

Life Is Beautiful, 1999

Rated PG-13. Running Time: 1 hour 56 min.

Our content rating: Violence 4; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 0

"Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

1 Corinthians 13:8 & 13

Psalms 22; Matthew 5: 43-48

It has been said that a great artist is willing to take great risks in their work. If so, then we must include Roberto Benigni among them.

Critics and the general public were understandably skeptical when they heard that one of Italy's top comedians was making a film about the Holocaust. It seemed unimaginable to link laughter with mass murder on such a huge scale that the mind cannot fathom it. Even the great Charles Chaplin, an inspiration for Mr. Benigni, stated after the end of World War Two, when the horrific facts of the Holocaust had been brought to light, that had he known the full scale of the Nazis' monstrous crimes in 1940, he would not have made *The Great Dictator*.

Besides Chaplin's film there is but one precedent for the approach that Mr. Benigni took—Czech filmmaker [Karel Kachyna](#)'s memorable but little known *The Last Butterfly*, in which Tom Courteney plays a French mime whom the Gestapo forces to organize a group of Jewish children into staging a musical production of "Hansel and Gretel." But this was essentially a serious drama laced with the humor of the mime's mimicking the Nazi salute, an act so funny that it elicited laughter even from Nazis in the audience.

That the Italian filmmaker has pulled off the seemingly impossible by creating a film on the Holocaust that was not offensive to Jewish viewers might seem like a minor miracle. Actually, it might be better to view the film as a celebration of the power of a father's love and imagination over the forces of hatred and brutishness, as the Holocaust forms more of the context of the first half of the film.

Even when father and son are caught in the Nazi's vicious web and packed off to a work camp, we are spared the usual grim scenes of beatings and gassing—just once there is a shot of a pile of bodies encountered by Guido, reminding him forcibly of the source of the smoke that pours out of the tall smokestacks that dominate the camp.

Some viewers have criticized the first half of the film, which is a whimsical tale of the wooing of Guido's beloved Dora (glowingly played by Nicoletta Braschi, Mr. Benigni's real life wife). He is a Jew newly arrived in town, and when he first sees the school teacher, he is smitten, even though she is already practically engaged to a Fascist suitor. In a series of incidents filled with coincidences and physical humor worthy of Chaplin (I think of the latter's great short *One A.M.* with its hilarious use of props), our little hero

wins the hand of the gentile Dora. They marry, have a son whom they name Giosue (Joshua), and Guido becomes a bookseller.

Wherever it has been shown the film has received accolades from Jew and Gentile viewers. The story is told in what amounts to two acts, the first dealing with Guido (Robert Benigni), a Jew, courting the lovely school teacher (Nicoletta Braschi, who in real life is married to Benigni), a Gentile. This is told in Chaplinesque style, with the naive Guido having to contend against a Fascist suitor of Dora's. We see Mussolini's visage on wall posters, but life goes on in their village with little intrusion from the government. Guido is successful, in his quest for the hand of Dora and for a license to operate a bookstore. Jump to five or six years later, with Guido and their little son Giosue' walking down the street, and we see German soldiers passing by. The child is able to read a shop sign: "No dogs or Jews allowed." When Giosue' asks the meaning of the prohibition, Guido replies that it merely expresses the strong dislikes of the shop owner. He asks what animal Giosue' dislikes the most. "Spiders!" the boy replies. Guido declares that he doesn't like Visigoths, therefore they will put a sign in his bookshop window "No spiders or Visigoths allowed." As we will see, this is the pattern the father takes to shield his innocent son from the poisonous reality of anti-Semitism.

The Nazis are soon rounding up the Jews of the village, Guido and Giosue' among them. When Dora finds out, the distraught woman insists that she be included, although she is not allowed in the same cattle car. Guido tells his frightened son that they have been chosen to go to a special resort for a long vacation, and that all trains are so crowded that people have to stand up to travel. At the work camp he pretends to admire the crowded quarters, and when a Nazi officer comes in, he volunteers to "translate" the rules for the prisoners, even though he does not understand German (luckily for him the German understands no Italian). This is for the benefit, indeed the survival of his little son. The camp rules are, "Don't ask for snacks;" "Don't cry;" and "Don't ask for Mama." He then explains that points will be given for proper behavior, and taken away for violating the rules. The grand prize, the father declares, is a new tank. As the days pass Guido manages to hide his son in their top bunk while he is marched off to work. He gives the boy most of his food and entertains him with stories and fantasies of their supposed good life.

The film takes a certain amount of suspension of belief, but all in all it is a wonderful parable of the power of imagination and love confronting unspeakable evil. Little of the horror of the prison camp is graphically shown, except for one brief scene in which Guido comes upon an immense pile of skeletal bodies, reminding him of the purpose of the buildings with the tall smokestacks. The ending of the film, with its costly sacrifice, will tear at the heart, and the wonderful way in which Guido's promise that he who wins the "resort" contest will be awarded a tank comes true for the boy is a joy to behold. A wonderful film based on the premise that true love will involve sacrifice, or in Christian terms, a cross.

Discussion Questions

1. The first half of the film is peppered with references to the horrible events to come (foreshadowing). Describe several of these and analyze Guido's attitude toward them. Are there clues that speak to how he will eventually handle being put into a concentration camp?
2. Over the course of the film, Dora goes through a transformation. Describe this transformation, paying close attention to the early scenes with Amico (her fiancé) and the later scenes in the camp. What inspires her to change? How is this transformation evidenced?
3. Do you think Guido was right in telling his son that the Holocaust events were a "game"? In order to protect him, Guido withheld the truth from Giosué on several occasions.
 - • Was this an ethical thing to do? Why or why not
 - • When do you think it is appropriate for parents or other authority figures (even in broader terms of society) to withhold the truth (or even lie)? When, if at all, do you think there is a line that is crossed?
4. When you first meet Guido, does he seem the kind of man you would all a hero? By the end of the film have you changed your mind? Explain.
5. Many critics have noted that the film feels like two distinct pieces: The first, a lighthearted comedy, and the second, a dark tragedy with comedic elements. Why do you think Benigni divided the film so sharply into two halves? What effect does this structure have?