects and burdened with bogus philosophizing.

Angelopoulos's flawed but memorable *Ulysses' Gaze* had a certain majestic indifference—or at least so it seemed as projected as a virtual installation on the big screen at the not-quite-bombed-out Anthology Film Archives, an almost empty theater on a derelict stretch of lower Second Avenue. Seeing it thus, one could almost believe that Angelopoulos had created the last European art film. *Eternity and a Day*, which is being released in the shadow of Lincoln Center and aggressively promoted by middlebrow over-achievers Merchant and Ivory, is more like a grotesque précis of the mode.

Bluntly posing the eternal questions—"Why have I lived my life in exile?" "Why didn't we know how to love?"—Angelopoulos dons the heavy mantle of Ingmar Bergman's dour

Work." Still, however clueless and condescending, *Besieged* is less intolerable than *Eternity*, mainly for being shorter and more sybaritic in its rescue fantasy. Bertolucci's we-are-the-world love story may be schematic but it's also showy. The movie is a little textbook of svelte, sub-Scorsese, New Wave filmmaking—a farrago of jump-, match-, and audio shock-cuts, camera spins, odd angles, and dropped narrative transitions.

Besieged, which had its world premiere last September at the Toronto Film Festival, was regarded by many of the director's devotees as a return to form. But, lacking the overblown, camp absurdity of *Little Buddha* or *Stealing Beauty*, it's still a prime example of cinema *National Geographic*. It opens in West Africa—land of strolling bards and military thugs—with a rural school-teacher's arrest by the minions of the local dictator. Helpless witness to this outrage, the teacher's young wife, Shandurai (Thandie Newton), next appears in Rome, where she studies medicine while supporting herself as the live-in housecleaner for an eccentric pianist she calls Mr. Kinsky (played, with excruciating archness, by David Thewlis).

Do you believe in magic? The reclusive Mr. Kinsky is understandably fascinated by this mysterious willowy creature—timorous yet steely—as she

Thus, in a distended short story with a modified O. Henry twist, audience sympathies are reversed. The displaced and persecuted Shandurai appears as haughtily withholding as a fashion model—and has enough outfits to prove it—while kinky Mr. Kinsky turns out to have a soul as big as Little Buddha. The viewer may well question the nature of Kinsky's sacrifice—particularly after hearing his ambitious attempt to fuse Edvard Grieg with Papa Wemba. Suffice to say that his alter ego Bertolucci is not giving up anything—he's far too generous to withhold that which he's been dangling before our eyes.

Bertolucci's fantasy of New Age bwana-dom is not the first Euro art film to contemplate the spectacle of a beautiful African woman alone in the metropolis—just the most fatuous. Distributor Fine Line should be compelled to show it on a double bill with the Dardenne brothers' 1997 illegal-alien drama *La Promesse* or, better yet, Ousmane Sembene's 1965 *Black Girl*—a clear-eyed (no less New Wave) account of misplaced love and neocolonial objectification. Shandurai may speak three or four languages and be an A medical student but, dazzled by the white man's voodoo, she's a tongue-tied, barefoot child of nature at heart. V

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