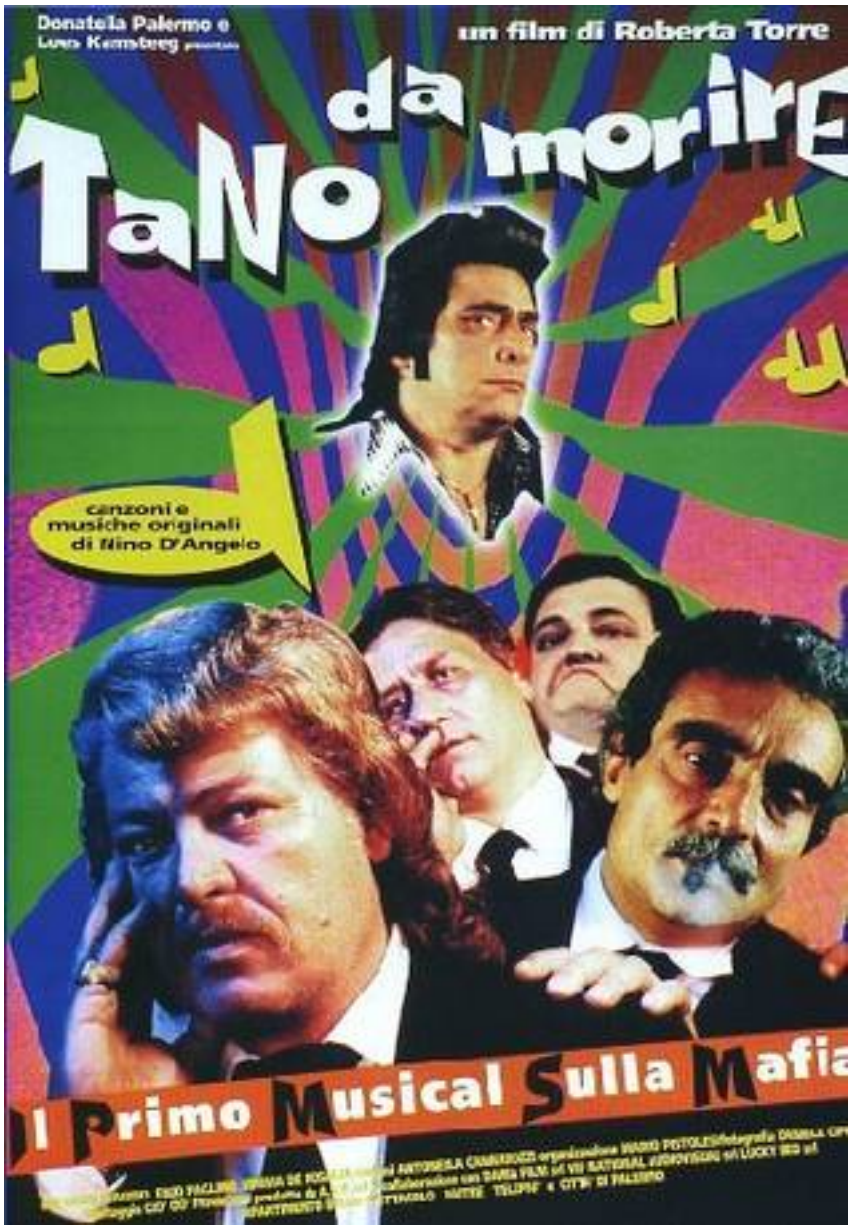
Tano da morire: Singing, Dancing, Shooting

George De Stefano (February 10, 2010)



The 1997 Mafia musical satire "Tano da morire" (finally) gets a U.S. release. There has never been a movie about the Sicilian Mafia quite like it... Surreal and often very funny, stylistically indebted to early Almodòvar and the American “trash” auteur John Waters, satirizes Mafia values and folkways, and in particular its perverse sex and gender codes

Tano da morire (To Die for Tano)

Written and directed by Roberta Torre

A Leisure Time Features Release

Whatever else can be said about Tano da morire (To die for Tano), the 1997 film made in Palermo by the Milanese director Roberta Torre, one thing is indisputable: there has never been a movie about the Sicilian Mafia quite like it.

Italy has produced countless films about La Cosa Nostra, in a wide variety of styles and tonal registers. But from its opening scene of a funeral procession to its penultimate sequence, a rap music video set in Palermo's Vucciria marketplace, Tano da morire is a radical departure from previous cinematic treatments of the Mafia.

The film was a commercial and critical success in Italy, winning several prestigious awards, as well

as generating some controversy. But it never found an American distributor. Now, nearly 13 years after its Italian release, it opens in New York City on February 10, with a limited national release to follow.

I first encountered Tano some years ago when it had a one-off screening at New York University's Casa Italiana. To be honest, I didn't quite know what to make of it. I admired its audacity, its formal inventiveness and its eclectic soundtrack (by veteran pop star Nino D'Angelo) that mixed Sicilian and Neapolitan folk music with rock, pop, and rap. The fact that Torre made the film with an entirely nonprofessional cast of Palermo residents – including some low-level mafiosi – imparted an authenticity no studio film could match.

But I had another, more ambiguous, and troubling reaction, one I later learned was shared by some Italian viewers. The film wanted me to laugh at the Mafia, and that made me uncomfortable. Wasn't Torre trivializing something deadly serious by making comedy of it, and musical comedy, no less, with exuberantly wacky production numbers featuring singing and dancing mafiosi?

