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'Nights of Cabiria': Restored Masterpiece

By JANET MASLIN

There is more grace and courage in the famous image of Giulietta Masina smiling through her tears in Federico Fellini's 1957 "Nights of Cabiria," the restored treasure of the summer movie season, than there is in all the fire-breathing blockbusters Hollywood has to offer.

The star's prize-winning, heartbreaking performance, the story's allegorical resonance and Fellini's sweeping, soulful vision of a Roman prostitute's resilient humanity mark "Nights of Cabiria" as a cinematic masterpiece. Not coincidentally, "Nights of Cabiria" has been refurbished and revived by the same team (Bruce Goldstein of Film Forum and Mike Thomas) who brought back Godard's "Contempt" last year, and who display the same acumen in reissuing a film of special prescience. Though it was shot in black and white amid the stark poverty of postwar Italy, neither the style nor the searching of "Cabiria" has grown dated at all.

As an outgrowth of characters played by Miss Masina in her husband's earlier films, "The White Sheik," "Il Bidone" and "La Strada," the unforgettable Cabiria is a tiny, scrappy survivor who drifts almost magically among the film's varied realms. In three astonishing long sequences here, she is taken under the wing of a movie star, disillusioned by a religious pilgrimage with carnival overtones and cruelly tricked by a hypnotist who exposes her once-secret dreams.

The fine new 35-millimeter print, which yellows at a few points but retains a beautiful depth and clarity, also includes an episode that has not been seen in the film since its original showing 41 years ago at the Cannes Film Festival.

In this section of the movie, a character who became known as "the man with the sack" takes Cabiria with him as he distributes food to people so poor that they live in underground caves. Beyond affording Cabiria a premonition of her own possible future, this fluid and mysterious episode drew the censure of Roman Catholic authorities, who saw the good Samaritan as a reproach to organized religion (there are many in the film) and asked that it be excised.

In the course of her eventful travels, Cabiria undergoes the profound spiritual evolution that gives the film its lingering grandeur. Anyone dismayed by the hyperkinetic emptiness of so much current film spectacle will find the antidote -- a deep, wrenching and eloquent filmgoing experience -- right here.