

# TO ROME WITH LOVE

*A Sony Pictures Classics Presentation. Written and Directed by Woody Allen.*

**A film review by Franco P. Visser**

I still have a very vivid, though not too fond a memory of the first time that I ordained myself to go and watch a Woody Allen movie. I was on holiday with family in Kwazulu-Natal's northern Drakensberg, and for some peculiar reason one of Allen's films, *Celebrity*, was showing in a nearby town's independent cinema. I thought it a good outing and persuaded my aunt to accompany me to go and view it one evening. Words cannot begin to describe my, or shall I say our, experience. My aunt, bless her soul, who is used to Disney, Afrikaans movies and anything Kevin Costner, did not appreciate the film at all nor do I think she understood it. Not that I can claim to be the one who comprehended that particular piece of Allen's cinematography. For one, the film was in black and white, and it is a well-known fact in my family only films that portray Hitler or the Anglo-Boer War were in black and white – thus not a very positive association to start off with. The film contained flashy and noisy vignettes and it had a storyline that to this day I am challenged to figure out. Not as nearly enjoyable as this review's choice of film, *Celebrity* will go down in history as a major movie-outing flop! Ask my aunt what she remembers about the film, and she immediately starts using too many expletives, words that I just cannot quote here...

The film *To Rome with Love* was a perchance-choice while ambling around in the movie store one lazy Friday afternoon. Seeing a picture of Rome with its clearly recognisable skyline I picked the cover up immediately. Shall I just say that anything *Italiano* gets me in a state of immense bliss, and I think it was the cover of the film that sold it to my viewing pleasures immediately. At the time of me renting it, I did not know it was a Woody Allen film, and I must confess that if I knew that beforehand, I would probably not have rented it to begin with, what with the vivid memories of the *Celebrity* fiasco in mind. I am happy though that I did, because the film sure was an enjoyable and highly intelligent and enjoyable piece of filmmaking in addition to delivering spot-on social commentary by Allen. Like red wine, olives and blue cheese, Allen's films are not for everyone, and a taste for Woody Allen films takes some time to be acquired, if at all.

*To Rome with Love* follows four different stories each with its own subset of characters all playing out simultaneously in the 'Eternal City', Rome. The film is introduced by a traffic policeman, *il poliziotto del traffico*. The viewer is first taken to the story of an American tourist Hayley (played by Allison Pill) who meets and becomes engaged to an Italian lawyer, Michelangelo (played by Flavio Parenti). Hayley's parents, Jerry and Phyllis (played by Woody Allen and Judy Davis) travel to Rome to meet Michelangelo and his family pre their nuptials. Jerry is a has-been opera director with very strange ideas, not least the latest one that he develops after meeting Michelangelo's father Giancarlo (played by Fabio Armiliato) and hearing him sing in the shower. Giancarlo, a mortician by trade, has an amazing voice whilst in the shower, and he secretly dreams of singing the lead in *Il Pagliacci*. Jerry in turn dreams of making a return to the world of opera direction and Giancarlo's voice might just be the ticket for him. There is just one small problem – Giancarlo can only sing the way he does while taking a shower. After a disastrous shower-less audition at a studio in front of opera big wigs, Jerry persuades Giancarlo to perform the lead in *Il Pagliacci*, shower and all. Giancarlo, under the



direction of Jerry, features in the well-known opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo singing all his arias naked in a shower cubicle. His voice is admired by all, though the obvious avant-garde staging of *Pagliacci* does not go down well with the Italian *critici della lirica*. Jerry's wife is a *psichiatra* I must add, and she has her hands full with Jerry, his weird ideas and his non-stop talking and reasoning. Allen casting himself in the role of Jerry in my mind is a brilliant example of classic projection.

The second storyline followed by the film is that of two newlyweds, Antonio (played by Alessandro Tiberi) and Milly (played by Alessandra Mastronardi) who arrive in Rome to follow Antonio's dreams of getting a position in the family business run by his snobbish uncles and aunts. Milly gets lost while trying to get her hair done in time for meeting her husband's stuck-up family, while at the same time a local and rather

successful *prostituta* named Anna barges into the newlyweds' hotel room. Anna mistakes Antonio for her client, and in his state of semi-undress she insists on providing sex to him. As she pins him to the bed Antonio's snobbish uncles and aunts arrive and push their way through the half-open door. Antonio, being petrified of his family introduces Anna to the family as his new wife Milly, and the two of them set off with the family to various lunch-time meetings with important personages, most of whom know Anna and are good clients of hers. What happens to Milly whilst Antonio is experiencing the nightmare of his life, I will leave up to you the viewer to discover. Let's just say that Antonio and Milly do end up back together again and on their way back to their rustic hometown albeit with their sex lives newly invigorated...

The third storyline in *To Rome with Love* follows how the life of Leopoldo (played by the inimitable Roberto Benigni from the film *Life is Beautiful*) is changed overnight as one morning he awakes to find himself being a celebrity for no reason at all. He is stalked and followed by *paparazzo* cameras and television presenters, and the Italian public is even interested in whether he wears boxers or briefs. Leopoldo is promoted at work, gets to sleep with models and superstars and is treated like a VIP where ever he goes. The glamour is soon lost on him and his family and he years back to a time when he was just a normal individual with a normal family life. Until the camera men and television people spot a 'more interesting' person on the street one day and his celebrity status is lost in an instant. Leopoldo soon discovers that it was better to be a celebrity than a common man, or so the film wants one to believe.

The fourth story line in my mind is an actual over-kill, as between the showering opera star, Antonio and the prostitute, and Roberto Benigni, the film had more than enough to make it a success. The fourth plot revolves around a young American couple in Rome, Jack and Sally (played by Jesse Eisenberg and Greta Gerwig) and their individual struggles with life and love, in addition to Alec Baldwin appearing in Jack's life in what seems to be Jack's alter-ego named John.

*To Rome with Love* is a light hearted and pleasurable film to watch with several moments of sheer brilliance, though tinged with oddity that is masked by a good measure of hilarity. A worthwhile film to watch, and oh what I would have given to have my aunt join me for the viewing of the latest Woody Allen creation. Get yourself a copy and view it and remember to roam with love... Best wishes for a prosperous 2013!