



FILM: **THE GREAT BEAUTY**

FDG RATING: 2.95 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Paolo Sorrentino: *Director, Writer*
Toni Servillo: *Actor: Jep Gambardella*

DATE: June 14, 2015

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE GREAT BEAUTY**

The 2013 Oscar-winning best foreign language film, *The Great Beauty*, reached the heights of a great cinematic experience for some of our resident reviewers, and drowned in meaningless extravagant depravity and boredom for others. We had extremely opposite reactions just as the film confronted us with startling visual and conceptual contrasts. Even the poster for the film places Jep Gambardella in his flamboyant yellow “disco” jacket, seated suavely on a minimalist geometric marble bench, in front of the exquisitely chiseled 1st century classical sculpture of Oceanus.

The sweeping first scenes, show us the magnificence of Rome in all its glorious centuries old architecture, vistas, fountains and sculptures as we listen to a choral rendition of *I Lie* as it would be sung in one of Rome’s sacred cathedrals, elevating everything to a spiritual level.

But we also see an annoyed woman sitting beside a magnificent statue, smoking, reading the newspaper, oblivious to the “great beauty” next to her. A man in his undershirt washes himself in ancient fountain. Only a group of Japanese tourists, and especially one man, is overcome by what he sees as he tries to photograph the glorious view.

Turning 65, this is what Jeb is facing and reflecting on, in an even more exaggerated perspective. His lavish hedonistic, flamboyant lifestyle and similarly self indulgent entourage of “friends” makes us all sadly wonder if our generation and generations to follow will ever create anything worthwhile even though living in the midst of some of the greatest achievements of mankind.

Jeb wrote one successful novel, *The Human Apparatus*, and since then has seduced his way through the glitzy nightlife of Rome for decades, saying he never wrote another book because he was looking for the great beauty but he never found it. As a writer, he inhabits the persona of a detached observer and what we see along with him is a disturbing, surreal life style of excessive self indulgence. This is what turned off the half of our reviewers, who lost interest in the story, unable to feel sympathy for any of the characters. The rest of us, continued to be absorbed by Jeb’s quest, as he confronts the death of his early lost love (possibly the “great beauty” of his life), exposes the absurdity of religion through his encounters with an uninspiring, lazy cardinal more interested in his recipes than in providing spiritual guidance, and starts to question his purpose in life.

We appreciated tributes to Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, which has a dated but somewhat similar theme with Marcello Mastroianni living an unsatisfying high society life, and finding pleasure mingling with the lower class.

Our critics who like the more artsy cinematic style enjoyed the gorgeous panoramic scenes and visual treats such as the ceiling becoming the sea, and the flamingos on the balcony. Others recognized this film as an ambitious accomplishment with big important ideas, mesmerizing music, interesting characters, and found it very thought provoking. However, some of us justifiably found it tedious, and impossible to feel any connection with any of the characters. Even with Jeb’s strong performance, the film was too long and seemed disrespectful.

The ending is vague and lets us decide if Jeb is, in the end able to see and appreciate the beauty around him, sense a purpose in life and begin his 2nd novel. And then we wonder if he has what it takes to create something great or if it will be basically about nothing, which is exactly what some of our reviewers thought of this film.

(continued on page 2)

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the best, we had the widest disparate ratings in our film group history with one exuberant 6 (even though our scale ends at 5) which was eradicated by one vote of .5 since we insisted on a rating and in fairness to the 6, allowed a exception lower than 1. All together, the film garnered a struggling 2.95.

Film and discussion side notes:

Although the cardinal presented the vacuous hypocritical side of religion, the director was not completely degrading the Catholic faith. In contrast to the Cardinal, a wrinkled, shrunken, 104-year-old nun on her way to sainthood offered the most profound, sincere spirituality in her complete absolution of material possessions and mysteriously spoken seminal insights such as "Roots are important" referring both to her diet and also in the simplest of statements, to Rome's heritage.

The director also intended the film to be a commentary on the politics of the Berlusconi era that is riddled with scandal and reflected in the empty glitziness of contemporary Roman society. Berlusconi, the 50th Prime Minister of Italy, came to power in 1994 using a soccer chant "Let's Go Italy" as the name of his political party and selling Italians on a dream of prosperity. His reign was tainted by corruption trials and accusations that he used his political power to help his business interests. His last term was marred by sex scandals during which he was accused of partying with underage girls. On 1 August 2013, he was convicted of tax-fraud. When he left office, he and his ministers were heckled. It has been said that he has led to a degradation of Italian democracy. According to Sorrentino, "Berlusconi made a great contribution to this culture of nothing. He's an example of this attitude. There are all sorts of reports of Berlusconi being expected in Parliament to discuss important matters, and he kept everyone waiting because he was busy doing frivolous things. So Berlusconi has contributed greatly to this culture of distraction from important issues. He has promoted a culture of escapism."



.....

See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net

Film Discussion Group (FDG) organizer