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# Fellini's Wild World of Women

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Nobody but nobody makes movies like Federico Fellini. Especially those bitter-sweet, serio-comic excursions into memory and dream like "8½," "Roma" and "Amarcord." Fantastic and even phantasmagoric images cascade carnival-like onto the screen, with little order imposed on them other than the associational one of dream. The distinction of these movies is their intensely personal and emotional quality.

We do not go to Fellini to immerse ourselves in story and character or to encounter ideas. Nor do we go only for his astonishing images. What we want from the maestro and what he gives us are fabulous adventures in feeling—a decidedly original mixture of nostalgia, poignancy and joy that is unmistakably Fellini's own.

And that is precisely what he offers in "City of Women"—one of his most extravagant, extraordinary and amusing psychic voyages. As in "8½," the central character is clearly a Fellini alter-ego, a fiftyish Italian womanizer named Snaporaz, played by Fellini's cinematic stand-in, Marcello Mastroianni.

We first meet Snaporaz dozing on a bumpy train ride; he looks up to see seated opposite a stunning, sensual woman. Interpreting her suggestive smile as an invitation, Snaporaz follows her out of the compartment and ultimately off the train, only to find himself alone in the midst of a forest. Shades of Dante? Perhaps. Certainly Snaporaz's surreal adventures can be seen as a whirling descent into an Inferno—albeit of a comical variety.

He first lands in what could be called the first circle, a labyrinthine hotel hosting a giant convention of feminists. Some are putting on slide-shows, others are presenting skits. Nearly all are vehement and vengeful. Next Snaporaz descends, via a frightening car ride with an all-girl group of punk teen-agers, into the phallic fortress of the great macho lover, Dr. Zubercock, who keeps some 10,000 of his conquests in a giant mausoleum currently under siege by a lesbian police force.

And finally, sliding down a huge roller-coaster, Snaporaz finds himself in the midst of a carnival whose sideshow entertainments offer the memories of all the women he has adored—Mama, maids and movie stars. From here he is carried skyward (towards Paradise?) by a huge balloon in the shape of his ideal woman only to have her flesh-and-blood counterpart, a gun-carrying terrorist, riddle his dream with bullets.

Kaleidoscopic, hallucinatory, endlessly varied and gorgeous even, when grotesque, these multiform fantasies all share a center: the encounter between the eternal womanizer, Snaporaz and/or Fellini, and contemporary feminism. Not surprisingly, the film aroused a storm of controversy (and is likely to continue to do so) at the Cannes Film Festival last spring. Some find it anti-feminist, others see it as an attack on the macho male.

Given the vast array of materials Fellini has laid before us, both viewpoints have their grounds. Some of the women in the film are indeed terrifying, the female inquisitors at the carnival, for example, or the giant woman gladiators. And many of the protests these women mount result in chaos.

Yet the men seem to come off worse. Snaporaz may be handsome and sweet (especially in Mastroianni's marvelously engaging performance), but he is also puerile in his pursuit of women and too simpleminded to understand their needs and demands. Zubercock as played by the late Ettore Manni is overblown and overstated to the point of being ludicrous.

Still, to see the film as taking either side is not to see it whole. Even at its most critical, the sensibility that controls this film is tender and caring, even loving. Nearly everything and everyone is bathed with a warmth and affection that make even potentially repellent figures like Zubercock pathetic and women, if frightening, still curiously appealing.

The film's entire thrust has little or nothing to do with the striking of attitudes, the analyzing of ideas. What Fellini seems after here is the recording and communicating of a set of feelings: those complex, contradictory ones experienced by a middle-aged Italian male suddenly faced with a cataclysmic upheaval in social and sexual values.

"Italian," of course, is a key word here, since in Casanova's birthplace feminism has come as a shock, particularly to middle-aged womanizers.

Born to other mores and manners, shaped by other attitudes and values, poor Snaporaz-Fellini is bewildered; adoring of women in their most traditional guises and roles, he is disoriented. As he dreams and remembers, he waxes nostalgic about what was and becomes fearful of what is to come. Change isn't easy when you're "fifty but still nifty," as Snaporaz notes with no small measure of self-mockery.