

JANUS FILMS

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SHOESHINE

One of the greatest achievements in the cinematic revolution known as Italian neorealism, Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* stands as a timeless masterpiece of trenchant social observation and stirring emotional humanism. In postwar Rome, street kids Giuseppe (Rinaldo Smordoni) and Pasquale (Franco Interlenghi) shine the shoes of American servicemen in hopes of saving enough money to purchase a beautiful horse. But when Giuseppe's criminal brother tricks them into participating in a confidence scam, the duo are arrested and then ground through the merciless gears of the juvenile detention system until their once-unbreakable friendship becomes the first casualty in an inexorable sequence of tragic events. Scripted by an all-star team of screenwriters (led by neorealist legend Cesare Zavattini), and directed by De Sica with an uncompromising eye for the period's singular personalities and harsh conditions, *Shoeshine* is filmmaking at its most soulful, urgent, and heartbreakingly beautiful.

This 4K restoration was completed at L'Immagine Ritrovata by The Film Foundation and the Cineteca di Bologna, in association with Orium SA, using the best surviving original elements. Funding for the restoration was provided by the Hobson Lucas Family Foundation.

Italy | 1946 | 92 minutes | Black & White | In Italian with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

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VITTORIO DE SICA BIOGRAPHY

Vittorio De Sica is one of the most renowned and influential directors associated with Italian neorealism. Born in Sora, Italy, on July 7, 1901, De Sica began acting in the theater during the 1920s, when he worked in Tatiana Pavlova's company. In the early 1930s, he founded a troupe with actor Giuditta Rissone, his future wife. He transitioned to filmmaking with *Red Roses* (1940), based on a stage play in which he had starred four years earlier. Toward the end of World War II, De Sica embarked on a creative partnership with screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, the most enthusiastic proponent of the revolutionary cinematic movement known as neorealism. Their first project together was *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), followed by several other neorealist landmarks: *The Gates of Heaven* (1945), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), and *Umberto D.* (1952). Many of these titles garnered international acclaim as well as critical and box-office success; their impact on cinema history, in depicting the dignity and fortitude of the destitute, cannot be overstated. Even after the decline of neorealism, De Sica and Zavattini continued to collaborate: their *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963) won the



Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film. Seven years later, De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* would pick up the same honor, along with the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. De Sica's final film was a 1974 adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's novella *The Voyage*.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Typically regarded as Vittorio De Sica's first masterpiece, *Shoeshine* (1946) also represents a high-water mark of the Italian neorealist movement, which had begun with Luchino Visconti's *Obsession* (1943) and De Sica's own *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944). As the latter title suggests, De Sica worried over the youths of Italy and how they were being affected by postwar poverty, crime, and institutional failures. For his follow-up to *The Gates of Heaven* (1945), the director returned to this theme, which he outlined in an article for the Italian magazine *Tempo*. In answer to the question "What film would you like to make?," De Sica described a story "about children who worked for a living who are aware that they shouldn't be doing what they are doing for a living," based on the homeless orphans he had observed shining the shoes of American soldiers. Photographs of these children accompanied the text; their heading, "I ragazzi" ("The Boys"), was also briefly considered as a title for De Sica's film. The eventual title, *Sciuscià*, is a Neapolitan spin on the English word *shoeshine*.

As models for Giuseppe and Pasquale, the protagonists of *Shoeshine*, De Sica drew on a couple of boys whom he had encountered: the twelve-year-old Giuseppe and his younger pal Luigi. Both worked the shoeshine beat on Rome's Via Veneto; sometimes, when they earned enough money, they would travel to a high-end racetrack in Villa Borghese, where they entertained themselves—and, for a moment or two, tasted freedom—by horseback riding. In the summer of 1945, their story was transformed into a treatment by screenwriter Cesare Zavattini,

CAST

Pasquale Maggi	Franco Interlenghi
Giuseppe Filippucci	Rinaldo Smordoni
Raffaele	Aniello Mele
Arcangeli	Bruno Ortenzi
Staffera	Emilio Cigoli

