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Bertolucci's '1900'—So Far It's Just a Courtroom Drama

BY MARK N. GRANT

● NEW YORK—Five years ago on the strength of "Last Tango in Paris," Bernardo Bertolucci suddenly became the enfant terrible of international cinema. Today the English-speaking world, or at least the film buffs thereof, breathlessly awaits the director's even more apocalyptic encore, the \$5-million-over-budget, year-late "1900"—and waits and waits and waits, like Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot.

For a legal imbroglio as colossal and protracted as the film itself (between the director, producer Alberto Grimaldi of Produzioni Europee Associate (PEA) and the contracted North American distributor, Paramount) may keep this "Gone With the Wind" of the Italian peasant Communist movement from ever playing American theaters.

Grimaldi has sued Bertolucci, calling him an "egomaniac." Bertolucci has sued Grimaldi for pirating away a truncated cut of the five-hour version. Paramount has sued Grimaldi for breach of contract. Late last month in the Italian courts, Bertolucci finally won a round in the dispute: Grimaldi was ordered to let the director finish his four-and-a-half-hour version of the film and then try to sell it. But the suit doesn't end with that, nor are the other suits yet settled.

"1900" already has been shown in a two-part five-hour version in France, Italy, West Germany, Greece, Denmark and the Netherlands. It has yet to reach the United States (or Britain, Canada and Australia, for that matter), despite its impressive cast (Burt Lancaster, Robert De Niro, Donald Sutherland, Dominique Sanda, Gerard Depardieu, Sterling Hayden). More ironically, though the film played in Europe in the polyglot original sound or in subtitles, it was for the English-speaking markets alone that Bertolucci troubled himself this past winter to come to New York to supervise a dubbing of the entire five-and-a-half-hour version.

Blaine Novak of Caribou Films, who has been in steady contact with Bertolucci in recent months trying to negotiate for rights if Paramount falters, says, "I positively think Bernardo made this film for America, even though it's 'about' Italy."

At Manhattan's Magno Sound Studios, Bertolucci, in a

marathon of directorial *sitzfleisch*, worked seven-day weeks on end for two months overseeing N.Y. dubbing directors Paulette Rubinstein and Lee Kresel, with companion Claire Peploe (a coscenarist on Antonioni's "Zabriskie Point") constantly at his side as liaison to idiomatic English. As the film's many scenes of peasants in the Emilia valley of northern Italy crossed the screen, one could spot the inimitably lush Bertolucci *camera-stylo*, in this case a kind of Millet or Corotlike agrarian splendor with a subtle undertone of that almost mannerist expressionism of "The Conformist" and "Last Tango."

And certainly this was an artist who wanted every detail his way. Scene on screen: a milling throng in a large plaza. A wizened, toothless hag of a peasant woman is shaking a man's lapels. The dubbing counterpart, an attractive 40-ish actress, waits as the shot is re-projected for the moment of precise lipsync, and then, shriveling her voice into mock toothlessness, squawks into the mike: "Why did these teeth drop out? The padrone's are still there, all shined up! He's able to munch with them all day long, nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah—" "Excuse me, excuse, it's not 'nyah.'" Bertolucci sternly interrupts, "You finish with 'ah.' There's an 'M' at the end. 'Nyam, nyam, nyam, nyam—,'" and the whole studio is suddenly a symphony of nonsense syllables, everyone loudly chewing and savoring his 'nyams' as if to be better able to articulate them in the next dubbing take. Bertolucci, embarrassed, steps aside to say to the reporter scribbling in the corner, "You think we're all crazy."

Robert De Niro is on hand to postsync some of his own lines that did not come out well in the live sound recorded on location. De Niro's pacing the floor like a caged animal. Now he's hunkering on top of Bertolucci's dubbing control panel. The two are in a blather of cross talk trying to get the inflection of a single word exactly right.

"Jackass," says De Niro, accentuating the first syllable.

"Jackass," corrects Bertolucci. "Jack-ass, jack-ass,



Director Bernardo Bertolucci

jack-ass," goes De Niro, grinning vigorously, "now I've got it," getting into the fever of the scene.

Later, in a break, Bernardo comments: "It's a terrible thing in Italy, there's no education in sound, there's only education, love for images. I've heard Fellini shoots his actors saying, '49th, 50th, 52nd,' numbers, and then dubs the real dialogue in later. The others don't because they know they won't use it later."

