If all this were nothing but a joke

LINDA HOLT

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL
Various Cinemas

Whose idea of a good night out is a Holocaust movie? The first Hollywood blockbuster on the subject, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), prompted the American critic J. Hoberman to ask, "Is it possible to make a feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience of the 20th century?" Such questions have become even sharper with the release of *Life Is Beautiful*. In many ways a vehicle for the celebrated Italian comic Roberto Benigni, its star, director and co-writer, it has been accused of reducing the Holocaust to a comedy, a joke, or even a laugh. Categorical rejection has been the response of many film critics and intellectuals, while plaudits have come from Holocaust survivors, Jewish groups and film-festival juries from Cannes to Jerusalem. As the first foreign film in thirty years to receive an Oscar nomination for best overall picture, its popular success, however problematic, seems assured.

The dismissal of "Shoah-business" testifies to the curious snobbery which mass-market Holocaust movies engender. In part, it relies on the notion that films are, purely and simply, entertainment, not art; these misgivings do not arise as readily about other art forms which address the Holocaust (or about those who consume them) – or with films about other tragedies or historical atrocities. For the Holocaust is, culturally at least, *sui generis*: the grimmest of historical facts, it is treated as a quasi-religious mystery inspiring awe and reverence. Two articles of faith support its special status. First, the Holocaust defies (adequate) representation, so that a *Bilderverbot* applies. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), an art-house documentary con-

By contrast, *Life Is Beautiful* is an old-fashioned, even innocent piece of work. As an artistic response to the Holocaust, it is also audacious, transgressive and necessary. At the very start, a voice-over declares that it is "Like a fable. There is sorrow, but it is also full of joy and wonder . . . a simple story but not easy to tell." Benigni's film is adamantly a work of imagination. This not only sets it apart from nearly all recent film-making and writing about the Holocaust, but exposes it to the charge that it is avoiding or even denying history. Despite its historical backdrop, its characters and plot are historically neither true nor possible. The effect of the Final Solution was, admittedly, both later and less drastic in Italy than elsewhere (deportations only began after Germany occupied Italy in September 1943, and killed about 8,000 of the 45–50,000 Italian Jews). Nevertheless Guido, Benigni's hero, displays such compulsive anarchism and comic irreverence that no totalitarian regime would have tolerated him for more than five minutes. Nor do the records support the film's central story, in which Guido successfully hides his five-year-old son in a death camp.

Imagination is also what animates Guido, driving his tricks and pranks, allowing him to demonstrate the absurdity of Fascism and, ultimately, enabling him to make-believe to his son that life in the camp is one great fun-filled game. More radically, the film constantly invokes the imagination as its own *modus operandi*. This means more than the simple eschewal of naturalism and realism signalled by the opening voice-over, added (apparently, at the behest of Miramax) to forestall misunderstanding. Secondary meanings of the Italian word for fable (*favola*) include "fairy story" and "tall story", as well as a closer connection with the "fabulous" than survives in English. Its beguiling first half, a comic idyll in which Guido woos Dora, establishes the film's style – manic, opulent, theatrical. It mixes traditions: from comic operetta, *commedia dell'arte* and film. A theatre scene excerpts the famous Barcarolle *belle nuit* from the Jewish composer Offenbach's *opéra fantastique Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, underlining the parallels between Guido's yearning and Hoffmann's. It also provides the film's theme tune, which plays whenever Guido is pulling off a trick, as if to celebrate the magic of art and love, of impossibility and hope. Guido's jestering gesturing and his linguistic jabberwockying are drawn from *commedia dell'arte*, not Chaplin, let alone Norman Wisdom, who derive from an alien music-hall tradition. It is Benigni the director, rather than the actor, who pays homage to the anti-fascist slapstick of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). Guido shares the identification number 0737 with Chaplin's Jewish barber, whom he also copies in his use of the camp tannoy to broadcast a message to his beloved.

