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A fantasia of a battle between the sexes

"CITY OF WOMEN." Directed by Federico Fellini, screenplay by Fellini and Bernardino Zapponi. Starring Marcello Mastroianni. In Italian with English subtitles. At the Ritz Three. Not rated.

BY ERNEST SCHIER
Bulletin Movie Critic

One man and hundreds of women. Is it a sublime dream or a nightmare? More the latter for Marcello Mastroianni, in "City of Women," as a middle-aged woman-chaser who chases one woman too many to find himself at the bewildering center of Federico Fellini's newest fantasmagoria.

The shock waves of the feminist movement have reached and touched Italy's best known living director. Always a man who has empathized strongly with women, while confessing his confusion about them in his films, Fellini has created a sexual fantasia to deal with his newest conflicts.

But "City of Women" does not stand alone. It is best viewed in context with some of the director's earlier films, including "La Dolce Vita" (about the breakdown of morality), "Juliet of the Spirits" (a female crisis) and, of course, "8½" (the male crisis).

There are elements of all three films in this elaborate, often imaginative and far too lengthy (2¼ hours) dream about a man who is amused, distraught and threatened by the New Woman.

Mastroianni is the same, suave fellow he was as the film director of "8½." — Fellini's own alter ego — now older but still game for the chase. He jumps off a train to follow a handsome woman (Bernice Stegers) he thinks has proffered an invitation and finds himself the only man (except for a few attendants) at



Gaumont/New Yorker Films Photo

Marcello Mastroianni stars in Federico Fellini's "City of Women."

a feminist convention.

The place is a riot of activity and argument. Mastroianni, thinking he has landed in heaven, instead finds himself assaulted by the changing perceptions of women. There are all manner of women present, offering in groups and as individuals, the case against male aggression, against slavery in marriages, for masturbation, for individual preference, for the sanctity of the womb, for lesbianism and, mostly, for change.

He is kidnaped and almost raped by a particularly loathesome scullery maid, harassed by doped-up teen-agers who behave as badly as their male counterparts and finds brief refuge in the besieged fortress of an insatiable Don Juan who is celebrating his 10,000th conquest. But even here there is no peace.

Exhausted and rattled by the experience, he is groped over by women Storm Troopers, jeered at by mobs of females and dressed down by his own embittered wife.

The spectacle palls. While Fellini has grown bolder (a closeup view of

female genitalia), there isn't much that is new in "City of Women" or dramatically interesting. When Mastroianni is led in his mind back to his boyhood experiences with sex, the film has flashes of honesty and validity. But for the better part of "City of Women," it is the director talking to himself, trying to sort out his own old ideas vs. the new demands and attitudes of women. He doesn't get very far in understanding either the women or his own libido.