Fellini’s ‘Juliet’ Lacking Substance

By LAWSON TAITTE

Federico Fellini’s ‘Juliet of the Spirits’ is a puzzling film. Technically it is of great importance, since it is one of the first successful color movies and, along with Antonioni’s ‘Red Desert,’ the first to use color as an integral part of its meaning. See it. It’s pretty.

But I think ‘Juliet’ is a failure and the clue to this judgment lies in the director’s previous films. Fellini’s ‘8½’ is my favorite film; ‘La Dolce Vita’ I thought a pretentious (intellectually and, especially, morally) phony. ‘Dolce Vita’ preached in sign and symbol, but did not prove its case dramatically or pictorially. Fellini defined his own special talent for filmmaking as a matter of timing, as getting “the cadence” right; here he only managed a slow, loose connection of labored scenes, an expressionist exercise in a tabloid-photography setting.

‘8½’ abjured the pulpit and an obvious concern for the tone of society, and turned instead to the exploration of an individual psyche. Sharp visualization of subtle, concrete detail made it a fine film whose expressionistic externals of style had strong bases in reality.

Outside Reality

‘Juliet of the Spirits’ deals with a woman who lives outside reality, in the spirit-world of the title. The part of the film preceding the scene and the final shots show her from the outside, but the center of the film is entirely dominated by Juliet’s imagination. We see dreams, fantasies, memories, and hallucinations; but even the “real” segments in the central part of the movie are done in an exaggerated style to show how much Juliet is a prisoner of the ghost of things past.

The fantasy world of Juliet reminds me of the allegory of Spenser, who claimed that art should be moral teachings made beautiful to the senses and imagination so as to be palatable to frail man.

Fellini (the “he has nothing to say” man of ‘8½’) is giving us a post-Freudian fable of the release of a woman from the internal bonds of an archaic society. Such an aim is at least a real message, as opposed to the best-of-both-possible-worlds posturings of ‘La Dolce Vita.’

Moral Message

I must say, however, that the fable seems to me not worth the telling, and that the film does not cohere without it. First to the message: we are shown the sad results of Juliet’s education with regard to sex by her visions of Iris and her visits to the home of her neighbor Suzy. Sex is hell (a plug from her Catholic education). But if Juliet is wrong (as I assume) and sex is okay, we are shown no counterexample. We have only the heroine’s reactions.

Then there is the liberation at the end. We are informed that Juliet must be alone in order to save herself, but we are given no clues to what the newly (and rather too glibly) saved Juliet can do with her life. She is a deserted middle-aged woman who is photographed in front of some trees to symbolize a return to nature. Not very helpful from a film that wants to tell us how to live our lives.

Expression

Stylistically we return in ‘Juliet’ to the milieu of ‘La Dolce Vita’ in the time structure of ‘8½.’ Expressionism is thus piled on top of expressionism until it cloys. It almost works in the context of the beautiful photography of Gianni di Vennano and the score by Nino Rota. But I think it does not.

The broadness in the acting and in the general conception might have been gelled into an emotionally convincing whole had Fellini given us a scene of such traumatizing impact as to justify Juliet’s liberation from the past. To me the scenes which attempt this seem schematic and, strangely enough, too restrained. We get hints of hellfire and mystic insight, but they are constraining.

The timing is all wrong. I know many who disagree with this judgment, and for them the film reaches its ambitious heights. I can only repeat that it does not for me, although the very possibility of its doing so should make you see if you have not already done so, especially since there is an interesting structure and touching performance by Giulietta Masina, Fellini’s wife, who touches the part of the middle-aged housewife with hints of her earlier pathetic waif from ‘La Strada’ in proportions that mix beautifully.