

What It Means to Be Human

An Interview with Alice Rohrwacher

by Maria Garcia



Photo © by Robin Holland

Italian filmmaker Alice Rohrwacher's *Lazzaro Felice* (Happy as Lazzaro) is about the young, eponymous sharecropper (Adriano Tardiolo) whose pleasant demeanor and physical strength make him indispensable to his fellow workers. While these qualities alone set Lazzaro apart, he is also a simpleton. He first appears in a pose of unnatural stillness, backgrounded by the burnished colors of the tobacco plantation of *Inviolata*. Someone calls out, "Lazzaro, are you staring into the void?" The shot recalls images from the lives of saints, ears cocked to a God only they can hear. Afterward, the scene shifts to the toil of dozens of sharecroppers in the field, enveloped by large leaf blades. A visit from the plantation overseer adds a disquieting note, but that feeling is initially dispelled by the sheer sensual beauty of the film.

In the evening, the farmworkers gather around their dimly lit table to share a meal. A light bulb flickers and they are plunged into darkness. Jolted from this timeless tale, and into the twentieth century (no cell phones are in evidence), the enslavement of Lazzaro and the other sharecroppers by the feudal overseer becomes apparent, especially after the arrival of the landowner, Marchesa Alfonsina del Luna (Nicoletta Braschi). In her lavender silk dress and a white, wide-brimmed hat, she disrupts the natural hues and symmetry of the place. Taking up residence in her hilltop mansion, the marchesa schools her son Tancredi (Luca Chikovani) to the fact that the peasants expect subjugation; she also reads the sanguinary tales of Catholic martyrs to her in-house staff. In her recounting, they are stories about the consequences of acting against worldly authority.

If the marchesa is the antipode to Lazzaro, they each emerge from an historical memory, rooted in Europe, of gentry and serf. They are also reminiscent of the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*, Lazzaro as Pulcinella and the marchesa as Pantalone, representing the immutable aspects of human nature in an interplay that is fated for deception and exploitation. In the first half of the film, Tancredi befriends Lazzaro by claiming that since his father was an adulterer, they are likely half-brothers; Lazzaro, who has no family, is enchanted with Tancredi and invites him to live in his hillside cave. Sheep regularly sweep through Lazzaro's home, animals that in Roman Catholic iconography are a reference to Christ, as shepherd and sacrificial lamb. In light of Lazzaro's misplaced empathy for the marchesa's heir, who is faking his own kidnapping, the sheep prefigure Tancredi's complicity in Lazzaro's demise.

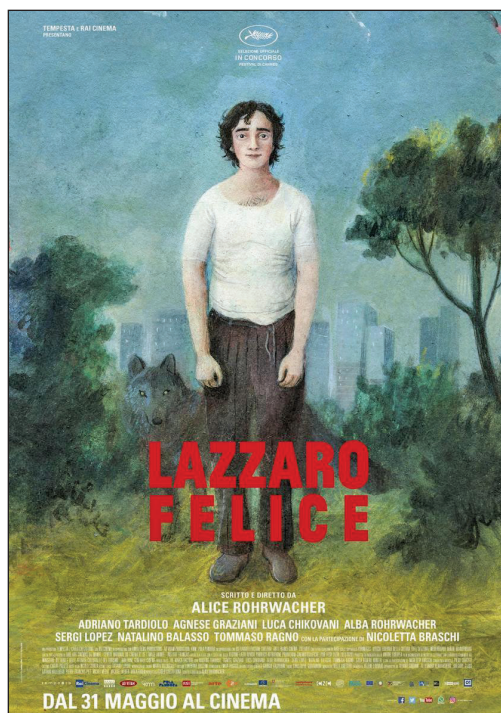
A magical-realist fable with numerous shifts and surprises, *Happy as Lazzaro* shows its director using the form of a fairy tale to explore the light and dark sides of being human.