Poetic tradition is present, too; Guido's uncle reads Petrarch, whose name graces the school where Dora teaches, while her name echoes that of Petrarch's beloved. Indeed, the consummation of Guido and Dora's relationship is suggested by traditional poetic symbols – he picks a lock and then follows her into a garden room profuse with extravagant blooms. An identical frame immediately follows, in which a small boy tumbles out of the garden room: their son, Giosué. Such narrative jumps may be inimical to Hollywood realism, but, like other credibility gaps in the film's

continues

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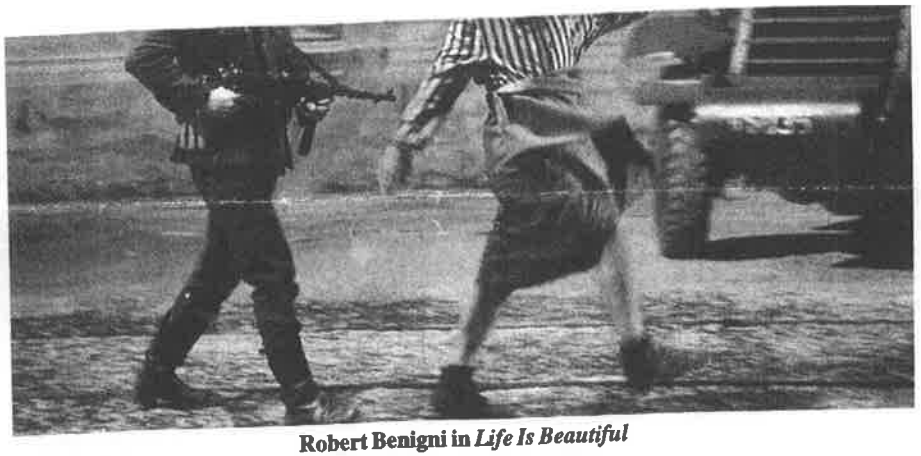
historical facts, it is treated as a quasi-religious mystery inspiring awe and reverence. Two articles of faith support its special status. First, the Holocaust defies (adequate) representation, so that a *Bilderverbot* applies. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), an art-house documentary consisting of eyewitness accounts, is held to be exemplary, while *Schindler's List* violated this taboo, so trivializing and sensationalizing its subject. Second is that something – enlightenment, the autonomy of art, history, faith, morality – ended with the Holocaust. Both these doctrines rest, of course, on the myth of Holocaust exceptionalism. And both preclude an aesthetic response – other than, perhaps, a postmodernist one.



Robert Benigni in *Life Is Beautiful*

Richard Bean

TOAST

Upstairs at the Ambassadors

Bread is the first processed food of Judaeo-Christian myth. After snacking on unauthorized fruit, Adam and Eve are banned from the good life, and informed that they are going to have to work for a living: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." The symbolism is potent. In the modern day, bread is money; you have to work to eat. The end of prelapsarian, fructivorous bliss equates conveniently with the birth of capitalism. Bread is the stuff of life, but also a doughy reminder of its dull materiality; it is miraculous – "this is my body" – and mundanely proletarian, as in Juvenal's sneering *panem et circenses*. It is packed with meaning as well as questionable additives.

While Richard Bean does not seem overly exercised by bread's basket of symbolic resonances, there is something mythic about his crisp, energetic new comedy, *Toast*. Set in 1975 (sideburns, flares, cod war), it follows the staff of a Hull bread-plant through one momentous nightshift. Behind the rank canteen in which the seven men spend a surprising amount of their time, a massive oven rumbles invisibly, a savage god demanding endless propitiation. When the oven jams, the possible consequences – closure, redundancy – are no less elementally catastrophic than a crop failure. So they sort the problem out themselves, swathed in sacking and tea towels ("Bugger me, it's Lawrence of Arabia") against the oven's fierce heat.

Bean himself worked somewhere similar during the 1970s, and his writing has the affection and sharpness of first-hand observation, not only in the characters' peculiar professional vocabulary ("proving", "tinning up", "spare wank") but also their warm, salty banter. He resists the fashionable tendency to pathologize the working-class male. His characters are flawed but have dignity; for the most part, they care about and talk truthfully to one another, and their gruffly tender horseplay and hands of cards are the opposite of Mamet-style war games. It is almost as if the low-status, casualized, domestically orientated business of breadmaking (no less than the blurring of gender roles through the 70s) has "feminized" them.

