CIRCO ROIS—CHE BELLA VITA!

a film by Philip Singer, Traditional Healing Productions.

Reviewed by Peter Bertocci

As an American teenie living in early 50s' Rome, I was once taken to see an Italian circus when it came to town. It was a real letdown, I remember feeling, having been treated as a younger child to the Ringling Brothers spectaculars which 20th century Americans had come to associate with the word "circus." The difference in scale just dwarfed the Italian version, making it seem trivial and dull. Philip Singer's 2004 documentary film about that still lingering Italian circus tradition, and the struggle of a traditional traveling circus to survive, is not at all trivial or dull. But when its introductory sketch of circus history from time immemorial segues from a quick, gaudy clip of a Ringling Brothers promo to the subject of the movie, the plodding, everyday existence of the Circo Rois, that kid's memory of mine seeped back to mind.

The filmmaker and producer, Phil Singer, was Professor of Anthropology at Oakland from 1969 to 2001, first as a member of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, later moving to the School of Health Sciences. Singer's special interest was in the study of spiritual healing practices, on which he had done research in India and later among transplanted Indian communities in the Caribbean (Guyana). In the mid-1970s, he developed an interest in ethnographic filmmaking and began to push his career in that new direction, going on over the next three decades to make films in nearly twenty countries, Italy among the latest. As summed up by a reviewer,

by the early 1990s, Singer had "made his mark in both medical and visual anthropology by producing and distributing films and videotapes that provide glimpses of healing beliefs and practices as diverse as psychic surgery, aromatherapy, acupuncture, cupping and trance dancing" (Anderson 1994). At first glance, then, a film on an Italian traveling circus seems a marked departure from Singer's filmmaking career. But his filmmaking history demonstrates Singer's fascination with what most non-anthropologists would see as exotic, perhaps even repellent, performances. Come to think about it, before the advent of today's "daytime TV" and "reality shows," where did people go to experience the voyeuristic display of the outlandish? The circus! And so this latter day Singerian cinematic foray may not be so radical a new direction for him after all.

The Circo Rois is one of last traveling circuses in Italy, trouping doggedly from town to small farming town in the Italian province of Campania, stretching from Naples down toward Sicily along the Mediterranean coast. Founded by the Minetti family in early 1800s, the third going on fourth generation of this circus dynasty is now headed by paterfamilias Remorchio and his brother's widow, Rosaria. Her four daughters and a son, whether hers of Remorchio's is not made clear, constitute the younger generation, all in their late teens or early twenties.

We first encounter the Minettis driving through a town in which they have just arrived and started to set up their equipment, a megaphone blaring the announcement and promotion of their forthcoming spettacolo (show). The film moves to a sequence of shots of the arduous, endless routine of setting up their equipment. This circus is clearly run on a shoestring, and, unable to hire a staff of roustabouts, the Minettis themselves must put forth the Herculean effort required to set up for their show, including erecting a plastic tent some 400 meters in circumference, held up by two huge towers and 60 poles. The process typically takes two days, and seems just about to exhaust Remorchio and his children.

No rest for the weary, however. Next day we see the entire

family enlisted in actually putting on the show. The younger generation does all the active performing. Three of the girls, Irenia, Gessica and Giamaicca, seem to be its mainstay—they dance, they jiggle and juggle, they do the familiar magic acts, one gets sawed into pieces, another body-twirls a bunch of hoops in hula fashion—and Mimmo, the son (billed as "Juanito"), juggles a barrel with his feet in the air and unsteadily attempts a simple balancing act on a low hanging contraption resembling a trapeze. All the performances are minimally adequate, limited in range and scope—Montreal's Cirque du Soleil has nothing to fear from the Circo Rois. The animal acts, if such they can be called, are less than pedestrian. A 4-meter long, 150 pound python, is lugged out by three of the young performers, who struggle to wave it about for the audience's not-too-frightened amusement, one of them kissing the creature's head as they exit the stage. A ragged team of ponies is run around the ring, but nothing is done with them by way of performance. A "wild boar" is led out and made to walk backwards, but somehow it looks more like a ordinary hog, more fit for display at a country fair than in a circus whose audience expects to see trained animals do their stuff. Fortunately most of the spectators are young children who are easily amused.

