

## **La Ciociara (1960)**

*Two Women* is a 1960 Italian film directed by Vittorio De Sica. It tells the story of a woman trying to protect her young daughter from the horrors of war. The film stars Sophia Loren, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Raf Vallone, Eleonora Brown, Carlo Ninchi, and Andrea Checchi. The film was adapted by De Sica and Cesare Zavattini from the novel of the same name written by Alberto Moravia. The story is fictional, but based on actual events of 1944 in Rome and rural Lazio, during what Italians call the Marocchinate.

Loren's performance received critical acclaim, winning her the Academy Award for Best Actress.

### **Plot**

Cesira is a widowed shopkeeper, raising her devoutly religious twelve-year-old daughter, Rosetta, in Rome during World War II. In July 1943, following the Allied bombing of Rome, mother and daughter flee to Cesira's native Ciociaria, a rural, mountainous province of central Italy. The night before they go, Cesira sleeps with Giovanni, a coal dealer in her neighbourhood, who agrees to look after her store in her absence.

After they arrive at Ciociaria, Cesira attracts the attention of Michele, a young local intellectual with communist sympathies. Rosetta sees Michele as a father figure and develops a strong bond with him. Michele is later taken prisoner by German soldiers, who force him to act as a guide through the mountainous terrain.

After the Allies capture Rome, in June 1944, Cesira and Rosetta decide to head back to that city. On the way, the two are gang-raped inside a church by a group of Moroccan Goumiers – soldiers attached to the invading Allied Armies in Italy. Rosetta is traumatized, becoming detached and distant from her mother and no longer an innocent child.

When the two manage to find shelter at a neighbouring village, Rosetta disappears during the night, sending Cesira into a panic. She thinks Rosetta has gone to look for Michele, but later finds out that Michele was killed by the Germans. Rosetta returns, having been out with an older boy, who has given her silk stockings, despite her youth. Cesira is outraged and upset, slapping and spanking Rosetta for her behavior, but Rosetta remains unresponsive, emotionally distant. When Cesira informs Rosetta of Michele's death, Rosetta begins to cry like the little girl she had been prior to the rape. The film ends with Cesira comforting the child.

### **Production**

The film was based on a 1957 novel by Alberto Moravia, *La ciociara* (The Woman From Ciociara). It was inspired by Moravia's experiences during World War II.

Carlo Ponti bought the film rights along with Marcello Girosi for a reported US\$100,000. Sophia Loren was always meant to star and there was some talk that the film might be financed by Paramount, with whom Loren had made a number of movies. Anna Magnani was going to play the lead and Loren was going to be her daughter. George Cukor was going to direct as part of a two-picture deal with Ponti, the other one being *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960). The film was going to be shot as part of a six-picture deal between Ponti and Paramount.

Cukor and Paramount dropped out. Vittorio De Sica became attached as director. Magnani pulled out, supposedly because she did not want to play Loren's mother, leading to Loren taking Magnani's role, even though the former was only 26 at the time. However, De Sica says it was his decision for Loren to play Magnani's role and cast a younger performer as the daughter "for great poignancy. If, in doing this, we moved away from original line of Moravia, we had better opportunity to stress, to underline, the monstrous impact of war on people. The historical truth is that the great majority of those raped were young girls." In a 2017 interview, Brown stated that Loren protected her from some of the underlying implications of the rape scene in the film, and also stated that director De Sica brought her to tears for the climatic final scene of hearing that Belmondo's character has died, by saying that a telegram had arrived saying that Brown's parents had died in an accident.

Magnani said she was going to do it, "Moravia wanted me, but Ponti got it, and Moravia did not fight. After that, they went through all the roles I'd turned down for Sophia Loren to play." "The book was one of the most beautiful I've ever read", said Loren. "I thought it was worth taking the risk at 25 to play an older woman because the story was so beautiful." Loren later said her performance was inspired by her memories of her mother during the war. She also said she was greatly helped by her experience acting in *Desire Under the Elms* (1958).

Ponti raised money from France and Italy. French investment was conditional upon a French star being used, which led to the casting of Jean Paul Belmondo, who had leapt to international fame in *Breathless* (1960). Belmondo's voice was dubbed into Italian.

### **Awards**

The film won the Academy Award for Best Actress for Sophia Loren, due largely to heavy promotion by its North American distributor, Joseph E. Levine. This was the first time an acting Oscar had been given for a non-English-speaking performance, although she made the English dubbing for her role herself. Loren was too nervous to attend the ceremony and elected to stay in Rome instead. Greer Garson accepted the award on Loren's behalf.

Loren also won the award for Best Actress at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival. Loren won 22 international awards for *Two Women*.

### **Remakes**

*La Ciociara* was remade for television in 1988. It was adapted by Diana Gould, Lidia Ravera, Dino Risi, and Bernardino Zapponi. It was directed by Risi, and starred Loren, Robert Loggia, Leonardo Ferrantini, Dario Ghirardi, and Sydney Penny. An opera, *La Ciociara*, in a re-write by scenario writer Luca Rossi, with music composed by Marco Tutino, received its premiere at San Francisco Opera, and a European premiere at Teatro Lirico, Cagliari.

