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I Remember Mamma

A lost Pasolini film reaches cinemas

Perhaps the title of Pier Paolo Pasolini's youth-run-amok 1959 novel summarized this remarkably gifted/damned artist best: *A Violent Life*. Both fascinated and repulsed by the postwar decay in his native Italy, he employed paints, prose, poetry and moving pictures to capture a poverty-stricken underworld so cutthroat it'd give Ratso Rizzo the creeps. The seediness caught up to him in 1975, in a brutal murder eerily foretold by his last ghastly film, *Salo—The Last 120*



Days of Sodom. Now, 20 years after the director's death, Milestone Film is giving long-overdue U.S. theatrical release to Pasolini's somber second feature, *Mamma Roma*, a 1962 piece brimming with societal misanthropes tumbling straight into the urban gutter. Anna Magnani—fresh from her *Rose Tattoo* Oscar—claimed at the time that the Pasolini-scripted title character of an over-the-hill

hooker was "the most important role I have played so far." Her Mamma Ro' is vulgar and coarse, trampled underfoot by a violent life yet wanting only the best for her already truant teenaged son. It's prime Pasolini—a lone candle of hope just waiting to be extinguished.

The film opens with Mamma Roma—her street name—drunkenly crashing the wedding of her former pimp. Both are free to walk more respectable paths, but there's an underlying threat to the glances the old partners exchange that seems to spell tragedy. "You don't know yet how cruel this world can be," Mamma warns her kid before she drags him back to cultured Rome. Junior stares blankly back: As soon as he spies the local gang of street toughs, he has some cultural ideas of his own. Before long, he's smoking, drinking and stealing from dying hospital patients. He even robs his mother, who, losing faith, turns to a priest for guidance in one of the film's most

curious scenes. Trading words with the cleric in a series of frontal shots, Magnani is filmed far lower on the screen than he is, implying not only the power religion still exerts over her but also the utter futility she senses in such a gesture. As she listens to the advice, she understands that not even the Pope could save her son at this point. And the irony of an outlaw parent attempting to sway her progeny from crime is the melancholy cry-wolf thread that binds this bleak effort together.

Was Pasolini foreseeing an ignoble end this early in his career? Hard to say, but *Mamma Roma* (due on video late '95) certainly acknowledges the pervasive lure of evil with relatively little moralizing. If the world is indeed a cruel teacher, as Pasolini believed, there's never a noticeable shortage of willing students. —Tom Lanham ■



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