

DVD Review: Matteo Garrone Experiments with Surrealism in ‘Reality’

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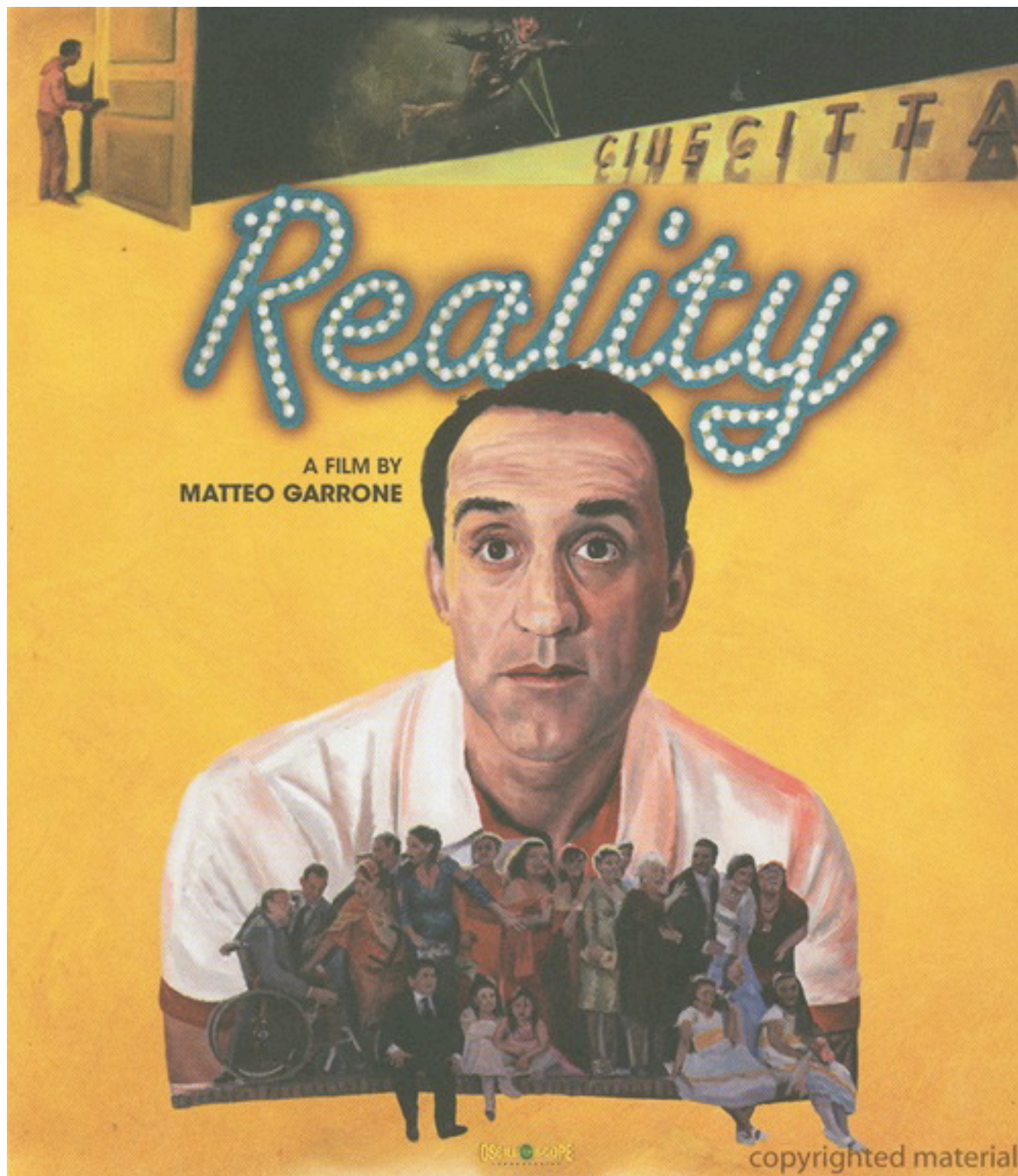
CHICAGO – Like Sebastián Silva’s equally mesmerizing and maddening “Magic Magic,” Matteo Garrone’s “Reality” explores a psyche as it slowly unravels, obscuring the line between truth and fiction until it becomes hopelessly blurred. In fact, both filmmakers utilize a similar technique in portraying their heros’ delusions by occupying their peripheral vision with eerie apparitions.

This might make “Reality” sound like a horror film, but it’s actually a Felliniesque comedy—at least for its first act. A surprising portion of the film’s running time is devoted to detailing the modest life of Luciano (Aniello Arena), a fishmonger with an adoring wife (Loredana Paone) and family who harbors an exuberant love of performance. We first see him greeting a Reality TV show star, Enzo (Raffaele Ferrante), in full drag, playing the role of a smitten ex. Though the faces of his surrounding audience are delighted, the scene straddles the line between amusing and squirm-inducing.



DVD Rating: **4.0/5.0**

It isn’t until the film’s half-hour mark that Luciano auditions (at the request of his children) for the latest season of the Italian series, “Big Brother.” This is where Garrone draws provocative connections between Luciano’s pursuit for approval from studio executives and the ways in which people of faith attempt to please their God. Luciano’s acts of charity are simply spawned by his desire for fame and fortune rather than any sort of charitable instinct, thus causing his behavior to register as utterly artificial. Whether his falseness will be detected by the gauzy lenses of Reality TV is a question that the film resists answering, opting instead for a “Godot”-like descent into surrealism, as Luciano’s paranoid ambition causes his personal life to crumble. The entire premise is more than a little far-fetched, but Garrone’s elegantly absurdist approach (a far cry from the gritty realism of his superior 2008 masterwork, “Gomorrah”) forges a fine duet with Arena’s terrific debut performance. The smile that materializes on his face can look simultaneously deranged and childlike (he’s like Alan Cumming in the body of a rugged gangster).



Reality was released on Blu-ray and DVD on August 13th, 2013.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Garrone's insistence on being behind the camera at all times allows him the freedom to partake in a spontaneous "dance" with his performers through an environment of his own making. His fluid long takes owe more to Malick than Scorsese, while his richly insightful perspective on Italian culture is entirely his own. I can't wait to see what he does next.

"Reality" is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, and includes some splendid special features worthy of a Criterion release. A superb 23-minute interview with Garrone reveals his personal vision for the film (he dubs it "Pirandello-like") as well as the true story upon which it is loosely based. His juxtaposition of the two strikingly diverse sides of Naples—the historic sites and modern locations ripe for a Reality TV crew—were meant to add to the film's dreamlike tone. Composer Alexandre Desplat connected with Garrone over their shared love of Nina Rota, whose work certainly served as influence for the film's ominously enchanting score.

Plentiful behind-the-scenes footage can be found in two vérité featurettes, though the best extra by far is an illuminating portrait of Arena, a convicted felon who has performed for 12 years with his fellow inmates in the prison theatre program, Compagnia della Fortezza. Not only is this a fascinating vignette (providing glimpses of Arena's onstage thesping), it also suggests that the actor's own vital relationship with fantasy may have enabled him to dig even deeper into his role. Considering that Arena is currently serving a life term for killing three men, Luciano's pleasurable imprisonment in the final moments of "Reality" is all the more poignant...and haunting.

'Reality' is released by Oscilloscope Laboratories and stars Aniello Arena, Loredana Simioli, Nando Paone, Nello Iorio, Nunzia Schiano and Rosaria D'Urso. It was written by Ugo Chiti, Maurizio Braucci, Matteo Garrone and Massimo Gaudioso and directed by Matteo Garrone. It was released on DVD on August 13th, 2013. It is rated R.



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