Tancredi professes to abhor his mother's views, and reports her to the authorities—after he fails to extort money from her. Lazzaro dies, the plantation is raided, and the peasants are displaced to the city. In voice-over, a sharecropper recounts a folk tale about a wolf hunted by villagers; he always escapes his pursuers, and one day, as he prepares to eat a man, the wolf discovers the rare "smell of a good man." An equivocal figure, and a totem animal for Italians, it is a wolf that discovers Lazzaro's dead body and, in the second half of the film, warns the reborn Lazzaro of danger. A figure of fable, the wolf's presence places Lazzaro's story into the realm of primordial belief so that his luminosity in the film, both in his visage and the way he is lit, rather than evoking the nimbuses of Roman Catholic saints, makes him an ancient symbol of consciousness.

As both the potential devourer and the initiating figure in Lazzaro's perpetual death and rebirth, the wolf remains inimical—and Lazzaro's resurrections, vain expectations. After the fall of *Inviolata*, Lazzaro reappears in the film's "present," twenty years later. He wanders the now ruined mansion, looking up at the painted ceiling that is a map of *Inviolata*. It is devoid of people and, indeed, Lazzaro may be attempting to recall his previous life as a sharecropper. Remembering his past incarnations, Lazzaro might perceive his victimization and understand the patterns of disenfranchisement he witnesses. Only his early death allows him to remain inviolate. Eventually reunited with the former tobacco pickers, Lazzaro wanders the streets of the city with them. One night, they hear music from a nearby church and shuffle into the building, but are rudely evicted. The music follows them all the way home. Like Lazzaro, it is ephemeral, of the moment, and as evanescent as grace.

Rohrwacher's virtuoso resolution of the film's diverse visual landscape that, for instance, draws from fifteenth-century Italian art, Italian neorealism, and social realism, and the imbricating of narrative and thematic threads from hagiography and fable, conjures the all-embracing and naive quality of her protagonist's gaze. The film's orchestral score, which grows from a sublime Romantic-era piano theme (think Chopin or Liszt), also belongs to Lazzaro. In the restraint and deftness of Hélène Louvart's handheld camera (the film is shot in 16mm), Rohrwacher finds a documentary counterpoint to Lazzaro's point of view, especially in the final, devastating denouement.

In *Cineaste's* interview with Alice Rohrwacher, during the New York Film Festival in October, she said she could point to no directorial influences for *Lazzaro Felice*, but shades of Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951) float through the movie.—**Maria Garcia**



Cineaste: What was your original inspiration for making *Lazzaro Felice*?

Alice Rohrwacher: The inspiration always came from very far away. It was not a flash, but rather something rolling, or growing like a plant. At one point, it appeared, but then there was a very long process. In fact, I wrote this film very quickly here in New York, but for many, many years I was thinking about the character, how to construct this movie, and about how to tell this tragic story in a humorous way.

It is a pessimistic story and one that is somehow ridiculous. When I was a child, I lived in a rented house in the countryside. It had been abandoned. Everywhere there were things of the previous owners, of previous lives. I wondered: why did these people leave? I think I also wondered why my family wanted to live in an abandoned house! This movie is more about why this house, the mansion, is abandoned—and about what happened there.

Cineaste: *Lazzaro* is the Italian name for the Biblical figure, Lazarus, and your character, at one point, rises from the dead.

Rohrwacher: Yes, and fifteen years ago, it was a common given name.

Cineaste: *Lazzaro* represents an ancient, shared belief that predates religion.

Rohrwacher: Yes, that's right. It is the religion of humanity, not of different religions or ethnicities. Of course, there are references to a particular religion in the movie, to Roman Catholicism. For instance, the marchesa teaches the lives of the saints. I did not intend to celebrate that in the movie; the stories are used to convey an oppressive process. I think in the movie there is also another religion where a saint cannot perform a miracle. This religion is simply a way to be.

Cineaste: *Lazzaro* is happy when others are happy. I feel you are celebrating a presence that is evanescent.

