

Happy as Lazzaro review – beguiling fable of golden, rural Italy trampled by modernity

Cannes award-winner Alice Rohrwacher's follow-up to *The Wonders* is a sun-scorched, time-bending tale of a tobacco magnate and a village of sharecroppers

Italian director Alice Rohrwacher received a Cannes Grand Prix award for her previous film [The Wonders, a gentle pastoral comedy](#) set in rural northern Italy. If that film hinted at a timelessness in its careworn, leisurely paced portrayal of a family of beekeepers, Rohrwacher's fascinating follow-up goes one further and tinkers with the very notion of time itself.

With *Happy as Lazzaro*, Rohrwacher has crafted a magic-realist fable that doubles as an origin myth for a modern [Italy](#) subsumed by corruption and decline. As with *The Wonders*, it is shot on Super 16mm, lending the film a grainy sepia tinge that initially evokes warmth and nostalgia but in time resembles something more like decay.

The setting again is rural Italy, this time a crumbling village with the less-than-apt title of *Inviolata*. Its inhabitants are an extended family of not terribly motivated sharecroppers under the aegis of a local tobacco magnate, the Marchesa Alfonsina de Luna. At first sight the villagers seem to hail from the 19th century, given their antiquated habits and outfits, but the odd modern flourish such as a baseball cap or Walkman suggests otherwise. Either way, there's a sense of this being a community unmoored from present-day concerns, a feeling intensified by the slow, sun-scorched first hour.

[Sharecropping](#), it turns out, was outlawed in the 1980s. The Marchesa has neglected to inform her charges of that detail (a plot point inspired by a real-life incident), arguing that exploitation is something that everyone does, and reason that if she is exploiting the peasants then they in turn must be exploiting someone else. That someone, it turns out is Lazzaro, a peasant boy with an otherworldly vacancy reminiscent of Chance, the simple-minded [Peter Sellers character in Being There](#). Lazzaro is mercilessly but affectionately teased by the rest of the peasants, who have him carry out duties no one wants to do, such as picking giant cabbages and guarding the chicken coop from wolves.

One day the Marchesa arrives for one of her periodic visits to the village, bringing along her son Tancredi, a callow youth with bleached hair and a miniature dog he carries under one arm. Tancredi takes a liking to Lazzaro, though more in the manner of a pet than a friend, and recruits him to help with a wheeze he is planning to spring on the Marchesa, whom Tancredi intensely dislikes. Tancredi plans to fake his own kidnapping, hiding out in the wilderness around the village listening to his Walkman while he waits for his mother to cough up the million lire his ransom note has demanded.

Things don't go according to plan, and the film undergoes a dizzying temporal and tonal shift, one which – without giving the game away – leaves Lazzaro an even more unmoored figure than he was before. The golden Italian countryside gives way to scuffed urban sprawl, the figures he encounters are more unscrupulous than before, and the inequity seen in miniature in *Inviolata* is suddenly writ large.

The Wonders review – a likable, if sentimental, coming-of-age movie

3 out of 5 stars.

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Lazzaro reacts to all this with the same blank implacability as he does everything, and remains a mystery to the end. To some, he's a ghost; to others, a saint; to Tancredi, a good-luck charm. Often he just seems to be a victim, a placeholder for some pastoral vision of Italy that has been trampled underfoot by modernity. More than anything else, he is a figure as elusive as this beguiling, half-remembered dream of a film.

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