The cast includes Mark Williams from television's *The Fast Show* and the sublime Sam Kelly, but everyone is excellent. Director Richard Wilson orchestrates the action at a vigorous pace which communicates the necessary urgency when things start to heat up, and suits the Feydeauish aspects of the play (a continuous line-dance of overlapping comings and goings), but perhaps fails to express the deep monotony of factory work, for all its camaraderie and intrigue. Indeed, one nice Aristotelian flourish – a wall clock which keeps real time over the course of the first act, then speeds spotlit through six hours at the start of the second – makes one wonder what such a hyperactive crew can have got up to during those six hours. Especially since it then takes just forty-five more minutes to fix the oven and get on with the shift.

Toast is something of a genre piece, even a period piece. The gritty-but-witty industrial ensemble drama may have peaked under Margaret Thatcher (when there was something to be really cross about), but its roots are in the social realism of the 1960s and 70s. *Toast* is easier on the eye than many of its predecessors, and certainly less overtly political. Colin the shop steward, for example, seems drawn from the more conservative Carry On / Boulting Brothers / *Are You Being Served?* tradition. Even so, there is next to no chance of a modest, unstylish humane piece like Bean's getting on television these days.

KEITH MILLER

traditional poetic symbols – he picks a rock and then follows her into a garden room profuse with extravagant blooms. An identical frame immediately follows, in which a small boy tumbles out of the garden room: their son, Giosué. Such narrative jumps may be inimical to Hollywood realism, but, like other credibility gaps in the film's first half – cartoon-like, Guido's constant careering off in brakeless cars or on out-of-control bicycles never encompasses the possibility of injury – they celebrate the power of a child's world ruled by make-believe, dreamlike logic and wondrous serendipity. Most important of all, this functions not only as a force for love – it wins him Dora – but as a moral instrument.

As in Shakespearean comedies (and tragedies), there is a constant play with the distinction between appearance and reality. The Italian *Bürger* are ever ready to confuse them; local dignitaries mistake Guido for the King of Italy, and his manic arm-waving for the Fascist salute, when he is in fact warning them about his car being out of control. Such confusion turns out to be central to the psychology of power in fascism. Early on, Guido charms a young girl he encounters by pretending he's a prince who's going to invent a land and call it "Addis Ababa". The allusion, of course, is to Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia; later in the film, a giant "Ethiopian" cake borne by black bearers aggrandizes the engagement banquet of the town's leading Fascist.

Childish fantasies of omnipotence carried into adulthood result in evil, not innocence. Much fun is had with the ludicrous appurtenances of political power, the result of fascism's blindness to its own absurdity (not for nothing did the playwright Vaclav Havel redesign official uniforms to be as absurd as possible when he became the Czech President). Functionaries tied up in Fascist ribbon resemble babies in nappies, nowhere more so than when Guido imitates one such visitor to Dora's school, giving a performance, in full Jewish comic mode, of Aryan superiority, to the delight of his schoolchild audience. The point is reinforced when, instead of answering Guido's question about his political views, a local shopkeeper turns to his squabbling schoolboy sons, Benito and Adolphe. Similar is Guido's riff on

"No dogs or Jews" to Giosué; in their shop, he tells his son, they will put up a sign "No spiders or Visigoths".

The film has been criticized for the radical discontinuity between its first and second half. Certainly the first half works within a comic mode, but while Guido's fairy-tale courtship culminates in marriage, comedy's traditional end, the film's story goes on. Guido continues to oppose the Nazi will to power with his Schopenhauerian will to imagination, and his motivation is still love, but his resistance, despite its comic strategies, is now a matter of life and death. The film is indubitably tragic: Guido, its hero and centre, is killed a few hours before the camp is liberated. His death is all the more shocking for its casual treatment – off-screen, marked only by a brief burst of machine-gun fire. It has been prefigured by the gassing of Guido's ageing uncle with similarly little ado. The first half established him as the embodiment of human dignity, his reprimands to Guido – "nothing is more necessary than the unnecessary" and "you're serving, not a servant" – also representing correctives to fascist thinking and behaviour. All we see of his death is how, while undressing for "a shower", he gallantly helps a German female guard who stumbles in front of him. The subtitles miss the moral double-entendre of his question to her, which in Italian means both "Have you hurt yourself?" and "Have you done yourself evil?"