Rohrwacher: Yes, something that keeps reappearing, and is always the same. It is incredible and intact. It is something that we experience when we are very little, maybe in the first moments of our lives or when we are children. It is when we have no expectations or we don't know what is bad or good. We just look. This is something we share and that makes us compassionate. I don't think we have to be like Lazzaro, but we have to remember Lazzaro. We have to recognize Lazzaro. We have to feel for Lazzaro, not in the sense of being him, but in the sense of remembering what he represents.

Cineaste: Was there ever a real story like that of the marchesa and her family in recent times?

Rohrwacher: There was one, but there are millions of them in the world, people with power and privilege who use that to keep others in ignorance, in a kind of cage. This cage does not exist physically, of course. No one in the movie is in chains or bleeding. For me, it is worse than the cage we can see. The peasants had so much work to do to survive that they never had time to think about pleasure or their relationships or how to improve themselves—especially the women.

Cineaste: *Lazzaro Felice* reminded me of Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), and maybe *Lazzaro* has a bit of *Totò* in him.

Rohrwacher: It is one of my favorite movies! In that film the poor discover petroleum. They find something from the future. De Sica's film is a fairy tale, and in many ways, it is optimistic. The leader tries



Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo) is the simple-minded, good-hearted, and almost saintlike protagonist of Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro*.

to do good, and he is a kind person. It was beautiful to think of this movie while I was in Milan in the winter. I think the crew felt like the poor did in *Miracle in Milan*, not because of Lazzaro but because of the weather. Sometimes, when the sun appeared, it was like that beam of light in De Sica—all the poor would run under the sunbeams. We thought of doing that.

Cineaste: When you were writing, were you thinking of this film?

Rohrwacher: No, not so much. When I write, I don't think

about other movies, but good movies are part of your memories and dreams. As Godard said, movies make memories—the memories of humanity. If a movie works on you, it becomes your history and, somehow, when you write, your way of thinking is mixed in with these references.

Cineaste: But I feel that this is the most Italian film you have ever made. There are so many references to Italian cinema and to Italian art.

Rohrwacher: Our eyes are always looking for similarities. When you are in love, this happens. Sometimes, you are walking on the street and you see some person, and you remember someone else. It is a mystery, no? You don't know why but you are always looking for a moment when everything was together, when life was clear. It's like Proust and the madeleine. I am not lying when I say there are no directorial references, but maybe I share a memory with another director. As for the paintings, yes, I was looking at Giotto. There is a lot of Piero della Francesca, too.

Cineaste: And *Lazzaro* looks like an angel in a Botticelli painting.

Rohrwacher: Yes, I didn't think of that. *Lazzaro Felice* is a movie where there is only the reality. But sometimes the reality is unbelievable.

Cineaste: There is a certain amount of dissonance in the spectacular landscapes in the film and in the sublime cinematography, as opposed to what you suggest is the widespread misery and disenfranchisement of the "have nots." Even the synchronous movement of the peasants when they work is pleasing to the eye.

Rohrwacher: The light of history shines on the poor. In the film, when the peasants are discovered and they have to cross the river, their terrible condition is apparent, and then their misery is forgotten. Somehow we pass from the Middle Ages to a second kind of Middle Ages. The peasants don't know they are allowed to complain about their condition. The only one that does is Tancredi. Lazzaro tries to save Tancredi because he is the only one who complains. This is the great deception of the story. The person who has everything complains, but the ones who don't have anything do not complain.

Cineaste: You mean that Lazzaro is moved by Tancredi because he can articulate his suffering?

Rohrwacher: Yes. Then when he loses everything, Lazzaro is lost. He sees Tancredi as a victim. I think the world is divided between people who cannot allow themselves to express their rage because they can't organize it in their minds. They have too much to do and get depressed.

Cineaste: This is opposed to Tancredi who has the leisure to do so, and the leisure to dream.

Rohrwacher: Yes, and that's why Lazzaro responds to him and goes to the bank to defend him.

Cineaste: The scene at the bank is very disturbing.

Rohrwacher: I feel that it is happening all over the world, that when we don't know something or someone, we immediately see danger.

