

## **Malèna (2000)**

**Malèna** is a 2000 romantic comedy-drama film starring Monica Bellucci and Giuseppe Sulfaro. It was directed and written by Giuseppe Tornatore from a story by Luciano Vincenzoni.

It won the Grand Prix at the 2001 Cabourg Film Festival.

### **Plot**

In 1940 in a little Sicilian town on the day 12-year-old Renato experiences three major events: Italy enters World War II; he gets a new bike; and he first sees the beautiful young woman known as Malèna. Her husband is in the forces in Africa, fighting the British, and she lives alone. Because of her looks and her solitary state, she is an object of lust for all the town's men and of hatred for its women. She keeps an eye on her infirm old father who lives alone, until he gets an anonymous note slandering her, upon which he rejects her.

Renato becomes obsessed with Malèna, spying on her in her house and stalking her when she leaves it. To fuel his erotic fantasies, he steals some of her underwear from her clothes line. When his parents find it in his bedroom, they go wild and try to break his fixation.

Malèna gets the news that her husband is killed, adding grief to her isolation. Rumours grow around her, which she unwisely helps by allowing an unmarried air force officer to visit her after dark. When she is denounced and put on trial, the officer sends testimony that he was nothing more than an occasional friend. The betrayal hurts, but Malèna says nothing to condemn him. After her acquittal, her advocate calls round and rapes her.

Renato decides to be Malèna's protector, asking God and his saints to watch over her and performing little acts of vengeance against her detractors. He does not realise that his views of her are little better than those of the townspeople, and has no idea how Malèna herself feels.

Meanwhile, the war reaches Sicily and the town is bombed by the Allies, killing her father. Now penniless and universally scorned, with nobody willing to give her work, she sinks into prostitution. The townsfolk are happy to see her as a whore rather than a dangerous widow. When Nazi forces occupy the town and Renato encounters his idol with two German soldiers, he faints. His mother decides it is demonic possession, taking him to a priest for exorcism, but his more practical father takes the lad to the town brothel. There he fantasises that the prostitute initiating him is Malèna.

The Germans leave, and to ecstatic cheers American troops enter the town. The women storm the hotel and drag out Malèna, ripping off her clothes, beating her and cutting off her hair. To escape further persecution, she leaves the hostile town. A few days later, her husband Nino, who has survived as a prisoner of war but lost an arm, comes back looking for her. His house has been taken over by displaced people and nobody wants to tell him how to find his wife. Renato leaves him an anonymous note saying that she still loves him but has suffered misfortunes and gone to the city of Messina.

A year later, Nino and Malèna are strolling through the town. Women notice she now looks more matronly and plain. Even if she's still beautiful, they realize that she is no longer a threat. So people begin speaking of her with more respect: when she goes to the market, the women who beat her say good morning and call her madam. Walking home, some fruit falls from her bag and Renato rushes to pick it up. He wishes her good luck and she gives him an enigmatic half-smile, the only time either has ever spoken to or looked openly at the other.

The aged Renato reflects that he has known and loved many women and has forgotten all of them. The only one he can never forget is Malèna.

### **Critical reception**

When first released, *Variety* wrote: "Considerably scaled down in scope and size from his English-language existential epic, *The Legend of 1900*, Giuseppe Tornatore's *Malena* is a beautifully crafted but slight period drama that chronicles a 13-year-old boy's obsession with a small-town siren in World War II Sicily. Combining a coming-of-age story with the sad odyssey of a woman punished for her beauty, the film ultimately has too little depth, subtlety, thematic consequence or contemporary relevance to make it a strong contender for arthouse crossover. But its erotic elements and nostalgic evocation of the same vanished Italy that made international hits of *Cinema Paradiso* and *Il Postino* could supply commercial leverage."

Film critic Roger Ebert compared the film to Federico Fellini's work, writing: "Fellini's films often involve adolescents inflamed by women who embody their carnal desires (e.g. *Amarcord* and *8½*). But Fellini sees the humor that underlies sexual obsession, except (usually but not always) in the eyes of the participants. *Malena* is a simpler story, in which a young man grows up transfixed by a woman and essentially marries himself to the idea of her. It doesn't help that the movie's action grows steadily gloomier, leading to a public humiliation that seems wildly out of scale with what has gone before and to an ending that is intended to move us much more deeply, alas, than it can."

*Malena* is a beautiful and deeply touching film. It is a masterful combination of sites, sounds and colors. The two leading actors (Monica Bellucci and Giuseppe Sulfaro) are simply excellent at what they are supposed to convey in this movie. Apart from her truly majestic elegance, Monica Bellucci invests her character (Malena) with an aura of tragedy, of some profound and unrelenting emotional trauma and pain which remains unspoken throughout the film and reaches its climax at the very end. Malena's stunningly beautiful eyes remain constantly downcast, and her face - tense and pierced through by psychic pain (she rarely raises her face, let alone speaks words). Renato (the teenage boy) wins his audience by his incredibly pure and valiant love for Malena (this affection he carries in his heart for several years). She becomes his muse, his courage, his sense of honor, his whole rationale for confronting difficult and disruptive life of the war-torn Italy.

It's hard to say that Malena was a victim of her own beauty, but it was really what drove all of the conflict in the story. The women at first seemed to be upset with their husbands because of their stares, and things got worse and worse because of the endless gossip which seemed to monopolize the talk of the entire town.

The film takes place during the last days of WWII. Malena's husband has gone to war, but he never returns. She is left to fend for herself under the most extreme circumstances. In order to make ends meet, all the men in town offer Malena anything so they can get favors from her in return.

Watching all this is Renato, a young man who has reached puberty and is completely taken by Malena's beauty. Renato follows this woman all over the town. Whenever Malena is coming into view, Renato abandons his bicycle and makes a point to pass near this gorgeous creature almost breathing her aura. Weaving his way throughout all of this chaos is Renato, a 12-year-old boy who has conceptualized Malena as the ideal woman in all ways. He sees himself as her protector, desperate to save her from the tension that he sees growing around her, the unfair antagonism that is being leveled at her, for really no fault of her own.

In "Malèna" Giuseppe Tornatore mixes a lot of his own memories of war time Sicily à la Fellini's "Amarcord" and combines them with adolescent curiosity à la Truffaut's short "Les Mistons", all centering on the radiant and enchanting beauty of the title character played by Monica Bellucci. "Malèna" however is much more than just a celebration of Bellucci's sinuous body, which on the other hand admittedly is most effectively used when photographed by a capable director. But "Malèna" has other things to offer as well. For one it is an exquisite coming of age portrait, masterfully narrated and shot, marvelously scored by Ennio Morricone, in many ways a companion piece to Tornatore's better known and critically acclaimed "Cinema Paradiso". It's also nostalgic, endearing, funny, touching, daring at times, erotic is a given, yet beautiful and innocent, but then also tragic, sad and even unexpectedly shocking - the film is a symphony of all those emotions brought together through two very strong characters, the boy and the desired woman.

Giuseppe Tornatore is one of the most known today's directors outside Italy, not only because he won the Oscar with "Nuovo Cinema Paradiso" but also because his films are quite clever, and very well exportable: i.e. The Pianist.