Why did he bother to come to New York when English dubbing is available in Rome? "I could choose here among a greater number of actors. For the two boys in the first act of the film, I heard auditions of 15 or 20 kids for each." (These boys aren't even major roles.)

An egomaniac, as Grimaldi has said? The post-"Tango" Bertolucci, now 37, is a soft-spoken, pleasant-looking man of round boyish face, narrow, intense brown eyes, slightly thinning brown hair and a faintly incipient middle-age paunch. He's surprisingly tall and perpetually attired in a pullover sweater that gives him a teddy-bear quality. He seems a cross between the neurasthenic aesthete and a lumberjack posing in a Skoal tobacco ad (he's in fact part Irish on his mother's side). A firm but thoughtfully not overbearing touch directing actors, disarmingly accessible and uninflated by celebrity, the man is nevertheless not without a certain pensive diffidence, an air of neurotic complication and enigma.

Though he gets frustrated with his English (it's actually quite good), the cerebral Bertolucci manages to turn a surprising number of mistily gnomic phrases. He talks of the dialectical tension between sight and sound, shot and theme.

The sexual innovator of "Tango" finds porno films "boring," but, he adds, "Deep Throat" is one of the few porno exploitation movies where the sexual position becomes such an obsession that it becomes . . . interesting in itself, like other obsessions."

And not merely mechanical? "But sex can be mechanical."

Has anyone else followed "Tango's" lead into thinking-man's erotica? "I saw 'L'Empire des Sens.' (Nagisa Oshima's "In the Realm of the Senses," the Franco-Japanese film with a graphic castration scene, banned from last year's New York Film Festival, currently playing in L.A.). I think it's a very serious film, too, a mysterious, ritual vision of sex. I haven't seen any other movie where the sex was the *optique* (sic) through which you were looking at life."

He says he doesn't like or go to see most Italian movies, hasn't seen a single Lina Wertmuller film: "Maybe she's terrific, I don't know. I know she's important in this country. I want to see it." Among American directors, Robert Altman's name brings a smiling nod; among critics, not surprisingly considering her impact on the "Tango" phenomenon, the New Yorker's Pauline Kael. "She's always liked and been important to any movie I made. But it was strange with 'Last Tango' because it was a completely spontaneous publicity. The people at United Artists told me that they never paid so little for publicity so big. If they had had to pay, it



Robert De Niro and Dominique Sanda in a scene from Bernardo Bertolucci's controversial film "1900."

Please Turn to Page 48

It's a Long, Long Wait for '1900'

Continued from Page 42

would have been an incredible amount of money."

But will it be as easy for "1900"? "There are a lot of important American actors. It must be released," he says with surprising cocksureness, as though it already had been released with no problems at all.

But there have been problems. Back in June, 1974, Paramount signed a deal with Grimaldi (who'd also produced "Tango") for North American rights to "1900," with a minimum guarantee of \$1.75 million, plus a share of gross receipts. The "1900" that world premiered at the May, 1976, Cannes Festival was 5½ hours long. Bertolucci cut it to a five hour-10 minute version, distributed by Fox and UA in Europe last fall.

Recoiling at the length, Paramount offered to rescind

the contract if Grimaldi could find another distributor to pick up the \$1.75 million tab. Fox offered to do so if given a four-hour version, but Bertolucci drew an aesthetic Maginot line at four hours 25 minutes.

Four days before completing this four-and-a-half hour cut in February, Bertolucci was sued by Grimaldi, and the Italian courts sequestered the remaining parts to be edited. Grimaldi then hired an American editor to cut the film to three-and-a-quarter hours and delivered this print to Paramount. Bertolucci promptly countersued Grimaldi, disowned the three-and-a-quarter hour version, claiming his "civil right of expression" had been violated. In a telegram, the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle rallied to Bertolucci's side. Grimaldi quickly issued a

counterstatement.

Then in April Paramount filed suit in federal court in New York against Grimaldi, attempting to rescind its \$1.75 million letter of credit. The rescission bid failed, but the suit continues.

The latest Italian ruling granting Bertolucci his four-and-a-half hour print back has enabled Caribou, the small U.S. distributor that has been wooing both Bertolucci and Grimaldi ever since Cannes last year, to screen it in English for the first time.

