

## Cannes Film Review: 'Happy as Lazzaro'

**Alice Rohrwacher's heady, ambitious third film mixes time-bending fabulism with contemporary social critique to gradually exhilarating effect.**

By Guy Lodge

othing much makes sense in "[Happy as Lazzaro](#)," until a stunning mid-film pivot that shakes time and space and snaps it all together, its world emerging from the disturbance as senseless again — but in a completely different, all too recognizable way. The third and most richly strange feature yet from Italian writer-director [Alice Rohrwacher](#), this beautifully rendered tangram of a movie sees her pushing her recurring fascination with fables to its most literal (and literate) degree. Earthy folkloric storytelling, time-traveling magical realism and fact-inspired social drama are fused in its tale of a rural innocent defying life's certainties to bear witness to two separate eras of social and economic exploitation. The result is a slow but bewitching burn that rewards viewers' patience with humor and uncanny grace, sealing Rohrwacher's status — following her 2014 Cannes Grand Prix winner "The Wonders" — as a truly distinctive European major.

A substantial prize at Cannes this year would certainly buoy the commercial prospects of this challenging if hardly austere auteur work, though with or without jury hardware, "Happy as Lazzaro" should engage the same specialist distributors who took a chance on the similarly fey charms of "The Wonders." If anything, this is a more constructive conversation piece, streaked with political talking points that should resonate universally, even as Rohrwacher's elegant, elastic screenplay is steeped in troubling chapters of Italian history both recent and ancient. As such, it extends a strong tradition of Italian cinema merging candid naturalism with a cool breeze of whimsy: There's spiritual DNA from the likes of Nanni Moretti, Ermanno Olmi and the Taviani brothers here, though Rohrwacher is nobody's imitator.

The true, ripped-from-the-headlines story in which "Lazzaro" is rooted could forgivably be mistaken for a folkish fiction — those wishing to experience the film in its optimum, shape-shifting state would be best advised to read reviews selectively, if at all.

In 1980s central Italy, a wealthy noblewoman took advantage of her estate's isolated location to extend the practice of sharecropping years after it was abolished, keeping her unpaid laborers wholly in the dark about their rights in the outside world. Rohrwacher draws directly on this scandal, but evokes it eerily from the inside out, building a rustic milieu that disorientingly seems to straddle the modern(ish) day and the Middle Ages. Centered in Inviolata, a parched, tellingly named pastoral village serving the tobacco plantation of grotesque "Queen of Cigarettes" Marquise Alfonsino de Luna, it's a world in which burlap-clad serfdom exists alongside tinny Eurodance leaking from a Sony Walkman, and no one seems to question the dissonance.

Our eyes and ears through this are chiefly those of young peasant Lazzaro (beguiling, buttermilk-faced newcomer Adriano Tardiolo), an achingly naive adolescent who seems otherworldly even in the highly, well, *other* world of Inviolata. Lazzaro is more pure than simple: someone to whom acts of goodness and good faith come reflexively, without consideration or guile, making him blindest of all to his people's victimization under the Marquise's thumb. All of which makes him vulnerably fascinated by Tancredi (Georgian actor-musician Luca Chikovani, another big-screen novice), the rakish, devious lad of the manor, who draws Lazzaro into a close, conspiratorial friendship that comes to transcend the borders of this suspended reality.

Rohrwacher spends over an hour exploring the ins and (admittedly few) outs of Inviolata: It's an undeniably slack start, drifting through the weathered lives and spaces of its inhabitants with a dreamlike lack of focus or narrative compass. A few viewers may be left wondering if they've entered some kind of fugue state themselves. There's gratifying method to her meandering, though it's hard to articulate the payoff without breaking its unusual spell. Suffice it to say that in the film's more propulsively plotted, predominantly urban-set second half, time lurches cruelly forward for some characters while standing freakishly still for others; progress is made, though only by swapping one system of unjust social hierarchy

for another; and Lazzaro lopes sweetly and unassumingly through it all, at once uncomprehending and bearing the only understanding of the world that has much value.

If that makes “Happy as Lazzaro” sound like a nightmarish esoteric spin on “Forrest Gump,” rest assured that the film, for all its interest in fables, trades less in morals than in equivocal, irony-laced human observation. Rohrwacher deftly skirts sentimentality even as she risks big, expansive poetic gestures: A scene where heavens-opening organ music is literally stolen from a cathedral, exiting the church doors on a fair evening wind, is almost chillingly lovely, while the film mostly resists preciousness as it weaves recurring traditional mythology into an already amply storied narrative.

As in both Rohrwacher’s previous films, the great French d.p. Hélène Louvart is an invaluable creative ally in her near-seamless melding of realism and fabulism. Shooting in tactile, textured 16mm, her camera deliberately glides and gazes over the dry, calcified fields and slopes of *Inviolata* as if it were exploring the cratered surface of another planet, washed in shades of mustard and umber that suggest an entire landscape discolored by tobacco. Through the eyes of Lazzaro, however, the rain-stained streets and satellite towers of an unremarkable Italian industrial town are made to appear no less alien. That the corners of the frame are slightly rounded throughout, as in a yellowed photograph from a past era (and as also seen in Lisandro Alonso’s 2014 “*Jauja*”), might be one of its few too-cute details. Even that, however, heightens the sense of “Happy as Lazzaro” as a wilfully, gorgeously out-of-time work, one that tangles past and present with critical concern for the future.

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