

Not up to the task

Life is Beautiful (*La vita è bella*), directed by Roberto Benigni, screenplay by Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami

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Roberto Benigni is a prominent Italian comic performer and director. He has directed, among other films, *You Upset Me* (1983); *The Little Devil* (1988); *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), about a bus driver mistaken for a gangster, reportedly the most successful film in the history of the Italian cinema; and *The Monster* (1995), a comedy about a serial killer. To English-speaking audiences he is perhaps best known for his roles in Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law* (1986) and *Night on Earth* (1992), and Blake Edwards' *Son of the Pink Panther* (1993).

In *Life is Beautiful* Guido (Benigni) arrives in the Tuscan town of Arrezzo on the eve of World War II. He goes to work in a restaurant where his uncle is the headwaiter, but dreams of opening up his own bookstore. He keeps running into an attractive schoolteacher, Dora (Nicoletta Braschi, Benigni's wife), and eventually falls for her. Apparently in an effort to see her again, Guido pretends to be a school inspector and gives an impromptu speech on racial superiority before the assembled students and teachers, ending with a striptease. Meanwhile Dora is reluctantly seeing the civil servant--and fascist party member--whose signature Guido needs to make an application for his business. Naturally, this is the one man our hero has offended the most. Guido spoils the engagement party for Dora and her fiancé, at which he was assigned to wait on tables, by riding in on a horse and carrying her off.

Five years later the Germans have occupied Italy. Guido, who is part Jewish, and his son, Giosué, are sent to a concentration camp. His wife, who is not rounded up, insists on going too. In the camp, Guido tells his son that they are contestants in a game and that Giosué

will help the two of them accumulate points by following certain rules (hiding when the guards come around, never crying, never complaining about being hungry, etc.). When a brute of a guard, for example, asks the newly arrived prisoners if anyone speaks German, Guido, who doesn't speak the language, raises his hand. As the guard barks out the harsh camp regulations, Guido, imitating his tone of voice and gestures, announces the 'rules' of the game he's told his son they're playing. In this manner father and son survive the camp, until, as the war ends, Guido tries to find his wife in the chaos and is shot for attempting to escape.

Benigni has created a controversy by setting a comedy in this hellish environment. I don't know that such a thing is impermissible in principle. I don't agree with the one critic, for example, who described the effort as 'grotesque folly' because the Holocaust was 'an event that exists outside human meaning.' If that is so, it's no argument against Benigni. It's an argument against *any attempt*, artistic or otherwise, to grapple with the terrible events and simply leaves one intellectually at their mercy. *Schindler's List* at least demonstrated that an artistic accounting of the fate of the European Jews was possible.

That being said, to create a comic work of this character is a very difficult undertaking. In the face of such horror, a filmmaker, aside from artistic skill, would have to demonstrate remarkable moral qualities. He would need to exhibit almost superhuman selflessness and prove at every point that he was not exploiting the circumstances in any way in the interest of advancing his career or improving his self-opinion. But precisely these qualities would be likely to deter an

artist possessing them from taking on such a work.

As a comic genius and artist, and someone with a considerable degree of historical insight, Chaplin is perhaps the single filmmaker who comes to mind. In *The Great Dictator* (1940) and even in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), after all, he treated some of this. Ernst Lubitsch, in *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), made a remarkable comedy about a group of actors in occupied Warsaw making fools of the Gestapo. I doubt, however, that either Chaplin or Lubitsch would have conceived of setting a comedy inside a concentration camp.

In any event, one should ask the same questions about *Life is Beautiful* that one asks about any work of art: Is it serious? Is it beautiful? Does it deepen one's feelings for people? Does it deepen one's understanding of the world and oneself?

I think the film is essentially quite weak. Benigni is no doubt sincere in his hostility toward fascism and anti-Semitism (his own father suffered in a labor camp), but I didn't find the film affecting. And while it may not be offensive, it does tend to trivialize the experience. The gap between the reality of concentration camp life and its portrayal in the film is alarmingly large. Giosué, for example, despite conditions of near starvation, remains happy and healthy. And if the use of the camp is primarily metaphorical, why introduce it at all?

Benigni is a gifted comic performer, but no more than that. One can see his jokes from a long way off. He is too pleased with himself. The most distasteful aspect of the film, in fact, is the number of times the camera cuts to Dora-Nicoletta Braschi looking adoringly at Guido-Roberto Benigni. Why do we need to be reminded how adorable he is? To insist on as much attention as Benigni does a performer would need to be doing extraordinary work. When a Chaplin or a Keaton keeps the camera trained on himself it is not simply egoism--he is the most interesting thing to be seen and he knows it.

There is another disturbing element in the film. The fate of the other prisoners in the camp, including Guido's uncle and all the other children, who are eventually exterminated, seems to be of relatively little concern to the filmmaker. He concentrates solely on the successful effort to save Giosué. If Benigni were making a point about the horror of a situation in which saving one's own skin becomes the only guiding principle, that would be one thing. But that doesn't

seem to be his focus. Guido and Giosué take up the foreground almost exclusively, with all the other unfortunates simply forming an indistinct background. The spectator is apparently to consider this entirely natural and unsurprising.

It is also difficult to put from one's mind the unhappy thought that aside from his worthier aims, Benigni has made *Life is Beautiful* in part precisely to be thought audacious and provocative. 'A comedy about the Holocaust, who would dare?!' If this were a work to which Benigni had dedicated years of effort and for which he made sacrifices, a more difficult and compelling work, a work that showed signs, even as a comedy, of some sort of moral and intellectual struggle, such a thought would not occur. Instead it remains too much like a stand-up comedy routine against the background of the Holocaust.

Benigni borrows his title, somewhat complacently, it seems to me, from Trotsky in the latter's 'testament.' An opening gag draws its inspiration from *Modern Times* and the film is certainly intended to bring *The Great Dictator* to mind. This is heady stuff. Benigni is invoking significant figures and significant themes. Too bad he does little more than that.



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