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La grande bellezza (The Great Beauty) 2013

141 mins Italy

Director: Paolo Sorrentino

Screenplay: Umberto Contarello and Paolo Sorrentino

Cinematographer: Luca Bigazzi

Cast: Toni Servillo – Jep Gambardella

Carlo Verdone - Romano

Sabrina Ferilli - Ramona

Carlo Buccirosso – Lello Cava



The first time you see Jep Gambardella, the Roman sensualist magnificently, poetically adrift in *The Great Beauty*, he has a cigarette clenched in the center of his big, bared, ochre-stained teeth. People are surging all around him, their bodies pulsating to music that has transformed a multitude into an organism that beats like a heart. As he sways amid this delirium, Jep smiles with welcoming arms and lidded eyes, an attitude that brings to mind one of those marble saints scattered around Rome forever locked in rapture. And then Jep joins the dance, surrendering to a throng that, in absorbing him, turns an orgiastic reverie into something like a religious communion.

A deliriously alive movie, *The Great Beauty* is the story of a man, a city, a country and a cinema, though not necessarily in that order. It was directed by Paolo Sorrentino, whose last big-screen adventure was *This Must Be the Place*, an English-language story about a goth musician (Sean Penn, Kabukied up to look like Robert Smith from the Cure) who, after the death of his father, a Holocaust survivor, comes out of self-imposed exile to become a Nazi hunter. After a nearly stillborn start, it soars during an explicitly European road trip across America that exults in the rough beauty of the country's Western landscapes and in that American gift (and curse) for shaking off the past

With *The Great Beauty*, Mr. Sorrentino has not only returned to Italy, he has also taken on its past and how it weighs on the present and future. Set in Rome, that immortal city of ancients and tourists, the movie follows Jep, a sybarite played with a veneer of wit and fathomless soul by the Italian actor Toni Servillo, who dances into the story while celebrating his 65th birthday. Four decades earlier, Jep's only novel, "The Human Apparatus," was hailed as a masterpiece, but that was many years and glasses of Campari ago. These days, he works (if barely) as a journalist and lives in a terraced apartment overlooking the Colosseum. He was, he says during his party, "destined for sensibility."

So, too, was Mr. Sorrentino, who in *The Great Beauty* has created a wildly inventive and sometimes thrilling ode to sensibility and to some of its linguistic cousins, like sensation, sensitivity and sentiment. Structured as a series of loosely connected episodes, the peripatetic story comes into focus soon after Jep's birthday, when he learns that his first love, an enigmatic blonde who smiles at him in his memories of a seaside idyll, has died. Her husband breaks the bad news to Jep, and together they weep, an emotional torrent which — in an elegiac illustration of Mr. Sorrentino's associative method

— initially evokes Jep’s memories of the dead woman, whom he watches while swimming, and then comes to a watery culmination with the men embracing in a hard rain.

The lover’s death (which is symbolically yoked to 1968 and its revolutionary promise) hovers over the story and over Jep as he wanders Rome, dines with friends and meditates on his life in voice-overs that sound like confessions. Elegantly attired, his gray hair swept back and curling at his neck, a handkerchief fountaining out of his jacket pocket, Jep is the very picture of the flâneur, the 19th-century urban stroller and spectator immortalized by Charles Baudelaire and in whom, Walter Benjamin wrote, “the joy of watching is triumphant.” What the flâneur watches is modern life, and other people. “The crowd is the veil,” Benjamin wrote, “through which the familiar city beckons, to the flâneur as phantasmagoria — now a landscape, now a room.”

Benjamin wondered why the flâneur, born in Paris, did not spring from the glorious archaeological sprawl that is Rome. “But perhaps in Rome even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well-paved.” He suggested that for a flâneur, Rome’s “great reminiscences, the historical frissons” are so much junk better left to the tourists. The tourist, that familiar figure of contempt, plays a crucial role in *The Great Beauty*, which opens with a prologue set in the Janiculum, a hill west of the Tiber. There, scattered amid busts of heroes of the Risorgimento, the 19th-century movement for Italian unification, a smattering of Italians mill about while a group of Japanese tourists take in the sights — a view, a city, a people, a history — that, Mr. Sorrentino suggests, the natives no longer necessarily see.

To an extent, *The Great Beauty* about Jep’s wakening to a world that, as he strolls around Rome — his ears tuned in to children’s laughter, his eyes fixed on a courtyard scene — has become charming atmospheric noise. As he walks along the Tiber early one morning, he explains in voice-over that when he arrived in Rome at 26, he decided that he wanted to become “the king of the high life.” But he didn’t just want to go to parties, he continues, he wanted to have “the power to make them a failure.” It’s a little comment, seemingly trivial and yet also revealing because as Jep began partying in Rome in the 1970s, the country experienced what became known as the Years of Lead, a time of political violence and the Red Brigades. (Meanwhile, the world mourned the deaths of those neorealist fathers Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti and Roberto Rossellini.)

Jep’s awakening has its moments of violence and melancholy. Death hangs over *The Great Beauty*, from the statue of Garibaldi inscribed with the words “Roma o Morte” (“Rome or Death”) to the funeral where Jep tearfully hoists a coffin. Mostly, though, there is beauty reborn as Mr. Sorrentino’s cameras fly through Rome, knocking the dust off the city’s monuments and Jep alike. At one point, during one of his nightly salons, Jep casually tells his friends that “the best people in Rome are the tourists.” It sounds like a glib aside. Yet as he emerges from the long wandering that has defined him — a drift that Mr. Sorrentino suggests that has been shared by one and all — Jep opens up to awe, affirming what all visitors know: we are only passing through, so we had better make the most of our visit.

Manohla Dargis (2013)

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