Remorchio emcees the whole thing as its sole "clown." He's not very funny, sad to say, and you never get the feeling that his heart's really in it. Part of his stück involves "audience participation," and he seems to enjoy that the most. The "acts" Singer has chosen to show us here are fairly repulsive. In one scene Remorchio induces a chubby little kid he has lured to the ring to simulate urination in an exaggerated bump and grind routine. In another, an old gent from the audience sits in a "barber's chair." Remorchio simulates a shave and a hair cut for the man with huge cardboard replicas of scissors and razor, rearranges the few remaining hair strands with a giant comb, then spews water from his mouth over the "customer" by way of winding up. The camera occasionally pans the audi-

ence, the telltale lens scanning lot of empty seats. A good guess is that there aren't many people out there over the age of 10, and the few that are, are not laughing.

Up to this point, film has been shot in a solid, workmanlike way, pretty much at eye-level, permitting viewers to track what's happening on their own, all standard techniques in ethnographic filmmaking. Critics of Singer's early films complained of his tendency to insert himself into them, in a manner prequelling today's celebrity documentarians, but there is none of that in this one. He does the flat-toned narration, which is minimal, to provide necessary background, and his voice as interviewer is heard prodding responses out of his subjects. Other than that there are long takes of action, with no coaching of the viewer by an omniscient narrator.

In the final segment of the film, things shift, and Singer gets the family members to talk about themselves and their lives. Each is trotted out before the camera, and Singer, from behind it, becomes the interlocutor. Not all of them seem comfortable on camera, and one wonders why they are putting themselves through this confessional ordeal. Each begins with an obligatory affirmation of how much they like their circus lives and of their loyalty to the family and its time-honored mestiere (profession). But it takes little prodding to get them to air their anxieties and animosities. The girls worry aloud about whether they'll ever get married, and if they do, it may have to be into some other circus family, since, under the heavy thumb of "Mamma" they never get to go out, never get to have any fun, are not allowed to have money on their own, and never meet that hoped-for someone who will take them away from all this. The son claims pleasure from performing, even if for only one child who might enjoy the act, and he would like perhaps to work in another, larger circus where he can perfect "his art." But he seems resigned to an uncertain future as the one fingered to take this show on whatever may be its future roads. Rosaria, their widowed mother, resignedly describes her endless work day, not only as the circus's "legal representative" who has to keep the bills paid up, but also to be

the family's chief cook and bottle washer. Echoing others, she complains about the competition from bigger circuses, worries about dwindling audiences, and wishes that aid from local and other governments would support small circuses like theirs.

Remorchio at first resists the "true confessions" mode. His rage is not far below the surface, and he resists Singer's prodding, occasionally taunting the interviewer with the occasional epithet—"American" (sneeringly), "Uncle Sam" (with mild contempt). But he, too, has his laments. He has spent his life in this circus, performed nearly all the various acts, kept things going after the death of his brother, and is now reduced to the role of a clown. "Una vita di sacrificio" this is, he says at the end, a life of sacrifice. The film ends with the circus folding up and moving on to the next town. One evening's performance has had to be canceled for lack of a sufficient audience. It's likely that the Circo Rois is not long for this world. What we are to learn from witnessing this vignette unfold on screen is not, however, entirely clear.

Watching it, I was reminded of other films in which portrayal of a dying artistic institution marks the passing of an era, offering a metaphor for inexorable social change: Diegues's Bye Bye Brasil (1979) and, perhaps in like vein, Bogdanovich's Last Picture Show (1971). But this is probably a stretch. Singer's Circo Rois is no doubt an anachronism in today's Italy, even in the south, until recently an economic backwater, where the Minettis ply their trade. It might have been tempting to juxtapose its inexorable decline against the backdrop of the bustling, modernizing Mezzogiorno, as the past is pulverized by the present. But Singer does not give us any obvious context for thinking that he intends his movie to serve so grandiose a metaphoric purpose. The film is best viewed as the simple portrayal of a family caught in the trap of its own occupational tradition, out of synch with the world where its members wearily try to sell their worn and washed out wares, frustrated as they imagine aloud how their lives might otherwise be. One wishes only that their performances had not been so embarrassing and their personal anguish not quite so agonizingly displayed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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