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Happy as Lazzaro (12a)

Dir: Alice Rohrwacher

Starring: Adriano Tardiolo, Agnese Graziani, Luca Chikovani

Sponsor: Richard and Linda Hall

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Synopsis: Italy, present day. A group of peasants live on a rural Italian estate, harvesting tobacco as indentured servants to the Marchesa de Luna. One of them, Lazzaro, makes friends with Tancredi, son of the Marchesa. Tancredi persuades Lazzaro to help fake his kidnapping; later, when the authorities intervene, they discover the illegal exploitation of the workforce by the Marchesa. The workers are forcibly moved to the city, where some of them meet Tancredi, who is living in near poverty after the family's estate was seized. He invites them to lunch but when they turn up, they are told it's a mistake and are turned away by Tancredi's wife. Lazzaro goes to a bank, to insist Tancredi's estate is restored. He produces a slingshot, given to him by Tancredi years before. The bank customers beat him, leaving him seriously hurt. A wolf appears: when Lazzaro is presumed dead, it runs off into the city.

"Lazzaro, are you staring into the void?" That question, asked in the dark and never answered, opens Alice Rohrwacher's superlative film, establishing the blank profundity of the face that will guide this moving, magical-realist fable of injustice even before it is seen. Lazzaro is an innocent, a seer, a saint. He encounters the world with a seeming incomprehension of self-interest and a ceaseless generosity, throwing into relief the violence of a social order that changes superficially overtime without ever relinquishing the exploitation of the poor that resides at its call. In the wide, green eyes of actor Adriano Tardiolo, Rohrwacher finds a gaze that sheds all cynicism, a guileless anchor for her devastating exploration of the false promise of progress and the elusive possibility of collective happiness.

As the film begins, Lazzaro is one of a group of sharecroppers working on the isolated Inviolata estate in a condition of permanent indebtedness to the Marchesa de Luna. *Happy as Lazzaro* thus appears to plunge the viewer into a historical drama of indentured servitude, set in an indeterminate past, perhaps the 1950s. However when the aristocrats appear, technological and sartorial signifiers suggest a later period. Rohrwacher seems to resolve this initial confusion when *carabinieri* arrive on the scene and the truth of Inviolata is revealed: it is a case of modern slavery facilitated by floods in 1977 that made the estate inaccessible.

In fact, the scrambling of time that marks the film's first half is only amplified in its second, which finds the peasants now living precariously in the city near rubbish strewn train tracks, cooking up petty scams to get by. How much time has passed? The aristocratic son Tancredi appears at Inviolata as a bratty teenager and in the city as a ponytail fifty-something, a rate of ageing roughly twice that of the present Antonia. Time is out of joint. For Lazzaro even less time has elapsed. After falling to his death, just as the authorities were discovering the Marchesa's crimes, he is resurrected, true to

his namesake, wearing the same tattered clothes out of the past and into our present.

Happy as Lazzaro possesses a keen attention to concrete physicality. Abetted by the use of 16mm the film dwells on the textures of lush tobacco leaves and creamy pastries, crumbling frescoes and chalky rock, or the cheap synthetic glint of crisp packets and AstroTurf. The intimate relation to the land at Inviolata, rendered in dusty ochres, give way to the nauseating artificiality of the city, full of steely grays and electric light. The material conditions of existence are everywhere foregrounded. Yet alongside the realist commitment is a conflicting impulse, generating the energetic tension that animates this singular film. Rohrwacher's embrace of temporal elasticity creates an aura of fantastical confusion, one that she mines as a site of allegorical richness.

Happy as Lazzaro uses its bifurcated form to stage a confrontation between feudalism and modern capitalism, finding fundamental - and fundamentally injurious - similarities between the two. Historical change is often construed as a forward march of social amelioration, a convenient fiction that risks serving as an alibi for the catastrophe of the present. Rohrwacher refuses the facile idea that things inevitable get better with time, instead tracing patterns of persistence and mutation across these two economic systems. With the end of sharecropping, the workers gain a kind of freedom, but it is the freedom of competing each morning to make the lowest bid for a day's wages picking olives. The unflagging deference of the poor to the rich doesn't end, nor does the workers tendency to act against their own class interests, but the closeness to nature wanes. *Happy as Lazzaro* complicates a conventional belief in progress while avoiding a simple romanticisation of servitude as pastoral idyll. This allegory might risk being hollowly diagrammatic were it not rendered with such care for the specific details of life and character – for the joy of a meal eaten together, the exertions of work, the entitlements of the rich or the manipulations of those (wrongly) presumed to be friends.

