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Searing Study of a Mafioso in Exile

★★★(Lucky Luciano)

Directed by Francesco Rosi. Written by Rosi and Lino Jannuzzi, in collaboration with Tonino Guerra, from a story by Rosi. With Gian Maria Volonte, Rod Steiger, Edmund O'Brien, Vincent Gardenia, Charles Siragusa. *At the Paramount and suburban theaters.*

This isn't just another Mafia ripoff movie; it's a film of genuine intelligence and subtlety. Like *Lucky Luciano*, writer-director Francesco Rosi is a Neapolitan, but there are more important reasons why he's the logical director to deal with the career of one of the Mafia's most celebrated and elusive personalities. Rosi makes a habit of investigative, neo-journalistic films about powerful, private men whose public images are of cold, ruthless efficiency.

From his American-imposed exile in Naples, Luciano directed a vast drug network until his death from a heart attack several years ago. Little is known about his personal life, and surprisingly little is known about his role in the mob's overseas operations. He is a mysterious figure, as mysterious as the industrialist Mattei, the subject of an earlier Rosi movie (it won the grand prize at Cannes, but its brief run at the Circle here last year was typical of its US exhibition). At the end of "*Lucky Luciano*," little that is new has been revealed, but the film has nonetheless been effective in portraying the symbiotic relationship between organized crime and the political society that allows its leaders to exist and is, in turn, nourished by them.

Rosi takes larger-than-life figures — heroes, villains, champion bullfighters, political figures, gangsters — and through a meticulously realistic style transforms the cold facts of their public lives into searing social documentaries. Like Eisenstein, Rosi proceeds from a fairly orthodox Marxist base in order to seek out and illuminate the hidden order of society by concentrating on the way men use power — and the way power uses men. Beginning as Luchino Visconti's assistant on 1948's neo-realist classic "*La Terra Trema*" Rosi made his first movie in 1962; in many ways, he is the only Italian originating in neo-realism who is still employing the tools of that movement.

Power fascinates Rosi; measured against him, lightweight directors such as Costa-Gavras display a curious lack of mature insight into the workings of modern society. Their work can't be placed alongside Rosi's savage pacing, the scorching authenticity of his *mise-en-scene*, the dense interweaving of past and present in order to flesh out a skeletal, journalistic structure. The themes of "*Lucky Luciano*" are ones Rosi has shown himself past master at: the tangled relationship between crime and political power, the close similarity between organized banditry and government, and the primacy of order in a society divorced from the morality of those who impose it.

The movie shows how Italian-American Mafiosi such as Luciano and Vito Genovese were given *carte blanche* to loot and reorganize postwar Italy in exchange for dubious "services" to the Allied armies. In one particularly effective early scene, Rosi cross-cuts between two things: a farewell party for Luciano, given by top Mafia leaders on the occasion of his deportation, one of the mob chieftains toasting him with the words, "He who puts things in order is a man of power"; and symbols of order and permanence — the Statue of Liberty, a cross atop an Italian church. Luciano visits en route to Naples, the graves of his ancestors.

That's not just obvious point-making, though. Through the film, Luciano (Gian Maria Volonte) is seen in his public role of exiled elder statesman of some vast, powerful feudal state. Meanwhile, US investigators like Charles Siragusa (playing himself) labor diligently to bring him down. One of the unstressed ironies is the close similarity between the workings of Siragusa and his agency (constantly involved in skirmishes with a political establishment in Washington and New York, both of which, it is implied, have a vested interest in keeping the heat off Luciano) and the Byzantine workings of the mob. There is at least the implication at the end that Siragusa (who went on to become one of the top cops in Illinois) was as much a victim of official guerilla warfare as was his chief informant, Gene Gianini (Rod Steiger), of the Mafia kind.

The film's failings are those often noted in Rosi's past work: an unwillingness to humanize the central figure, an unnecessarily difficult dramatic structure, a rhetorical tone. Still, Rosi makes the counter-claim that his chief dramatic interest is in "how a character behaves in relation to the collectivity of society . . . To understand what a man is like in his private drama, you must begin to understand him in his public life." And within the limits he sets for himself, Francesco Rosi once again demonstrates that understanding.

— Don Druker

(An earlier version of this review appeared in the *Chicago Reader*, with whose permission it is printed here.)