

## Document Citation

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# ERNESTO

(INTERNATIONAL SPECTRAFILM)

Film Journal 10/28/83

Color/1.85

(R)

95 Mins.

Cast: Martin Halm, Michele Placido, Virna Lisi, Tuti Ferro, Lara Wendel, Conchita Velasco, Francisco Marso, Miranda Nacelli.

Credits: Directed by Salvatore Samperi. Cinematography: Camillo Bazzoni. Screenplay by Barbara Alberti, Amadeo Pagani, and Salvatore Samperi. Exec producer: Marco Tamburella. Art Director: Ezio Allieri.

A comedy-drama about a young man coming of age in early-20th-century Italy. Classily directed and acted, and with a surprising amount of homosexual content, the film should do its best business playing to gay audiences, but could well become a permanent fixture in revival houses after playing major cities. 83-171

*Ernesto* is a winning, richly detailed film, a skillful blend of ironic humor and wistful sadness, political commentary and eroticism. Not surprisingly, the sexual angle has been the focus of the film's promotion. But while there is a fair amount of sexual activity in the film, and most of it is gay, *Ernesto* is not a "gay film." Director Salvatore Samperi is instead telling the story of an adolescent's transition into society. Like the protagonist of Ermanno Olmi's classic *Il Posto (The Sound of Trumpets)*, Samperi's *Ernesto* is a young man who almost unconsciously loses some of his soul as he takes his expected place in the adult world.

A 17-year-old Jewish office worker in pre-World War I Trieste, *Ernesto* is too bored and mischievous to be kept behind a desk, so his exasperated boss has him supervise the workmen. *Ernesto* strikes up a casual friendship with one of the laborers, and the two soon become lovers. Michele Placido, perhaps best known here for his riveting portrayal of the street performer in Marco Bellocchio's *Leap Into the Void*, is outstanding as the older workman who falls passionately in love with his youthful overseer. His very passion, however, is the relationship's undoing. *Ernesto* refuses to reciprocate those feelings, not because of a lack of sexual interest, but because he instinctively realizes that to get through life safely and successfully, a person must not care too much about anything. Eventually, *Ernesto* provokes his boss into firing him, thus extricating himself from the demanding affair. Once "free," *Ernesto* becomes involved with a younger boy, Ilio, but quickly abandons him for his twin sister Rachele. These two roles are executed by actress Lara Wendel, in a remarkably convincing and virtuosic performance.

Actor Martin Halm manages to make *Ernesto* likable despite his unpleasant behavior. Thanks to Halm, we're constantly excusing *Ernesto*'s actions, expecting that at any moment he'll do something genuinely decent. But that moment never comes. Instead, what we see is a young man who doesn't so much think thoughts as try them on to see how they fit, and his wardrobe includes Judaism, socialism, capitalism, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. *Ernesto* is also a master at manipulating people through his own passivity—most notably when he tearfully confesses to his mother his homosexual affair, and then twists her forgiveness into an opportunity to hit her for some money.

For Samperi, *Ernesto* is a model bourgeois, someone ready to drop any intellectual or emotional response that could distance him from social acceptance and success. What makes his character frightening is that he changes with neither conscious deliberation nor regret. Regrets are for the others whom *Ernesto* leaves behind. And while Samperi is clearly on the side of the rejected and abandoned, his film is by no means a mere diatribe against a social type. There's an almost awed quality to *Ernesto*, a head-shaking wonder that this young man's story really does take place every day throughout the world. As a result, Samperi doesn't leave his audience in the comfortable position of simply rejecting *Ernesto*. Rather, he disturbs us into wondering about how we've failed others and ourselves. Any film that can be entertaining, provocative, full of surprises, and still get us to that point of self-examination is a work of rare value. *Ernesto* is such a film.

—Cole Gagne

traditional abode of the gods. Mischievous fauns, baby unicorns, winged horses; the magnificent black Pegasus and his snow white mate are seen cavorting in complete bliss under the fabled mount. Cupid arrives to weave his magic gift of love over a group of beautiful centaurettes and noble centaurs.

In a fresh outburst of music, Bacchus, the god of wine, comes in to spread a revelry of song and dance until interrupted by a rain storm. High above, Zeus finds sport in tossing lightning bolts at a dodging Bacchus. Soon tiring, Zeus gives up his game and falls into slumber on a cloud. The rain ceases and Iris streaks across the sky leaving a rainbow in her wake. Then high overhead, Apollo rides down in his golden chariot; the sun sets, and Morpheus, the god of sleep, falls upon us as Diana grasps the moon as if it were a bow and launches an arrow of fire into a cloud of stars.

DANCE OF THE HOURS  
BY  
AMILCARE PONCHIELLI

"Dance of the Hours" is a ballet from the opera "La Gioconda" (The Smiling One) by Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886), which was first performed at La Scala Opera House in Milan in April, 1876.

In "FANTASIA" this familiar music becomes a ballet like none other. The music expresses a pageant of the hours of the day. As the curtains rise, it is early morning in a formal garden. A fluffy pink form moves. It is an ostrich. With excruciating grace she pirouettes to other ostriches, and wakens them for breakfast.

From a pool, as Venus from the sea, comes the premiere danseuse, a hippopotamus. Her ladies in waiting, other hippos, assist her in her morning toilette, after which she dances an intricate routine until exhausted; she falls into slumber on a couch. Elephants appear,

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