### **Sophia Loren's Best Actress Academy Award was the first Oscar ever given for a performance in a foreign-language film.**

The novel (and therefore the film as well) is based on true events of mass rapes by the Moroccan Goumiers in the Ciocara region after the battle of Monte Cassino in World War II. Monte Cassino was captured by the Allies on 18 May 1944, and on the following night, thousands of Goumiers and other colonial troops scoured the hills surrounding the towns and the villages of Ciociaria. Over 60,000 women, ranging in age from 11 to 86, suffered from violence, when

village after village came under control of the Goumiers. Civilian men who tried to protect their wives and daughters were murdered.

But this isn't about great battles, it's about *Two Women* just trying to survive the ravages of war in the best way they can. Sophia decides their best place is in her old village, south towards Naples. Before the film ends, she's given plenty of reason to rethink that decision.

Sophia Loren, aside from being one of the most beautiful women, proves herself here to be a tremendous actress. She has a melodramatic Italian flair that impassions her lovably aggressive character, a widowed shopkeeper in Rome during the Allied bombing in WWII, who flees with her beloved daughter to her impoverished mountainous native region. Throughout the story, she proves to be a strong woman, seasoned by pain and not having lost the fire and fight in her.

Like many European films of its time, *Two Women* is all about the characters and the current on which they flow through the film, a realistic capsule of a time and place. Vittorio De Sica, who made the beautifully small-scale film *The Bicycle Thief*, which is about a relationship between father and son, forms a companion piece with *Two Women*, which is about a relationship between mother and daughter. He addresses strikingly the unbearable love between a parent and their child.

Truly one of the greatest Italian films, this is an absorbing, emotional, modest journey with wonderful music; coarse, down-to-earth cinematography from the wonderful old days of gritty film prints and old school hands-on editing; incredible acting not only from Loren but from the young actress playing her daughter, who drastically transforms; and also from Jean-Paul Belmondo, who convincingly plays completely against type; and a beautifully emotional final shot.

*Two Women* is a view into lives that, at least at the time, didn't get much time on cinema screens. We understand that this young mother, Cesira (very well deserved Academy Award winner Sophia Loren), has a kind of hard protective shell of the fiery, strong woman that today might seem to verge on being something to expect in an Italian drama, but here is meant to be just that - a shell to guard off from the wretched horrors of a war which repeatedly she asks "will it end soon?" She also has to be strong for her thirteen year old daughter Rosetta (Eleonora Brown, excellent even if not considering it's a first performance), who still has a little innocence and admiration for those who are more good-hearted, if not as resourceful.

Michel (Jean Paul Belmondo), is a resistance fighter that Cesira and Rosetta come across while traveling away from Rome during bombing raids. We see them (Michel and Cesira) getting close, though she recognizes in him one of the only vestiges of common sense and decency, even if in a slightly shrewd manner that she can't totally grasp. She's been through the war, right along with her daughter, and there's layers that Loren grasps that pierce through the character; De Sica knows that she's capable of reaching these very real dimensions even before she has to go full tilt into the tragedy of the rape scene in the church. Loren's absolutely stunning in her gorgeous beauty, but in a way that works to make a comment on how her character has to keep guarded as well.

From the start, De Sica and Zavattini set the tone: people walking on a street, suddenly the alarms sound, running, bombs drop. Should be business as usual, but it's still staggering for the mind to grasp. In a way, Cesira and Rosetta are in the midst of a kind of apocalyptic atmosphere, and we as the audience, even as we know where history will lead the characters, get wrapped

up in the maelstrom of violence (one moment that's important is when the mother and daughter walk along a quiet road, a man on a bicycle passes, and a plane swoops down, shooting, the women duck, but the man is killed - the women look startled for just a moment, but hide it and go on their way) and with some political discourse thrown in from time to time as well (these might be the only weak spots of the film, but still very good scenes with a quick pace and sharp attention to mixing real actors and "non" actors, a slightly elevated neo-realism). And there are memorable scenes before that last half hour- just seeing the Germans appear up in front of the Italians, menacing in an almost surreal two-dimensional fashion, verbally abusive, taking bread. Scenes precede this, like a couple of brutes who threaten Cesira with a gun. But this one strikes it hard: a state of mind in war cripples the mind.

Finally, they come to the abandoned church, and the infamous scene occurs. It's a very careful study in the disintegration of the human spirit at this point, and more than once, De Sica and his writer, as in times before, pull sincerely and harshly at the heart strings. Rosetta can't stand that her mother didn't protect her more, she's almost shell-shocked, and after a tense scene riding back with an opera singing trucker, she awakes at night to see she's run off with the trucker from before. She comes back, Cesira is furious, but not simply for that. A much greater tragedy has occurred, and it all comes crashing down. Even the most hardened and cynical moviegoer will be hard-pressed to hold back from crying as Loren brushes back her daughter's hair in the church, or tries to look away in the truck. And that final shot, however in sentiment as the final shots of *Umberto D* and *Bicycle Thief*, drive it on home like a dagger.

**Sources:**

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Two-Women-film-1960>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2020/cteq/two-women-vittorio-de-sica-1960/>