

12 January 2015

## La grande bellezza (The Great Beauty) (15)

Director: **Paolo Sorrentino**

Italy/France 2013 In Italian with English subtitles

Running time: 142 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Toni Servillo** (Jep Gambardella), **Carlo Verdone** (Romano), **Sabrina Ferilli** (Ramona).

SCRIPT: **Paolo Sorrentino, Umberto Contarello**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Luca Bigazzi**. EDITING: **Cristiano Travaglioli**. MUSIC: **Lele Marchitelli**.

It begins with an extraordinary scene set in the early morning, high above the capital at a monumental fountain (times of day – and night – seem to have a definite importance in this piece, which like *Fellini Roma* is a paean to the city of Rome). Some Chinese tourists are shepherded off a bus and given the tour guide treatment, while one of them wanders off to take a picture of the city spread out before him in the clear sunlight – and succumbs to a heart attack. Meanwhile a small choir of nuns sings from the monument's gallery overlooking the *piazza*, as if commenting, chorus-like, on the scene. The camera all the while glides in tracks and crane shots, as if a disembodied spirit (a trick Fellini often used to play). This obscure prologue introduces the themes of Rome and mortality, and establishes the baroque aesthetic of the rest of the film.

We next segue to one of those frivolous and dissipated party scenes so much a feature of Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), and Sorrentino's *Il divo* (2008). Through it struts our hero, Jep Gambardella, intoxicated with the fuss being made of him, and apparently unperturbed by his age amongst all this young fry (it is his 65th birthday). Gradually we become aware that he is a fêted writer, on the strength of one novel he wrote years ago, and that he now writes for a reasonably highbrow artistic journal.

Jep lives alone, tended by his combative Portuguese housekeeper, and spends the long night hours attending dinner parties and strolling through Rome's deserted streets or along the Tiber's quays. Then, one day, the bereavement of an old friend causes him to remember his youthful affair with the deceased, who later left him and married this man, though Jep now learns she never loved him. The rest of the film is a coming to terms with this loss, a loss which is in fact decades old, symbolised by the diary which the husband has not bothered to keep, and by a search for a

beauty comparable with the one he knew; not, one senses, the girl herself, but the moment, a moment we don't see until the end.

For a time it seems as though our bored guide might have found a new muse in Ramona, the daughter of an old acquaintance, who has taken to stripping at her father's Girl Bar well into her forties. But although there appears to be a tacit understanding between older man and younger woman, or because of it, no physical act takes place, and, in another of the film's obscure turns, she disappears, apparently taken away by the illness for which she has been vainly seeking a cure.

Through all of this we accompany Tony Servillo's Jep, charmed by the charisma of the man so clearly adored by most of those around him, and whose high-handed words and deeds are invariably inspired by good intentions. His fruitless search through his acquaintances and surroundings, and in his memories, for some new subject worth writing about inevitably recalls the Guido of Fellini's *Eight and a Half*, as the settings and characters do *La dolce vita* (a grotesque wreckage of a beauty here, a dried-up pseudo-socialist feminist there; a giant giraffe, a Mother Teresa figure); in Servillo, Sorrentino has certainly found his Mastroianni, for this is their third collaboration. There is no space to evoke more of the film's potent visual moments, its literate script, and its dense texture of musical quotations. For any who have looked back wistfully at their vanished youth, it is truly a thing of beauty.

**David Clare**