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# Urban Myths P. 117

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**A**claimed as something like a masterpiece when it opened here in 1957, Federico Fellini's Oscar-winning *Nights of Cabiria* has been so obscured—both by the director's subsequent movies and the partial eclipse of his once titanic reputation—that Rialto's impeccably restored re-release feels surprisingly fresh.

A new print of *8 1/2* is also scheduled for revival this summer, but the time scarcely seems ripe for a full-scale Fellini rehabilitation. After all, his favorite tropes (deserted piazzas, sprightly circus music, near-empty nightclubs with bored sophisticates watching hot voodoo) remain the stuff of Madonna videos, fashion shoots, and bank commercials. Still, given the allegorical backbeat in recent films as disparate as *Buffalo 66*, *Henry Fool*, and *He Got Game*, *Cabiria*'s stylized, performance-driven exercise in mystical humanism would wow them at Sundance—especially now that the film's hooker outfits, not to mention the mambo, are back in fashion.

I first encountered Fellini's schematic fable of an indomitable little streetwalker, played by his wife Giulietta Masina, in battered 16mm at a college film society screening and found its Disneyfied vision of the lower depths a bit old-fashioned—at least as compared to the aggressively contemporary *Fellini Satyricon*. Seen again in a pristine black-and-white print, *Cabiria* seems suggestively pre-"Fellini," less the premise for a Broadway musical than the missing link between Charlie Chaplin's richly emotional *City Lights*—Fellini's acknowledged model—and Jim Jarmusch's stringently controlled *Stranger Than Paradise*.

Coming off her world-famous performance as the sad clown in Fellini's international breakthrough, *La Strada*, Masina elaborated on the friendly little hooker briefly introduced in her husband's first solo feature, *The White Sheik*. The attempt to map her milieu would prove Fellini's last attempt at neo-neorealism. The filmmaker made much of researching the lives of Roman streetwalkers and even hired notorious young poet Pier Paolo Pasolini to slang up the dialogue. Cabiria, however, is less a character than a mythological construct—the innocent whore. What's amazing is how Masina, sexless yet adorable in her cartoon outfit (striped dress, ratty fur, bobby socks), makes this abstraction breathe.

A tiny, hot-tempered pixie with huge eyes and a sardonic smirk, her Cabiria is never required to turn a trick. Or rather, her trick has something to do with investing everything she does with childlike spontaneity—squabbling with the other hookers, telling off a passel of nuns, cutting loose on the dance floor, cavorting alone to the hurdy-gurdy Nino Rota soundtrack that

*Nights of Cabiria*  
Directed by Federico Fellini  
Written by Fellini, Tullio Pinelli,  
and Ennio Flaiano  
A Rialto Pictures release  
At the Lincoln Plaza

*Junk Food*  
Written and directed  
by Masashi Yamamoto  
At Film Forum  
Through July 7

BY J. HOBERMAN



*Nights of Cabiria*: the missing link between *City Lights* and *Stranger Than Paradise*

Cabiria is stashed in the bathroom, watching the couple's reconciliation through the keyhole.

The crucial moment is the star's refusal to respect Cabiria's refusal to take money—the episode is one more instance of her humanity denied. In a subsequent instance of disillusionment, she accompanies her cronies to a religious festival seeking a miracle cure for a pimp's crippled uncle. Cabiria's

ation, this painfully funny performance—in which Cabiria reveals the depths of her conventional, romantic yearnings—sets in motion the events which will bring about her downfall and beatification.

Showman that he was, Fellini more than once saved a movie with a boffo closer. *8 1/2*'s self-reflexive circus-ring finale has been stolen so often that the maestro might have made a small fortune leasing the rights to Woody Allen alone. The utter desolation with which *La Strada* ends nearly redeems the preceding hundred minutes of strained and sentimental whimsy. *Nights of Cabiria* has a Mack truck denouement that one sees coming miles away—since the picture's first scene, in fact—and a brief postscript which, again quoting from Chaplin, is nearly transcendent.

Whether our heroine ultimately achieves divine grace in this world or (more "realistically") imagines it among the angels in the next one—and even if *Cabiria*'s haunting final minutes are understood materially as the equivalent of Masina's curtain call for her brilliant, career performance—Fellini has orchestrated a passage that defies synopsis. Seeing is believing. Words cannot describe the emotions that flicker across Masina's face—so simple and mysterious. Watching it is like hearing the sound of a heart break.

apparently plays in her head.

*Pilgrim's Progress* in the guise of a one-woman variety show, *Cabiria* opens in long shot—our heroine frolicking with some guy on the outskirts of Rome until he grabs her pocketbook and pushes her into the river. The scene is played for uneasy comedy, but Cabiria's strident denial that she was robbed suggests suffering to come. The movie's most famous sequence is transposed from Chaplin's adventure with the drunken millionaire in *City Lights*. Cabiria is picked up by a morose movie star (Amedeo Nazzari) who has just had a public breakup with his luscious girlfriend, and is brought back to his palatial mansion—a Xanadu of exotic pets and delicacies. Masina's eyes couldn't possibly be any wider. She plays the scene with enough pratfalls and double takes to stock an episode of *I Love Lucy*, but the mode turns inexorably wistful when the star's girlfriend returns and the luckless

naive faith is such that she becomes upset when no one is transformed. But, despite the happily half-cracked priest who encourages Cabiria to seek God's grace, Fellini salvation is not to be found in the church—in a scene cut from the movie after its sensational Cannes debut, reportedly for its anticlerical implications, Cabiria encounters a selfless individual who devotes himself to bringing food and blankets to those who live in ditches just outside the city.

A final inversion of Catholic ritual has Cabiria wandering into a neighborhood vaudeville house, where, seeking some sort of communion, she is coerced up onstage to serve as a hypnotist's foil. Her trance takes her back to an idealized state of maidenhood. She imagines meeting her fiancé Oscar in a beautiful garden and dances with him to "The Merry Widow Waltz," a flowered garland on her head. More than just a public humili-