



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

VINCERE

2009 Italy 119 mins

Director: Marco Bellinocchio

Starring: Filippo Timi, Giovanna Mezzogiorno

Marco Bellocchio's latest resurrection of a great historical crime centers on a figure who, by nature, refuses to be handled intimately.

Played with snarling intensity by Filippo Timi, Benito Mussolini is introduced to us as he challenges God to strike him dead within five minutes; after the five minutes have passed, he pronounces that there is no God, his booming voice given as proof. It is 1907 and Bellocchio wastes no time situating us in the time period. Projecting "GUERRA!" over newsreels and still photos of marches and demonstrations, the director is even more fleet of foot in showing how Il Duce went from an anti-war Socialist to fiery Interventionist. Arising naked from his lover's bed, Mussolini's strut to a balcony is intercut with footage of the black flags unfurled after Archduke Ferdinand's assassination.

But *Vincere* ends up not being so much about the inner-life of history's most preposterous dictator -- Timi is on screen for less than 30 minutes of the two-hour run time -- and more about that woman who lies waiting for him in bed. Ida Dalser funded, loved, and believed in Mussolini and eventually bore him a son; her constant assertions that she was the dictator's first wife are carefully kept unclear in Bellocchio's film. Mussolini, noticing her inability to be completely dominated, thanked the mother of his child by having her first banished to her sister's house and later to a sanitarium, where she died in 1937.

Dalser is portrayed by the great Giovanna Mezzogiorno, and as Il Duce's betrayed lover she conveys astonishing courage and a borderline-demented loyalty; she invokes no one more than the Virgin Mary in her endless suffering and love for her son. Not so holy is the smoldering passion that ignites her relationship with Mussolini, who begins as staunchly secular but is later baptized as a Roman

Catholic by 1927. Timi's forceful eyes look above Dalser while they make love, commanding the crowd he has yet to amass. With his unique sense of humor, Bellocchio suggests that Il Duce wanted nothing more than to give an orgasm to the masses and be given total, unquestioned control over them in return.

When Mezzogiorno lifts her dress to him at a public event, it is a willful act of defiance and yet a huge turn-on for her dark lover; an act Mussolini's public partner Rachele (Michaela Cescon) would never dare perpetrate. As punishment, Dalser is banished to two separate psychiatric hospitals where she will suffer incalculably, wanting only to see her son and speak to his father.

Timi appears again in the film's final quarter as Dalser's son, Benito Albino, and two of his three scenes involve him doing an impression of his father. Indeed, Il Duce's presence is felt in pictures, sculptures, Albino's recreations, and newsreels throughout the film. And yet we are not to know him, kept at the same distance that Dalser is. The cinema is also used as a mirror: Five separate scenes take place in front of movie screens, and each one offers a reflection of the film's roaring emotional undercurrents. With his deft cinematic grammar, Bellocchio has condemned Italy's most reckless monster in his own densely produced way. It may seem like beating a dead horse, but it only goes to elevate and save a woman, both extraordinary in her bravery and conflicted in her obsession, from historical obscurity.

Chris Cabin, Filmcritic.com



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