

# Italian actress Sophia Loren returns to the screen in *The Life Ahead*

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Italian film actress Sophia Loren is a magnetic and effective presence in the new Netflix production, *The Life Ahead*. She plays Madame Rosa, an ex-prostitute and also a survivor of Auschwitz, who lovingly watches over the children of sex workers who have been left in her care.

Loren is joined by teenaged actor Ibrahima Gueye, as Momo, a 12-year-old Senegalese refugee. The 86-year-old film legend and the 14-year-old African newcomer make an effective pair, in a film directed by the actress's son, Edoardo Ponti.

Ponti is also the co-screenwriter, with Ugo Chiti, of this adaptation of Romain Gary's 1975 novel, *The Life Before Us*. An earlier version of this story appeared as *Madame Rosa*, starring Simone Signoret. That film, from Israeli director Moshe Mizrahi, won critical praise, along with the 1978 Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film. Signoret also won France's César Award for Best Actress for her performance.

The new adaptation, while still faithful to the novel, has a new script and differs somewhat from *Madame Rosa*. The scene has shifted from 1970s Paris to contemporary Bari, on Italy's Adriatic Coast. Rosa, nearly 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, has a weak heart. Although she remains active and strong-willed, she is also psychologically frail, at times haunted by her memories, and clearly nearing the end of her life.

Momo, Algerian in the earlier adaptation, is now Senegalese. Angry and lonely after losing his family, he is drifting into a life of petty crime. Fate brings him to Rosa after he steals her bag in a crowded market area. Soon afterwards, Rosa's own physician, a kindly Doctor Coen (Renato Carpentieri), who has been caring for the orphaned boy, brings him to Rosa and instructs him to apologize for the theft. The doctor also cajoles

Rosa, very much against her will, into agreeing to care for the difficult teenager for at least a two-month period.

Thus begins the story of Madame Rosa and Momo, and how their original antagonism gives way to closeness and to love. Rosa is often stern and at her wit's end with the boy, but she cannot disguise her growing affection.

Momo, meanwhile, begins to work for a drug dealer. At the same time, he bonds with Iosif, a Jewish child who is another of Rosa's remaining charges. Momo notices the concentration camp numbers on Rosa's arm, without understanding their significance. Rosa brings the boy to Arab shopkeeper Mr. Hamil (Babak Karimi), both to keep him occupied with various errands and to provide a steadying presence in his life. Another cast member is Lola, played by transgender actress Abril Zamora, originally the father, but now assuming the role of mother, of another child in Rosa's care.

The story weaves together the common travails of its two main characters, even though they are separated in age by about 70 years. Momo has dreams of a lioness who loves and comforts him. Rosa, sometimes in a kind of trance or dissociation from the world, or in a PTSD-like terror, escapes to her secret "Jewish refuge" in the basement, where she retreats from painful memories, and which Momo soon discovers.

Loren is of course at the center of *The Life Ahead*, and it has been made in part as a vehicle for the actress, who has appeared in a relatively small number of movies in recent decades. Her career began more than 65 years ago, when she was not yet 20 years old. Loren won the Academy Award for Best Actress at the age of 26, for her difficult role as the mother in Vittorio de Sica's *Two Women* (1961), the first major Academy

Award for a non-English speaking role.

She is also well known for the dozen or so films she made with fellow Italian performer Marcello Mastroianni over the course of four decades, including de Sica's *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), *Marriage Italian Style* (1964) and, in 1977, Ettore Scola's *A Special Day*, set in Rome in 1938, dealing with fascism and the Mussolini regime's persecution of homosexuals.

While *The Life Ahead* undoubtedly reflects a son's feelings for his mother, both Edoardo Ponti and his mother are clearly up to the task. *The Life Ahead* is a story worth telling once again, and Loren is fully in command. The fragility but also the generosity and even grandeur of her character are powerfully transmitted.

The cast is uniformly worthy, especially young Ibrahima Gueye. Rosa, nearing the end, fears the hospital, which she associates with memories of past terror. She appeals to Momo to help her avoid this, and his response effectively conveys how his earlier sullen anger has turned to affection and even to a growing maturity.

There is, not unexpectedly, a good deal of sentimentality in *The Life Ahead*. The implicit plea in the 1977 film for peace between Palestinians and Jews here takes a somewhat broader form in the theme of tolerance and understanding for the millions of migrants who have been uprooted by war, political upheaval, economic crisis and climate catastrophe in recent years. At one point Rosa and Momo are shown, wordlessly watching, as Italian police engage in an aggressive roundup of a group of immigrants.

The reappearance of the story of Madame Rosa recalls an important incident involving the first adaptation of the novel. At the same Academy Awards ceremony that saw the Best Foreign Picture go to *Madame Rosa*, Vanessa Redgrave won Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Julia* (Fred Zinnemann), the 1977 Holocaust period film also starring Jane Fonda and based on a memoir by Lillian Hellman. Redgrave, then a member of the Trotskyist movement, had faced a vicious campaign of slander in advance of the Oscars ceremony because of her support for the rights of the Palestinian people. When she won the award, she took the opportunity to denounce the "Zionist hoodlums" behind these attacks. Amidst the ensuing uproar,

complete with redoubled charges of anti-Semitism, *Madame Rosa's* director Moshe Mizrahi, whose film appealed for unity between Arab and Jew, was asked for his opinion about Redgrave's comments, and reportedly replied, "Basically she's right."

It will take more than love and a spirit of tolerance to defeat the dangers of nationalism, chauvinism and fascism that have led to Rosa's sadness and suffering as well as to the conditions facing Momo. Nevertheless, the theme of a common struggle, transcending religion, race or ethnicity, and the obvious care and talent that went into the cinematic treatment of this theme, make *The Life Ahead* well worth watching.



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