

'Happy as Lazzaro' Review: A Ghostly Journey Makes Alice Rohrwacher's Movie a Unique Allegorical Mystery — Cannes 2018

The director of "The Wonders" returns with a fascinating look at rural life with a supernatural twist.

By Eric Kohn

The first hour of "Happy as Lazzaro" is a naturalistic look at rustic life in the Italian countryside, where noblemen and peasants live a solitary existence seemingly out of time. The next half shifts the setting to the city, but more importantly, pitches the story in a strange, supernatural direction that transforms the entire drama into a fascinating allegorical mystery.

Director Alice Rohrwacher's third feature revisits some of the themes she mined in "The Wonders" about the dissolution of the pastoral world under the pressures of modernity, but she pushes that fixation to a metaphorical place. At times that takes the loose narrative in a heavy-handed direction, but Rohrwacher shows such commitment to her peculiar storyline — while the cast imbues the stranger twists with an undercurrent of credibility — that the movie lulls you into its unpredictable rhythms, and a striking poetry creeps into the material, finally overtaking it.

At first, though, "Happy as Lazzaro" lingers in a hidden world. The scene is the small village of Inviolata, where Marchesa Alfonsina de Luna, a demanding overlord dubbed "the queen of cigarettes," oversees an estate where impoverished sharecroppers work as indentured servants. Here and there, Rohrwacher drops in small contemporary details — an iPhone there, a t-shirt there — but for the most part, these characters may as well exist in the 19th century. Rolling empty hills surround them in every direction, and their daily routines unfold with a quiet, sleepy quality indicative of a world where nobody's in a rush to change.

But change comes from an unlikely source, when the fresh-faced peasant Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo) forms an unlikely bond with rebellious nobleman Tancredi (Luca Chikovani), in part because there's nobody else in their age group around. Eventually, Tancredi concocts a bizarre scheme to have Lazzaro kidnap him, and the boys go so far as to forge a contract in blood while hanging behind a wooden shed. Well, Lazzaro's blood, anyway — despite his tough-guy posturing, Tancredi's too wimpy to jab himself with a knife, while Lazzaro's anything-goes attitude shows just how much he exists at the whims of upper-class malaise.

Not that he's all that troubled by it. (The scene plays for laughs, but they come with a tinge of melancholy.) Nothing seems to trouble the muted title character, whose soulful eyes and gentle features suggest an utter innocence to the wonders of a universe that has never opened itself to him. Newcomer Tardiolo is an instant breakout, and his nearly wordless performance gives his character the elegance of a Renaissance-era sculpture (and the stillness, too). For a time, the dynamic between Lazzaro and Tancredi suggests shadings of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, but Rohrwacher's just getting started. Similar to the invasion of a crass reality television show on the farmland tableaux of "The Wonders," the bubble of "Happy as Lazzaro" is pierced by the arrival of police forces that entirely reconfigure the scenario's context. The peasants are forced off the land, but Lazzaro — a creature who seems incapable of living anywhere else — doesn't join the migration. In a sudden tragic twist, he's left behind, and a magical fable introduces the spellbinding transition into a more fantastical second half.

Time passes. Again, it's not clear how *much* time, and for all we know the ensuing proceedings take place in the near future. In any case, after denying the advances of a hungry wolf, Lazzaro finds the old estate abandoned and makes his way into town, where he finds many of his old peasant companions — including his sister, Antonia (Alba Rohrwacher), who thinks she might be seeing a ghost. No matter: Lazzaro sticks around, going about his usual silent ways, and nobody really questions the circumstances behind his arrival. He's just there, as usual, a witness to the passage of time who hails from a simpler one where nothing changes. The rest of the cast, however, ages to a remarkable degree — especially Tancredi, who resurfaces as a sad reflection of his former self.

Rohrwacher's unhurried pace, filled with drifting camerawork and dead air, combines documentary-like aesthetic of Italian neorealism with mysterious circumstances, a steady formula that by now reflects her homegrown style. The movie doesn't always justify its twists, and Rohrwacher's script tries a bit too hard to inject obvious meaning into a story that doesn't need the extra signifiers.

So, about that wolf: He's some kind of symbol roaming the town, representing the never-ending struggle of nature and progress, and Rohrwacher deserves some credit for pushing her drama into a higher plane of possibilities. But the wolf has nothing on the profound insinuations of Lazzaro's face, and the complex social tensions he can never resolve. He's at once an ethereal reminder of old ways that refuse to die and a tragic manifestation of rural life as the walking dead; either way, he epitomizes the sophistication at the heart of a movie that confirms Rohrwacher has much to say, and her own beguiling ways of saying it.

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