

HOLY TONGUE

(LA LINGUA DEL SANTO)

(ITALY)

A Medusa Film release of a Rodeo Drive/Medusa Film production in association with Telepiu. (International sales: Adriana Chiesa Enterprises, Rome.) Produced by Marco Poccioni, Marco Valsania.

Directed by Carlo Mazzacurati. Screenplay, Franco Bernini, Umberto Contarello, Mazzacurati, Marco Pettenello. Camera (Technicolor, widescreen), Alessandro Pesci; editor, Paolo Cottignola; art director, Leonardo Scarpa; costume designer, Lina Nerli Taviani; sound (Dolby Digital), Mario Iaquone; associate producer, Francesca Di Donna; assistant director, Marina Zangirolami. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing),** Sept. 8, 2000. Running time: 110 MIN.

Antonio Antonio Albanese
Willy Fabrizio Bentivoglio
Kronzano Toni Bertorelli
Ronchitelli Ivano Marescotti
Patrizia Isabella Ferrari
Saint Antonio Marco Paolini
Maritan Giulio Brogi

By DAVID ROONEY

Two of Italy's most accomplished actors, Antonio Albanese and Fabrizio Bentivoglio, make a formidable team in director Carlo Mazzacurati's "Holy Tongue," a delicate comedy about friendship, failure and the redemption of two very likable small-town losers. Combining elements of the buddy movie and crime caper, this intelligently scripted film strikes a fine balance between its lighter side and a more melancholy vocation, making it both humorous and poignant. Home-ground commercial prospects look excellent, and the comedy's accessible nature and universal themes give it a better-than-average shot at offshore arthouse dates.

Mazzacurati's films in the past have dealt with more weighty issues, notably the uneasy connection linking Italy with Central and Eastern Europe in "Another Life," "The Bull" and "Vesna Goes Fast." Working in a lighter key here with screenwriting collaborators Franco Bernini, Umberto Contarello and Marco Pettenello, the director has produced arguably his most satisfying work yet, distinguished by a strong sense of place and a deep feeling for the landscapes of Mazzacurati's native northeast region.

The odd-couple protagonists are Willy (Bentivoglio), who recently lost his salesman's job and was ditched by his wife, Patrizia (Isabella Ferrari); and Antonio (Albanese), a perennially unemployed onetime professional rugby player. While



FLIGHT SCENE: Vet Italian actors Fabrizio Bentivoglio, left, and Antonio Albanese star in Carlo Mazzacurati's "Holy Tongue."

there's plenty of money to be made in their wealthy hometown of Padua, the fortysomething friends speak no English and have zero computer skills, effectively cutting them out of the business community. Instead, they hang out in the town's most down-market bar and make modest sums through petty thievery.

A Saints Day procession and church service give them the idea of robbing the donation box in the local basilica. Thwarted by guard dogs, they run for cover, but Antonio impulsively steals a jewel-encrusted holy relic containing the tongue of Saint Antonio, patron saint of the humble and needy. Troubled by thoughts of the wrath of God and by the words of priests in TV news appeals, Willy wants to return the relic.

But emboldened by the idea of finally making some serious cash, Antonio becomes more ruthless and reckless, delivering ransom demands to the Vatican. His boldness proves contagious, also giving Willy a sense of power over the city that has long rejected them.

When the church refuses to pay, Antonio goes to a local Gypsy encampment to off-load a ruby lifted from the relic. But, as the Gypsies are perhaps the only people with greater reverence for Saint Antonio than the Catholics, the Gypsy chief (Tony Bertorelli) immediately cops to the stone's origin and alerts the media, prompting the duo's hasty retreat from town and a flight across the region punctuated by surreal encounters.

Hiding out in a country house belonging to Patrizia's slimy new lover (Ivano Marescotti), they begin negotiating with a publicity-hungry Padua businessman (Giulio Brogi), who believes he owes his prosperity to Saint Antonio and is willing to pay a hefty ransom.

The musical accents of the Veneto region give an amusing lilt to the dialogue, and Brogi's character's self-promoting TV campaign for the statue's return will provide the biggest laughs to Italians familiar with secessionist-minded Northerners, but the humor here is a lot less dependent on regional and dialect quirks than many contemporary Italian comedies. Consequently, it seems more likely to function beyond national borders.

Backed by a skilled supporting cast, Albanese and Bentivoglio bounce off each other with effortless affinity. Their contrasting personalities and physical types — the former chubby and jovial, with an unpredictably volatile, at times surly streak, the latter dejected and lost-looking, incapable of reacting against the sadness that weighs him down — provide the comedy with a lively dynamic that recalls any number of classic comic screen pairings, skewed with an Italian twist.

The deftly handled comedy is never uproariously funny but consistently clever and enjoyable. Perhaps even more than this, however, the film scores with its beautifully judged, bittersweet undertone, driven by Willy's sorrowful voiceover commentary. His indissoluble ties to the city that has cast him aside, his longing for his wife, his inability to accept or understand her decision and his inarticulateness in campaigning to win her back create a disarming minor-key mood that lends depth to the material.

Playing a more disheveled, less savvy and self-confident character than usual, Bentivoglio skillfully juggles self-deprecating humor with pathos, making the final-act payoff — in which the anti-heroes in one way or another emerge as winners worthy of respect — all the more sweet and affecting.

Swept along by an eclectic soundtrack of melodic tunes by Keith Jarrett and other composers, the film owes much to the handsome widescreen lensing of Alessandro Pesci, whose customary use of deep, robust color has never been sharper, giving a lush, evocative feel to the expansive landscapes and rolling hills around Padua and the somber skies over the Venetian lagoon.

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