The film's extravagant length is the cross it bears; "Gone With the Wind" is still the exception," Bertolucci laments. Explains Paramount marketing vice president Gordon Weaver, "We knew from experience with 'The Godfather' that in theaters with no matinees, with a film of that length you end up with one showing a day, which is not economically viable." Grimaldi stated in his reply to the critics, "American distributors could not find exhibitors willing to show the film at the

Please Turn to Page 50

'1900' Will Do for an Encore

Continued from Page 48

four-and-a-half hour length, even if it were screened at two parts, as it was in Italy," he adds somewhat deceptively that only 50% of those who had seen Part One in Europe returned to see Part Two.

However, the two parts together were the highest grossers in history in Italy. And it was the director's specific intention to have Part Two open almost simultaneously with Part One, but in Paris, Fox didn't open Part Two until 17½ weeks later.

In Italy, Part One was closed by the courts—for pornography!—two weeks after it opened. Part Two then was immediately thrown into theaters. The courts rereleased Part One a few days later, and the two then played simultaneously. The episode was a nasty reprise of the "Tango" experience. "Tango" still can't be shown in Italy, and Bertolucci sees himself as the target of Italian censors' madonna-whore complex.

"It's being used as an instrument of repression," he says. "Why 'Last Tango' and not hundreds of other Italian porno movies—maybe because 'Last Tango' was going directly to something too true. I think the best censorship is freedom, because when a movie is bad, when a movie is vulgar, it kills itself alone."

The big hang-up of the current litigation is over how to interpret the contract between Grimaldi and Bertolucci in relation to that between Grimaldi and Paramount. According to Bertolucci's N.Y. attorney, Robert Levin, the former was the earlier of the two contracts and in it the director emphatically did not agree to make a three-and-a-quarter hour version.

But Grimaldi's N.Y. attorney, Ronald Taft, while conceding that the producer-director agreement is earlier, adds, "Bertolucci's agreement with Grimaldi provides that he would deliver a picture that complies with

whatever distribution agreement Grimaldi would later make," and thus Bertolucci would be legally bound to delivering a three-and-a-quarter hour version.

Grimaldi himself, who repeatedly refused to talk to this reporter, says in his press statement, "Before we began shooting '1900,' Bernardo Bertolucci was aware that the distribution agreement that my company had with Paramount for U.S. and Canada stipulated a running time not to exceed three-and-a-quarter hours."

And now Paramount, rumored to have disliked the film since Cannes, is trying to wriggle loose. Says Walter Josiah of its legal department, "We lost the letter of credit preliminaries, but we still have a claim against the producer for breach of contract because the three-and-a-quarter hour version is not a Bertolucci film."

Gordon Weaver adds, in exquisite double-talk, "We contracted for a three-and-a-quarter hour Bernardo Bertolucci film. *He* didn't edit it."

Does Paramount board chairman Barry Diller's re-

mark to Time magazine ("I don't like the five-hour version. Paramount will never distribute this film") mean Paramount is out of it? "It's fairly obvious, isn't it?" says Ronald Taft. "They *can't* be out of it, despite Diller," says Blaine Novak of Caribou, who would gladly take any length cut. "They own it."



Finally, is the film's frank Marxism the reason Paramount chickened out? "I've seen both the original five-hour version and the dubbed English three-and-a-quarter, and I say politics is not involved at all," says Weaver.

I had asked Bertolucci whether "1900" wasn't excessively political. "It's like a novel," he said, bristling slightly. "The model is a novel at the end of the last century, and in the novel you have human beings, love, passion. To say it's only a political movie is very simplistic and reductive."

Reminded of his one-time mentor Godard, now a jab-

bering Maoist, he went on. "I think that a political movie must be seen to have a political effect. The last Godard film I saw, 'Numero Deux,' was . . . it may have been beautiful and tragic, but it doesn't work in the political sense. I think to be really political a movie must be popular, must be seen. Otherwise, yes it's political, in abstraction, in theory."

For this intense artist, who by his own admission struck a Faustian bargain between idealism and the marketplace, the ultimate affront is clearly the masses being kept from his film.

But one final question. Did Bertolucci deliberately set about to provoke what has happened, hoping to squeeze through the loopholes his way, but ending up bollixed up in a web of his own contrivance—like the character Athos in his film "The Spider's Stratagem," who tries heroically to penetrate the past but ends up being rebuffed by it? Has life imitated art for Bernardo Bertolucci? ●

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