CREDITS

Director	Vittorio De Sica
Written by	Sergio Amidei Adolfo Franci Cesare Giulio Viola Cesare Zavattini
Producer	Paolo William Tamburella
Cinematographer	Anchise Brizzi
Composer	Alessandro Cicognini
Editor	Nicolò Lazzari
Production design by	Ivo Battelli Giulio Lombardozzi
Production manager	Nino Ottavi

with whom De Sica had worked on *Children*. Alfa Cinematografica had approached the director with an offer to fund his project about shoeshine boys, which would build upon a foundational story line by Cesare Giulio Viola (author of the novel from which *Children* had been adapted). To research their subject, De Sica and Zavattini visited some of the real locations that would be recreated for the film, including a notorious minors' prison. Deeply impacted by the experience, Zavattini wrote a nineteen-page treatment with, he explained, "an ethical objective driving the entire film. The children's loneliness and the story of the white horse was the matrix." In the final version of *Shoeshine*, Giuseppe and Pasquale's desire to purchase a beautiful white horse sets off a tragic chain of misunderstandings and systematic cruelties, culminating in their wrongful imprisonment for burglary. Broken down by merciless jailers and the dog-eat-dog tribalism of their fellow inmates, the boys turn on each other with shocking violence.

Over the course of two months, this initial treatment was transformed into a feature-length screenplay by Zavattini, Viola, Sergio Amidei (cowriter of *Open City*), and Adolfo Franci (cowriter of *The Gates of Heaven*). According to his biographer David Brancaleone, Zavattini had largely adversarial working relationships with the other writers, especially with Amidei. A doctrinaire Communist, Amidei contested Zavattini's approach to the subject matter, which differed from the party's official socioeconomic ideology. Nonetheless, the team finished the screenplay in time for the commencement of shooting on October 10, 1945; production wrapped on January 6, 1946. Interior scenes were shot at Rome's Scalera Studios. But, in typical neorealist style, most of *Shoeshine*'s exteriors were filmed by De Sica and his crew (including cinematographer Anchise Brizzi) on location in Rome in order to capture the material conditions of the period—except the final sequence, for which a soundstage mock-up of a forest bridge lends a surreal quality to the story's culminating tragedy.

Casting the film's lead roles was extremely important: the two protagonists needed to seem like everyday boys—without the

polish of experienced actors—but also possess enough self-composure to elicit audience sympathy across a ninety-two-minute narrative. De Sica found his Pasquale in Franco Interlenghi and his Giuseppe in Rinaldo Smordoni, both first-time thespians who embody a perfect mixture of toughness and innocence. Smordoni would go on to act in only two more films, while Interlenghi landed roles in several more prestigious productions, including Federico Fellini's *I vitelloni*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Vanquished* (both 1953), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). In a 1962 interview with Studs Terkel, De Sica claimed that all the other shoeshine boys who appeared in the film were authentic street children.

Brancaleone and others cite disappointing box-office returns for *Shoeshine* in Italy, where the postwar market had become oversaturated with neorealist titles—and where, once World War II ended, audiences flocked to the more uplifting films that flooded in from Hollywood. The United States and France, however, celebrated *Shoeshine* as a new standard-bearer for sincere humanism and moral seriousness. Along with a nomination for Best Original Screenplay, *Shoeshine* received a special Academy Award, the first of its kind for a foreign-language film, in 1948. More than that, *Shoeshine* garnered hosannas from a vanguard of filmmakers and critics who saw in De Sica's work of art a naturalistic yet poetic view of the human condition. Six years after the release of *Shoeshine*, French critic and *Cahiers du cinéma* founder André Bazin lauded its director in a seminal essay, "De Sica: Metteur en scène." Bazin would influence many of the French New Wave directors of the 1950s and '60s to esteem De Sica's oeuvre as an exemplar of cinematic truth and dignity. In the U.S., critics James Agee and Pauline Kael exalted the film as one of the greatest of all time (Agee: "*Shoeshine* is about as beautiful, moving, and heartening a film as you are ever likely to see"), while no less an authority than Orson Welles offered the highest praise of all: "In handling a camera, I feel I have no peer. But what De Sica can do, that I can't do. I ran his *Shoeshine* again recently, and the camera disappeared, the screen disappeared; it was just life." ●

