

Filippo Timi as Benito Mussolini and Giovanna Mezzogiorno as Ida Dalser in "Vincere" directed by Marco Bellocchio. Daniele Musso/An IFC Films release.

To have, to hold...and to exploit

In "Vincere," director Marco Bellocchio examines the woman used and abandoned by Mussolini in his quest for power.

By Maria Garcia

"Vincere" ("To Win"), Marco Bellocchio's operatic film about the love affair of Ida Dalser and Benito Mussolini, is as much about the history of Fascist Italy as it is about the woman who sold everything to finance her lover's first newspaper.

When the two met in 1914, Mussolini was a journalist with political ambitions. Dalser was a prosperous business owner from Trentino (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). The story of their relationship, and Mussolini's eventual abandonment of Dalser and their son, Benito Albino, is familiar to Italians and was recently revived through Alfredo Pieroni's book, "Il figlio segreto del Duce: la storia di Benito Albino Mussolini e di sua madre Ida Dalser" ("The Secret Son of Il Duce," Garzanti, 2006).

Pieroni's research uncovered Dalser's letters to Italian authorities seeking recognition of her legal rights and those of her

son, as well as irrefutable proof of her marriage to Mussolini. The book was, in part, the inspiration for Bellocchio's screenplay. "Vincere" premiered at Cannes this year, and will be released in the U.S. in early 2010. In it, Bellocchio imagines a dramatic first meeting between Dalser and Mussolini, and a passionate encounter afterwards, during which Dalser's rapturous submission and Mussolini's emotional detachment presage a gloomy future—for them, and for Italy.

The 70-year-old Italian filmmaker, best-remembered in the United States for his "Henry IV" (1984), starring Marcello Mastroianni and Claudia Cardinale, is a popular figure on the art-house and film festival circuit worldwide. He is a native of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, also the birthplace of Mussolini. Bellocchio's cinematic virtuosity, as well as his penchant for melodrama, are both apparent in "Vincere":

archival footage of Mussolini is expertly blended into the film, with the writer/director duplicating, in several significant scenes, the camera angles used in newsreels to make the dictator appear heroic. It's a beautifully produced film with an excellent score.

Bellocchio portrays events from Dalser's point-of-view; while she appears sympathetic, her slavish devotion and, later, her obsessive attachment to Mussolini, fraught with psychological pitfalls, mirrors the reaction of the Italian people, seduced by il Duce's plan to restore Italy's empire. Early in their relationship, Dalser smiles at Mussolini's megalomaniacal dream to rival Napoleon's influence on Europe. When he's fired from his editorial position, she liquidates her business, sells off her possessions, and gives her lover the money he needs to launch his career. "Vincere" is a parable, a commentary on the dark side of the Italian character. ➤

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The cast is led by Giovanna Mezzogiorno (“Love in the Time of Cholera”) as Dalser, and Filippo Timi as both il Duce and Benito Albino. Portraying historical figures is a difficult task for any actor and, in Mezzogiorno’s case, particularly so—she also represents the people of Italy who, like Dalser, were abandoned by the man sworn to protect them. It is her transformation from an ardent, young woman, to an impoverished single mother and then to a woman whose obsessive personality turns pathological, that keeps viewers engaged in the film. Timi, less familiar to American screen audiences, is equally riveting.

In a highly stylized fashion, Bellocchio quickly moves from 1914 and the early days of the love affair, to Italy’s entry into World War I. Mussolini, who had been drafted, was wounded in 1915, the same year Dalser gave birth to Albino. The writer-director stages an emotional encounter in Mussolini’s hospital ward between Dalser and Rachele Guidi, who bore the dictator a daughter out of wedlock years before he began his affair with

Dalser. Guidi and Mussolini were married in a bedside ceremony in December 1915—in the film, just a day before Dalser arrives, not having received replies to her letters telling Mussolini about their son. Mussolini, ill but drawn into the bedside confrontation, denounces Dalser.

As Mussolini rises to power, Dalser persists in threatening his reputation, in real life telling the Interior Ministry that he accepted a bribe from the French government in return for convincing Italy to enter the war. Mussolini first exiles Dalser to Trentino, and then plots to have her committed, along with Albino, to a psychiatric hospital. Both mother and child lived and died in institutions under extremely harsh conditions, and were buried in unmarked graves, Albino at the age of 26. In the film, Dalser and Mussolini meet only once after he denounces her; then, he disappears from her life, re-emerging as an iconic figure in newspaper headlines and newsreels. In one particularly dramatic scene, Dalser stands up in a movie theater, her shadowy figure merging with the projected image of a gesticulat-

ing Mussolini.

The dictator officially recognized Albino as his son, although the boy never met his father. Albino’s march toward madness, and Dalser’s—historians believe mother and son were drugged and tortured—matched Italy’s own delirious decline under Fascism. In the final, haunting shots of the film, Albino, who apparently bore a startling resemblance to his father, soundlessly imitates his facial expressions as he watches Mussolini on television. Here, Bellocchio suggests parallels between Mussolini and Italy’s present leader, especially in each man’s skillful use of media to control his image.

“Vincere,” which will receive only limited art-house distribution, is a big screen movie. On DVD, Bellocchio’s brash use of phallic imagery, an interesting counterpoint to the invincible Italian woman Dalser represents, will be diminished. For Bellocchio, Dalser is the eternal feminine figure in an archetypal drama about the masculine quest for power which crushes women and, therefore, the family—the heart of *la patria*. ▲



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