The uncle's counterpart, Dr Lessing, a "most cultured" German physician whom Guido waits on in the first half, also reappears as the camp's rather sinister doctor. His obsession with riddles, the basis of his previous friendship with Guido, refracts the play on appearance and reality with unwitting political overtones ("The bigger it is, the less you see it." Answer: "Obscurity." "If you say the word, it's not there any more." Answer: "Silence"). But in the context of the death camp, Lessing's harmless fun and charming innocence become morally repugnant. Guido thinks Lessing wants to help him when in fact Lessing is desperate for Guido's help with another riddle. Beyond the ironic allusion to the German Enlightenment playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose great plea for tolerance *Nathan der Weise* turns not on a riddle but a Boccaccian parable, lurks the castrated figure of another German doctor whose obsession with science led to a pact with the devil.

Much of the criticism of *Life Is Beautiful* for the unreality of its second half misses the point. The extermination camp looks like a cut-price, cardboard Colditz. The costumes, striped uniforms with yellow stars or red triangles, may be meticulous in their historical accuracy, but bear so few traces of their wearers' suffering and degradation that they seem like clowns' outfits. The lighting and camerawork suggest a degree of abstraction reminiscent of children's theatre, as with the depiction of the locomotive. These are deliberate devices for juxtaposing the make-believe game which Guido is creating for Giosué with the ultimately unrepresentable brutality and horror of the death camps. The guiding thought comes from Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, "What if all this were nothing but a joke? This cannot be true . . . ."

This juxtaposition relies on the audience's prior awareness of the Holocaust. But then the film necessarily courts the risk that this consciousness may be inadequate, and itself becomes liable to collapse the differences between appearance and reality in the direction of childish games. For example, the scene when Guido translates the rules of camp life, as delivered by a German guard, into the rules of the game for Giosué, has been lauded for its comedy. But the German guard is much less the cartoon buffoon barking out absurd orders in a ridiculously incomprehensible language, and the scene itself much more terrifying, if one understands what he is actually saying – Guido does not, and, without subtitles, the audience cannot unless it is German-speaking. Indeed, the extent of Guido's knowledge about the camp remains problematic – when he encourages Giosué to take "a shower", it seems as if Guido himself is unaware of its true function. Moreover, he clowns about even in Giosué's absence during well-nigh impossible physical labour in the camp's foundry, as if the game has taken over the film. A crucial scene in which Guido is supposed to realize the full horror of the Holocaust has him experiencing a nightmare vision of a foggy wall of skeletal corpses. It resembles a piece of painted theatre scenery, and although Benigni was doubtless right to avoid the kitsch of more realistic representations, he does not altogether avoid a sense of bathos, or hollowness. A kinder reading could argue that the film contains its own critique of Guido's (and by extension, its own and our) failure fully to confront reality.

Benigni has claimed that one inspiration for his film was his father, who would tell his children "funny stories" about his experiences in an Italian labour camp. *Life Is Beautiful* is a fable about the necessity of maintaining and protecting innocence. It sets the survival of Giosué Orefice (the family name means "goldsmith" or "jeweller") against the Nazi dream of total Judaeocide, self-sacrificing paternal love against all-out cynicism. It also reminds us how narrative art can transcend what Lawrence Langer has called literalist and exemplarist responses to the Holocaust.

Miracles of loveliness

ANDREW PORTER

Frederick Delius

Delius's six operas, composed between 1890 and 1913, are strange, personal, beautiful works in which disdain for convention yields at times to disconcertingly clumsy attempts to observe it. In 1894, he wrote, "I want to tread in Wagner's footsteps . . . . For me dramatic art is almost taking the place of religion." He had completed *Irmelin* and was busy with *The Magic Fountain*. *Koanga*, *A Village Romeo and Juliet* and the verismo essay *Margot-*

the words matter less than his music.

The Magic Fountain was planned as the first panel of a triptych featuring Indians, Negroes and gypsies; *Koanga* became the second panel, and there are vagabonds in *A Village Romeo*. In rising to a long note. Music from *Margot-la-Rouge* would be reworked forty years later as *Idyll*. *The Magic Fountain* shares some beautiful themes with the *Florida Suite* and with *Sea Drift*.

In 1916, the composer presciently declared that "realism on the stage is nonsense, and all the scenery necessary is an impressionistic painted curtain at the back with the fewest accessories possible". In that spirit, Ashley Martin-Davis designed and Paul Pyant lit Glasgow's *Magic*