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Author(s)	Kevin Thomas
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18 YEARS LATER

La Terra Trema Arrives

BY KEVIN THOMAS

Times Staff Writer

"La Terra Trema" is a timeless masterpiece that has finally arrived in Los Angeles—18 years after it was made and four years after it was ranked by Sight and Sound's International Critics Poll as one of the 10 greatest films ever made. The passage of time, if anything, has provided a perspective that makes it possible to appreciate all the more the profound accomplishment of its creator, Luchino Visconti.

While Visconti was filming his saga of the rise and fall of a family of Sicilian fishermen, De Sica was making "Bicycle Thief." Today, that familiar classic, along with many other famous Italian films of the period, seems dated, whereas "La Terra Trema" (at the Los Feliz) transcends both the traditions and limitations of neo-realism to achieve the level of classic tragedy.

Tragic Dimension

It is this ability to discover in the lives of peasants a tragic dimension in all its dignity that is Visconti's surpassing achievement. Few artists have succeeded in defying Aristotle's edict that only the nobility with its freedom of choice is capable of the tragic experience, and critics have long remarked that contemporary drama tends to confirm the feel-

ing that modern man's fate is at best, pathetic.

Yet by choosing to depict a people whose existence has been unchanged for centuries at that very moment when one of its number attempts to improve his lot by assuming responsibility for his own destiny, Visconti is able to explore in full measure man's subjection to the mores of the society in which he lives and to the forces of nature itself.

Hero's Awareness

His hero is Antonio, the handsome, likable head of a large family of fishermen. Having seen something of the world outside his village while in service, he returns home with a full awareness of the economic exploitation his people have long endured at the hands of the local wholesalers for whom all the fishermen work.

He mortgages the ancient family home to buy his own boat, goes into business for himself and thus eliminates the hated middleman. All goes well until one day when he insists in pride and confidence on going out to sea despite an approaching storm, which wrecks his boat beyond his ability to repair it and brings total ruin to him and his relatives. For not only do the wholesalers exact terrible revenge by denying him work but also the townspeople, who had envied

his heretofore successful attempt to better himself, by turning upon him.

Out of this situation in all its simplicity emerges a shattering irony: Antonio had not taken his stand for independence merely for himself and his own but to show all the villagers how they too might free themselves. We are left with the hope that they one day will come to realize this.

All the actors in "La Terra Trema" are unprofessional but none are amateurs under Visconti's painstaking guidance. Complementing the flawless performances is the film's breathtakingly perfect photography. Taking as its cue for tempo the eternal and resolute shifting of the sea, this superb, stately picture captures the ebb and flow of life itself.