Near the end of the film, the former peasants enter a cathedral to listen to the music, only to be ushered out. Even if Rohrwacher references the religious figure of Lazarus, her humanism is unambiguously secular; the Church, too, has abandoned the poor. When Lazzaro exits the cathedral, the organ ceases to function. Wind blows in and the music leaves with him, following the group as they push their broken truck down the road. This miraculous testimony to Lazzaro's munificence only intensifies as the film reaches its tragic and exhilarating climax. In a masterful, enchanted ending, *Happy as Lazzaro* tempers any pessimism with a wild,

undying hope for another way of being in the world, and strikes a final blow against the presumptions of linear time. Perhaps it is only when greed and self-interest reign that Lazzaro appears a holy fool; perhaps another time will come when we will all be as happy

Credits

Lazzaro	Adriano Tardiolo
Young Antonia	Agnese Graziani
Adult Antonia	Alba Rohrwacher
Young Tancredi	Luca Chikovani
Adult Tancredi	Tommaso Ragno
Ultimo	Sergi López
Nicola	Natalino Balasso
Carletto	Carlo Tarmati
Suora	Pasqualina Scuncia
Marchesa Alfonsina de Luna	Nicoletta Braschi
Director	Alice Rohrwacher
Screenplay	Alice Rohrwacher
Director of Photography	Hélène Louvart
Editor	Nelly Quettier
Art Director	Emita Frigato
Music	Karol Mossakowski
Sound Recordist	Christophe Giovannoni
Costume	Loredana Buscemi
	Italy/Switzerland/France/ Germany 2018 127 mins

Another View

There is magic in Lazzaro, the precious looking farmhand on a tobacco estate far removed from Italian society. He is the focus of Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro*. He is willing to do anything asked of him – make coffee, carry heavy bales of hay – without question. His family of docile farmhands also work endlessly on an estate for no pay and are told they are always in debt.

In the midst of celebrations, he agrees to go outside to make sure no chickens have escaped and, in doing so, bumps into a groundskeeper. To the question of whether he is willing to take over the man's shift to watch out for wolves, Lazzaro says agreeably and with a look of mild cheer, "Sure!" He says yes to every request that is made of him. But look at his face: a cherubic outline and big angelic eyes that betray only a wish to do good.

Actor Adriano Tardiolo's moonlit hazel peepers are reminiscent of those large lanterns of sight that lit up the face of Giulietta Masina in Federico Fellini's *The Nights of Cabiria*, and an incandescent expression – is it sadness? – that recalls Buster Keaton. His moppet hair falls just barely over his eyes like a ragamuffin, but a glow filters past the unkempt strands.

Paired with Rohrwacher's direction, Tardiolo's Lazzaro is an example of the creation of a legendary look. He is unreadable, though it's less important to articulate exactly what he symbolises than it is to consume the tidal wave of emotion you get from gazing upon him.

And yet, Tancredi (Luca Chikovani), the Marquis and the son of the 'Queen of Cigarettes', understands this language. As much as the film is about the exploitation of labour across time and place, and the cruel reality of economic inequity, Rohrwacher keys into a curious, enchanting, heartbreaking dynamic that exists between the handsome, bad boy blond, Tancredi and the comparably tattered Lazzaro.

At the mere suggestion, on Tancredi's part, that the two could be half-brothers, Lazzaro finds an anchor in his wayward life. It appears that, even though he is happy to do any task asked of him, that a more tangible connection to articulate solace and/or the dynamics of power that exist on the tobacco farm exists in the form of Tancredi.

The relationships in the film are largely antagonistic, or unsteady in their balance of power. The dynamic between Lazzaro and Tancredi is an excellent and uneasy interrogation of the notion of how much someone with class power and privilege really cares for another who is devoid of those things.

What happens when there is such disparity between two people who care for one another, and what are the political implications of one person caring for another? There is something magnetic and mercurial between Lazzaro and Tancredi, and Chikovani's model good looks transmit a melancholy air almost as powerful as Tardiolo's.

The innuendo and oblique suggestiveness of Lazzaro and Tancredi's dynamic feel intentional, as textural and detailed as the landscapes that the two walk across in their time together. It makes for a fitting, haunting, burning testament to queerness and its surreal and material relationship to class and labour.

Kyle Turner: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday March 13th, 7.30pm In Between (Israel/France 2016. Cert 15)

Culture wars are a phenomenon of our time, amply illustrated by this coming of age drama about 3 young Arab women with different backgrounds and attitudes sharing a flat in Tel Aviv, a liberal city with many attractions for people their age. As they seek to live their lives on their own terms, they encounter difficulties and indeed opposition from family and friends. This distinctive film has received both plaudits and criticism - including a *fatwa* for its Palestinian director - for its portrayal of young, modern Arab women facing up to the challenges posed by not complying with a mainstream social agenda.