Cineaste: You cut quickly between close-ups of Lazzaro's hands, or parts of other people's bodies, building that tension. The editing is almost Bressonian.

Rohrwacher: Thank you. It was intentional.

Cineaste: You directly refer to the plight of immigrants in the second part of the film, in the scene when a group of foreign workers attend an auction. It is the marchesa's husband who holds that auction. Were you thinking of Italy's recent changes to its immigration policy?

Rohrwacher: No, I was filming before the election. I find that sometimes movies are prescient. I remember when Nanni Moretti's film *We Have a Pope* screened at Cannes in 2011. Do you remember that the bishops in that film play soccer to take their minds off things? Afterward, Rome won the soccer championship. If you make a prophecy in a movie, it sometimes comes true. To answer your question, I am not specifically speaking about Italy. This is happening everywhere. Some of us say, "Life is better now." In reality, we have substituted one group of slaves for another. That's all. We have not really changed the global situation. Those who manage or are in charge are also always the same. I think this movie is a fairy tale because it is really about this incredible soul that is Lazzaro. He is not good or bad. He looks at others like a beautiful possibility. The movie stays with Lazzaro—by that I mean the story is his and it is his point of view, the way he sees, but I wanted to say that I am pessimistic about the course of history.

Cineaste: His "seeing" is preconscious.

Rohrwacher: Yes, that's right.

Cineaste: Is Lazzaro somewhat like *Chance in Being There* (1979)? He believes in all he sees on TV, although "belief" is not quite the right word. Usually these characters are corruptible, but Lazzaro is not.

Rohrwacher: Yes, that's it. He is a person that never loses himself whatever he confronts. He will always be as he is.

Cineaste: This is a political film couched in a fable and, like many Italian fables, it has a wolf.

Rohrwacher: Of course!

Cineaste: I'm not sure American audiences will understand the wolf as Italians see that animal. It is elemental.

Rohrwacher: Yes, there are many wolves in our legends, beginning with Rome, but let me put it this way—I think what we don't understand always stays with us. It is like an enigma. There are things that touch me and I don't know why, so I keep thinking about them. I think the most difficult thing about the movie is that you must have innocent eyes. Maybe it is simpler for an American to have this than a European.

Cineaste: Why?

Rohrwacher: Sometimes I feel that in American movies, or in the Americans I meet, there is less stratification. The eyes in Italian culture are stratified. You Americans see more directly and are open to many possibilities. I'm not sure—perhaps it is my imagination.

Cineaste: We are a mix of cultures, and also not as fixed as the cultures of older nations.

Rohrwacher: It is unique, yes, and in Italy there is less diversity. I don't know what Americans will think about the movie, but I hope they will not think too much. Just take the movie as a guest in the home and live with these people for a little while.

Cineaste: And is this wolf the Italian wolf, the indigenous species?



The Marchesa (Nicoletta Braschi) with her wayward son Tancredi (Luca Chikovani).

Rohrwacher: [Laughs] Oh, no, he's not *lupo Italiano*. He's a European wolf from a French mountain—and in the movie, it was his first time in a bank! The wolf is something we are all afraid of, and I also wanted to go back to a time when the wolf was in the forest. You knew where they were then, and you knew how to defend against them, and also another time when wolves were everywhere, but you don't know any longer where to find them.


Cineaste: When people are leaving the theater, do you want them to be talking about xenophobia or about what it means to be human?

Rohrwacher: What it means to be human—always. If you talk about what it means to be human, you are thinking about others, and the Other.

Cineaste: I thought of my nonna when I watched this movie. When I was a teenager, she and I were out walking, and we saw this brown dog with a curly tail. I said, "I am somehow always attracted to these dogs with curly tails, nonna," and she replied, "Yes, of course, because our first dog, Brownie, had a curly tail, and so he is beautiful to you." In that moment, when I first saw Brownie, he was "Dog," and I loved him. That is what Lazzaro has; it is the way he sees all of the time, isn't it?

Rohrwacher: That is a beautiful story—and, yes, it explains how Lazzaro sees and what he will always be. ■

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