

FOR WHOM LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

(1999)

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Even though 1999 was my fourth year as a member of the artistic community of Los Angeles, I still had not been an invited guest to the Oscars-the entertainment world's ultimate celebration. As a concert pianist, and a man of the theatre, I really didn't know if I ever would be. Working on the stages of New York and Europe, Hollywood and its Oscars seemed to be the stuff that magic is made of. But once here, in the thick of the mirage, the fuss became something to "poo-poo," especially when the invitation for this year's event was delivered to our doorstep.

"What, the Oscars? WHY would I want to go to those? I've been to enough award ceremonies to last me a lifetime! If you're nominated for something, maybe then, there's a point, but who wants to be a "nobody" in a crowd of "look-at-us, aren't-we-somebodies!"

So, my spouse dragged me with fingernails scratching the pavement. We had just said hello to Angelica Houston at the tip of the red carpet, when I suddenly found myself directly behind a slim man with a bald spot and protruding almost clown-like hair-Roberto Begnini.

The "poo-poo-ing" disappeared. I was floating in a childhood dream. Could it be me, little Hershey from Cote St. Luc, The "Golden Ghetto" suburb of Montreal, standing here with Roberto Begnini? I was aware that Mr. Begnini was just a person-and just as I was reminding myself of exactly that, Mr. Begnini magically became that man marching a high two-step, and flailing his arms about with that silly "shmateh" on his head. The magic of Life Is Beautiful, with its lilting music, delicately dancing in the background was with me. There was that look from Giosue's point of view, through that little slit of that metal box, and suddenly I was Giosue...the music dancing again, and then, as if my heart was ripped in two, the shots. One, two-maybe a third just be sure.

And right there, right on the red carpet, I started to cry. In this one split second, all my worlds came together. I was holding the hand of the woman I loved. I was at the largest, most prominent gathering of performers and audience (if even by satellite) in the world. I was standing with my favorite artist whose work was a mesmerizingly transcendental Holocaust story about love (as a child of survivors, the Holocaust and all that it means, is a prominent part of my being)... and all this was being transmitted to some one billion people all over the world. Secretly, even though I suspected that Shakespeare in Love would take the award for best picture, I hoped against hope that by some miracle, Life Is Beautiful would take the prize, and all things in the world would be right.

Well, the Oscars went as Oscars do, but I will say, I missed my refrigerator. After about two hours, being an audience member became hard work, and although it was fun work, I couldn't help but think about what I would have created for myself and my spouse to eat during commercials. When the ceremony was over, all things (and people) suddenly became equal. Stars (who seemed like they wanted "out of there" as quickly as possible) and the rest of the world, milled about in the passe-green lobby of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. It became plainly obvious that even for the winners-this all was a JOB. The endless posing-not phony, mind you, just all with the goal of "this is our business, and we gotta' make the most out of it." You'd never think twice about Macy's hawking its wares, would you?

And soon it was time to go. We headed home, back onto the red carpet, this time with Sophia Loren, who reminded me of "what it must have been like" when Hollywood wasn't just a business but a dream. On the way out, we bumped into the lovely Japanese filmmaker who took the short documentary award for her film about Jewish senior citizens. We introduced ourselves, and told her that her acceptance speech ("But most of all, I thank my mother who MADE me leave Japan to follow my dream.") was the most moving of the evening. We made our way home.

When we opened the kitchen door, our two houseguests from England greeted us.

"So, how was it? Did you rub shoulders with so and so, and who did you talk to, and who was there, and was it as gross as it was on television?" (He's an academic - she's a painter and a writer.)

"And that Roberto Begnini, Well, (remember the heavy English accent and sing-song) he just turns my stomach!"

The tirade began.

"Wasn't he just awful? He's so phony; I can't stand him; I hated the film; making a joke out of the Holocaust; jumping on chairs, so this, so that, so the other thing. I can't believe that it took any awards at all. . . blah, blah, blah."

"Well," I said... "saying that such performances are phony is like saying that all academics are boring," (Now I'm ruffling some feathers.)

The academics respond with, "They are." (This almost blew the wind out of the argument, but I was careful enough to ignore it.)

"First of all. . ." say I, "this is show business, The very idea of it is entertainment, a show, a performance. The use of the word "real" to describe any of it is foolish. None of it is real, and if it is, who is going to care?

The idea of it is to create an illusion that means something, that acts as a mirror perhaps, so that when it's held up to my face I see myself. I see my life. I see that someone else understands. If it

doesn't do that, I may as well watch the news. Now, as for Life Is Beautiful. Roberto Begnini took a devastatingly painful subject, and made it into art.

He crafted every frame to mean something, He made me see it through the eyes of this beautiful child, Giosue, and suddenly I was that child. It's very likely, that had I been alive sixty years ago, I may have been that child -at least I hoped-that had things turned out that way for my family and me, that my Papa would have given me that beautiful tank for winning the game! How much more meaningful my Papa's love would have been - because he died for me!

"I'm tired of reality. I live it. Every now and then I want a good metaphor to remind me of just how thrilled I am to be a feeling human being! Don't you get the IDEA?"

Suddenly, I wondered what these people were doing in my house. Thankfully, people do recognize ideas, and they do take that "mirror image" home with them and guard it safely in their hearts, as so many did with Life is Beautiful-as if it had happened only to them.

The truth is, all artists, if they are really that, look for their own voices, their own way of holding up that mirror of ideas-that simple story that affects every one of us-because after a11, we are all people. Everybody has a right to a feeling-to an opinion-even to a judgment, as these "friends" had about this film and its star. And then, I caught myself being angry, opinionated and judgmental about these strange individuals standing before me. What kind of people were these houseguests of mine? Was it that the Holocaust happened to other people, and in their eyes, one must never make light of such things? As a child of survivors, did I have more of a right to judge the material than they? Were they just stupid? (Unfair, but its what I thought.) Why couldn't they see what I saw?

For whom, and why, I wondered, is life really beautiful.