Moviegoing: Report from the Montreal World Film Festival

by James M. Wall in the October 5, 2004 issue

Veteran Italian director Ettore Scola begins his latest film, *Gente di Roma* (People of Rome), by following an older couple going through their morning routine—she preparing food, he dressing for work. Their apartment is small, so one camera covers their movements between rooms. The wife puts coffee on a counter, the husband sips it while she packs his lunch in brown paper.

It is still dark when the husband begins his long bus ride into the city. The camera lovingly examines the streets and neighborhoods which are slowly awakening in the dawn light, the people of Rome moving into a new day.

When the man arrives at his destination, he walks through a park and sits down on a bench. Soon he is joined by a companion who asks, “Have you told her yet?” He answers, “No, have you?” Both men have lost their jobs and do not know yet how they will live without the routine they relied on for so long.

Scola, who began his career as a writer for Italian film comedies, has, in his latter years (he is now 73), become more reflective, and in this film he is especially caring for the city of Rome and the people who live there. He has also retained some of his humor, viewing his subjects with a bemused respect.

Shot in semidocumentary style, *Gente di Roma* appears to move about randomly with no apparent narrative in mind. But it soon becomes clear that Scola is inviting the viewer to share moments of intimacy with modern-day Romans and their city. The film includes sequences on public buses, at one moment noticing a lonely rider trying to entice the female driver to dine with him when she gets off work. She ignores him. The man hastens to get off the bus.

The camera leaves him behind and moves into the kitchen of a fashionable restaurant, where a white waiter seems to be berating an African immigrant dishwasher. This seems an uncomfortable moment until the two men start arguing

over the merits of two local soccer teams. What has taken place is friendly banter, not an instance of racism.

The waiter then moves into the dining room and takes orders from a middle-aged man and his father. The father is grouchy and frightened because his son has placed him in a retirement home, and they have come to this public place to discuss the inevitable. In a subsequent scene a psychologist interviews subjects to determine the degree of their failed memories. One woman can't remember "cat-bread-house." A few minutes later she protests, "I should have studied more." The film ends with two different men sitting down on yet another bench.

Gente di Roma was one of more than 200 films showing at this year's Montreal World Film Festival, an annual event where one may see the work of directors like Scola, a highly regarded figure in Italy whose work is rarely seen in the U.S. Scola shared Montreal's "veterans' podium" this year with that giant of Swedish existential angst, Ingmar Bergman, who at 86 is still grappling with life's most tortured questions, not the least of which are the existence of God and the impossibility of human love.

With *Saraband*, which he insists is his final film—as he did with a previous one—Bergman has written and directed an update of his 1973 picture, *Scenes from a Marriage*, which featured Erland Josephson, now 81, and Liv Ullman, 65. It is a stunning achievement. Bergman wrote the script and persuaded Josephson and Ullman to resume their original roles as the conflicted couple, Marianne and Johan, 30 years later.

Saraband's producer introduced the film to a press screening and explained that Bergman, who had said he'd give up directing after 1982's *Fanny and Alexander*, decided to write a sequel to *Scenes*. The only catch: Bergman wanted to direct the picture himself.

The film's material is quintessential Bergman and requires his directorial touch. Marianne, long divorced from Johan, visits him in his isolated home in the woods, drawn there by some mysterious need. They reconnect as ex-partners might do, recalling the good and the bad moments of their marriage.

But Marianne has another role in this picture—she plays backup to the picture's real star, Julia Dufvenius, who plays Karin, an 18-year-old cellist locked in a dependent relationship with her father, her music teacher. The film's title, *Saraband*, refers to a

type of musical composition of the baroque period. The film opens and closes with a Bach saraband.

The father, Henrik, who is Johan's son, is drawing Karin into an incestuous relationship after the death of his wife. Reflecting Bergman's still apparently unresolved conflict with his own tyrannical Lutheran pastor father, the film's darkness comes from the intense hatred the two men feel for one another when the grandfather conspires to send the girl away to music school.

Marianne becomes the bearer of grace for the young girl, who is in desperate need of counsel. Bergman has described his film in musical terms: "*Saraband* can be seen as a concerto grosso, a concert for full orchestra—only, here, with four soloists. The drama consists of ten dialogues that follow a particular pattern, and it's an attempt at an analysis of a difficult situation." Grace comes, to recall the title of one of Bergman's earlier films, after we see "through a glass darkly." It is good to have the old master back at work again, analyzing "difficult situations."

Another festival film that examines a difficult situation in an engrossing manner is *The Syrian Bride*, which won the ecumenical jury's prize for best film (as well as three other prizes). Israeli director Eran Riklis, 50, considers the frustrations and humiliations faced by a Druze family living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. (The Druze, who come from a religious tradition which dates back to 1017, were originally Shi'is. They broke with this tradition, but still consider themselves Muslims, a belief not shared by mainstream Muslims. Druze are an accepted part of Israeli culture, however, even serving in the Israeli army, an assignment not available to Israeli Arabs.)

Palestinian actress Clara Khoury plays Mona, the "Syrian bride." Her role as a would-be bride hampered by the Israeli occupation is similar to one she played in *Rana's Wedding*, a 2002 film directed by Palestinian Hany Abu-Assad. In *The Syrian Bride* there is tension between the Druze in the Golan Heights and the Israelis, who consider the Golan to be Israeli territory. (Residents of several Druze villages remained behind after the Golan Heights were occupied in 1967, when most Syrians living there fled to Syria.)

This tension provides Israeli director Eran Riklis with a key plot device. Dressed in her bridal gown, Mona travels with her family to the border that separates the occupied Golan from Syria. There they are to meet the groom she has never met for

a marriage arranged by their families.

At the border an Israeli official has a new stamp for Mona's travel document that will allow her to leave the Golan *never to return*, at least not until the ongoing war between Israel and Syria ends. Unfortunately, the stamp says she is leaving Israel—and the Syrian border guard considers the Golan to be Syrian, not Israeli. He refuses to acknowledge her papers. A UN official is present to help, but it's Mona's action that brings the film to its conclusion.

The film's great strength lies in its examination of the conflicts between Mona's dictatorial father and the family's adult sons and daughters who do not follow the old ways. A moment of reconciliation between the father and one of the sons may be inevitable, but the scene has such sensitive and unexpected understatement that it offers a moment of grace in the middle of Mona's border frustrations.

In *Rana's Wedding*, the Israeli occupying forces remained in the background, overseers of a system of military checkpoints that frustrates Rana's efforts to marry the man she loves before her father ships her off to an arranged marriage. In *The Syrian Bride*, Israeli officials are part of the story. Stern but understanding, they make compromises in an effort to be sympathetic to the frustrated bride.

The Syrian Bride was well received earlier at the Jerusalem (Israel) Film Festival. *Rana's Wedding* has been enormously successful before Palestinian audiences in the U.S.; it was a featured attraction at the 2003 Chicago Palestine Film Festival. Given the different perspectives of the two directors, I doubt that either film would be well received by audiences on opposing sides of those wretched borders, which is unfortunate, because both are excellent.