St. Giuseppe Moscati: Doctor to the Poor

This film was originally a mini-series produced for Italian television by Rai Fiction and directed by Giacomo Camiotti. In Italian with English and Spanish subtitles, its 177-minute length is split into two parts and is best watched in two sessions. Unlike many hagiographic films made with low budgets, the film has excellent cinematic and production values. It consists of three interwoven stories: the primary one is of Giuseppe Moscati's (Giuseppe Fiorello) transformation from his medical school days in 1903 at the University of Naples into the Doctor to the Poor or as the series was titled "the Holy Physician of Naples." The second story involves his friendship and support for a playboy classmate Giorgio Piromallo (Ettore Bassi) who does not share Moscati's passion for medicine and resents all the good things Moscati does for him to succeed.

The third story involves Moscati's love for a Neapolitan princess Elena Cajafa (Kasia Smutniak) whose father wants her to marry someone who is rich and can maintain her in the manner to which she has become accustomed. He does not look with favor on someone who is always running off to the hospital or staying late to care for a sick patient while breaking promises to attend important events. Moscati finally confesses that he is married to his profession and she must accept him as he is.

The film is highly fictionalized, especially the love story and the deep-set antagonism of his friend. Nonetheless, they provide a necessary change of pace

and scenery; otherwise, the film would be set entirely in the hospital for incurables and his expending his considerable efforts to bring medical care to the disadvantaged.

There are a number of subplots such as his relationship with his mentor, Professor Montefiore, a renowned scientist and unbeliever. Most of us were brought up knowing that there is no real conflict between science and our faith but the myth that there is a conflict has been around for a long time and persists today. Apparently, the University of Naples at the time had an "openly agnostic, amoral, and anti-clerical atmosphere with secret societies" (Miller). Moscati is not only a believer but holds that charity, not science is what has transformed the world. "Without charity," he says "justice and duty are empty words." Later, when Montefiore is dying, he calls for Moscati and has a deathbed conversion.

Moscati refuses to ingratiate himself with the attending physicians who expect obedience even when wrong. This is heightened when he revives a patient left for dead by the powerful Dr. Delillo. This is shown in his use of cardiac resuscitation which had not yet been described, one of the film's few "goofs." Nonetheless, he is appointed first assistant of the hospital where he is in charge of the interns who love him. He tells them: "You will read a book that has never been printed. The book's covers are the beds in our hospital. The contents are the painful bodies of our patients. You have to accompany your studies with compassion for the sick and a big smile too" (Miller). He also has a

beneficial effect on the hospital matron Sister Helga (Emanuela Grimalda) who runs it by the book. She begins to loosen regulations allowing visitors and taking the patients out in the sun.

Another subplot involves a notorious prostitute Cloe (Paola Casella) who is carrying Giorgio's baby and against his wishes does not abort it. After delivering the baby, she leaves it on the doorsteps of an orphanage. Hemorrhaging postpartum, she is brought to the hospital for the incurables. Moscati recognizes her and, knowing she is dying (although she looks far from it), he acquiesces to her request to leave the hospital and carries her to his home presided over by his unmarried sister who is scandalized, setting up another interesting dynamic. Years later, the baby will factor into a reconciliation of Moscati with Elena and Giorgio who had married, initially to spite him, but later fell in love.

Moscati befriends a young thief named Aniello and they develop a close relationship. Aniello's death from tetanus has a profound effect on Moscati and he doubles down on his care for the poor, selling his household furnishings to give money to the poor for food along with prescriptions not just for drugs but for prayers and reception of the sacraments in an attempt to treat their souls and not just

their bodies. He refuses a professoriate to focus on his biochemistry research preferring to continue caring for patients.

Add in an earthquake, a cholera epidemic that the authorities first treat as if it is bubonic plague World War I wounded soldiers, and Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship, it all makes the film awash with visuals and interesting story lines. In 1927, after daily Mass, rounds, and a mid-day meal, he lies down and dies in his sleep at the age of 46 years. The screenwriter fashioned a different and more imaginative ending. It's a movie after all. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1975 and canonized him in 1982 (Miller).

The DVD comes with a booklet that has scene selections, discussion questions, a prayer to the Saint, and his real story, which, as far as it relates to medicine is fairly faithfully told.

REFERENCE

Miller, Michael J. Joseph Moscati: saint, doctor, and miracle-worker. DVD Insert.

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