Seeing the film again recently changed my opinion. Far from being an amusing if problematic

divertissement -- or a silly sitcom like the American Mafia farce "Analyze This" – Tano da morire is a serious film about the Mafia as a way of life, a culture. Surreal and often very funny, stylistically indebted to early Almodòvar and the American "trash" auteur John Waters, Tano da morire satirizes Mafia values and folkways, and in particular its perverse sex and gender codes.

The film opens with a funeral procession wending its way through arid, rocky countryside, mourners following the coffin as a typical Sicilian brass band plays. But there's something off about this familiar, even archetypal scene. The music, far from solemn, has some rollicking New Orleans funk in its syncopated rhythms and bluesy horns, and the procession, instead of ending up at a cemetery, vanishes into thin air.

A gauntly handsome, mustachioed man – the film's narrator – next appears to tell us that what we are about to see is a true story. And indeed, the title character, Tano Guarrasi, was an actual mafioso who, in 1988, was shot to death in his Vucciria butcher shop, a casualty of the savage power struggle between gangsters from Corleone and the older Palermo clans.

Torre tells Guarrasi's story not to denounce Mafia violence or to expose the corrupt alliance of Cosa Nostra and "legitimate" business. Instead of these familiar approaches, she mixes anthropology and satire to examine the cultural values of La Cosa Nostra. She does this mainly though a series of musical set pieces, most of them comic.

Tano's initiation into the Mafia is set in a 70s-style gay club, with big-haired gangsters in bell-

bottoms and stacked heels performing a homoerotic disco number, “Simm’a Mafia” (We are the Mafia). As they sing the catchy paean to “la società onorata,” they twirl, rub noses, blow kisses, and fondle Tano, the compliant initiate. In a beauty salon a group of disgruntled Mafia wives complain about their men to a samba beat while wearing swordfish heads as hats. An argument between the overbearing patriarch Tano and his sexually frustrated teenage daughter is done as 50s-style rock ‘n roll duet. And then there is that Vucciria production number – “Tano’s Rap”-- with crowds of dancing and rapping palermitani brandishing octopi and using long cucuzza squashes as microphones.

The musical numbers are often campy fun, but they do more than entertain. They capture, in the span of a few minutes, aspects of the Mafia that have been amply documented by investigative journalists and social scientists. La Cosa Nostra is known to be violently homophobic; members who are found out to be gay are likely to be killed. Yet the Mafia is a sex-segregated milieu in which “men of honor” form intense emotional attachments, often stronger than those with their wives and girlfriends. Torre’s spoof of Mafia initiation rites brings subtext to the surface, exposing the unacknowledged – and inadmissible -- homoeroticism in the Mafia’s homosociality.

In song and in hilarious dialogue, the Mafia wives criticize and champion the Cosa Nostra value

system. They complain about their violent, unfaithful husbands and lament their lot in life. But they proudly call themselves “women of honor” and ferociously denounce anyone who violates the Mafia’s codes, whether “pentiti” who testify for the government or women whose comportment offends them. Renate Siebert explored this contradictory mix of complicity and victimization in her 1996 book, Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia.

Satire is not kind, and many of the images in Tano da morire are unflattering to Sicilians. The lowlife ambiance of criminality and casual violence, the gender oppression and sexual hypocrisy, the intense emotion that too often devolves into hysteria – and I haven’t even mentioned the hairstyles and fashions – don’t exactly add up to a portrait of “Sicilia bedda” (beautiful Sicily). When the film came out, some Sicilians objected that it ridiculed not only the Mafia, but Sicily itself.

Satirists have to be merciless. But Torre herself has described her approach as not only satirical but also anthropological. So what is the responsibility of such a filmmaker to the community she portrays, the people without whose involvement she could not have made her film? Given that Torre is a Milanese, albeit one who moved to Palermo years before she made Tano, these questions are particularly fraught. Torre is hardly the first northern Italian film director to make a movie about the South, and if regional origins were a disqualification, then Visconti shouldn’t have made La Terra Trema or Il Gattopardo. But, one could argue, Visconti didn’t make Sicilians look exotically grotesque.

No doubt some will disagree, but I don’t believe Torre has exploited or denigrated Sicily and Sicilians. By enlisting local people not only as performers but as collaborators who contributed to the screenplay, she made them active participants in the film’s creation. Moreover, Tano da morire seems to have been a film Sicilians needed in the late 1990s. The horrific violence perpetrated in the 1980s by corleonesi gangsters that culminated in the shocking assassinations, in 1992, of prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, not only enraged Sicilians. The bloody depravity of the bosses and their men stripped away the remaining vestiges of the Mafia’s self-flattering mythology of themselves as tradition-minded men of honor.

With the worst of the violence having passed and Cosa Nostra discredited as never before, and

with many of its top leaders in prison thanks to Falcone and Borsellino, why not mock the Mafia? In a 1998 interview with the New York Times, the iconoclastic Sicilian filmmaker Franco Moresco said that Tano da morire “reflects a historical necessity, which ten years ago would have been impossible. Ten years ago the actors from the Vucciria neighborhood would not have participated. They would have been afraid to make fun of a Mafioso, to make fun of ‘omerta.’ They were the same people who used to see dead bodies in the streets.”

Perhaps this is why Leoluca Orlando, the anti-Mafia mayor of Palermo in the 1990s, enthusiastically supported Tano da morire, calling the film “an act of liberation.”

Links
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