

JANUS FILMS

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MIRACLE IN MILAN

Once upon a time in postwar Italy . . . Vittorio De Sica's follow-up to his international triumph *Bicycle Thieves* is an enchanting neorealist fairy tale in which he combines his celebrated slice-of-life poetry with flights of graceful comedy and storybook fantasy. On the outskirts of Milan, a band of vagabonds work together to form a shantytown. When it is discovered that the land they occupy contains oil, however, it's up to the cherubic orphan Totò (Francesco Golisano)—with some divine help—to save their community from greedy developers. Tipping their hats to the imaginative whimsy of Charles Chaplin and René Clair, De Sica and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini (adapting his own novel) craft a bighearted ode to the nobility of everyday people.

Restored from the 35 mm original camera negative by Cineteca di Bologna and Compass Film, in collaboration with Mediaset, Infinity TV, Arthur Cohn, and Variety Communications, at L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory in Bologna, Italy.

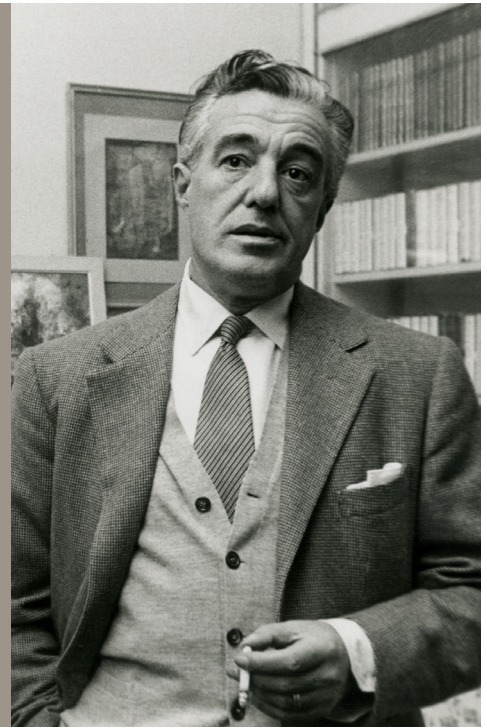
Italy | 1951 | 97 minutes | Black & White | In Italian with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

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VITTORIO DE SICA

Alongside Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica is arguably the most renowned and influential of the directors associated with Italian neorealism. Born in Sora, Italy, on July 7, 1902, De Sica began acting in the theater in the 1920s, when he worked in Tatiana Pavlova's company. In the early 1930s, he founded a troupe with Giuditta Rissone, his future wife, and in 1940 he transitioned to film directing with *Red Roses* (based on a play in which he had starred four years earlier). Toward the end of World War II, De Sica forged a creative alliance with legendary screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, the most enthusiastic proponent of the revolutionary cinematic movement known as neorealism. Their first project was *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), followed by several other neorealist landmarks: *The Gate of Heaven* (1945), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), and *Umberto D.* (1952). Almost all of these titles garnered international awards, honors, and critical and box-office success, and 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 1963 film *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film. Seven years later, De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* would win the same award, as well as 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*.



VITTORIO DE SICA ON *MIRACLE IN MILAN*

*The piece excerpted here was originally published in a 1968 book featuring the *Miracle in Milan* screenplay.*

I have been asked how and why I made *Miracle in Milan*. I cannot give a precise answer, however much I ransack my memory in search of the state of mind that preceded the birth of this film and that accomplished its laborious realization.

I think, however, all the trimmings aside, what decided and won me over to the idea imagined by [Cesare] Zavattini was, as always, the humanity of the central figure, who, beneath his present disguises, is again closely related to the characters of the worker and child in *Bicycle Thieves* and the boys in *Shoeshine*.

Once again, then, I have remained faithful to the world of my imagination. But, from the stylistic point of view, *Miracle in Milan* opened up new paths for me. Its content is humanist, but its inspiration, the climate in which the characters evolve their way of thinking and behaving, and their very fate itself, is more closely related to the legends of the North, to [Hans Christian] Andersen, for example, than to the reality of our present-day Latin world. Here is no hymn in praise of poverty—as I read somewhere, to my horror—nor any condemnation of riches. (I do not think either Zavattini or I can be accused of such bad taste in making use of an antithesis that would leave little room in the work for any art!) This is a fable, slightly wistful perhaps, but quietly optimistic within its poetic framework, if I may be allowed to give it such a name. Men and angels are to be found here, living on good terms together.

It is essentially a fairy story (the oil burns all night, but the following morning it stops), peopled by strange creatures who believe in

miracles and who work them themselves. It is a fairy tale for young and old. And yet the story is always posed midway between reality and fantasy, so I have tried to express it in the style best suited to that kind of story. In this style, I had two masters, [René] Clair and [Charles] Chaplin, towering above me with all the force of their genius. Their example drew me on, and yet it was a dangerous attraction. I had to undertake the difficult enterprise of embarking, on my own account, on a road that was at least equidistant from both of them. It is not my place to say, and I am not qualified to do so in any case, whether this was a new or a well-chosen departure. ●

CAST

Lolotta	Emma Gramatica
Totò	Francesco Golisano
Rappi	Paolo Stoppa
Mobbi	Guglielmo Barnabò
Edvige	Brunella Bovo

CREDITS

Director	Vittorio De Sica
Producer	Vittorio De Sica
Based on a story by	Cesare Zavattini
Screenplay by	Cesare Zavattini
	Vittorio De Sica
	Suso Cecchi D'Amico
	Mario Chiari
	Adolfo Franci
Cinematographer	G. R. Aldo
Music by	Alessandro Cicognini
Special effects	Ned Mann
Editor	Eraldo Da Roma

PRODUCTION HISTORY

If such a thing as the seemingly paradoxical “neorealist fairy tale” exists, then it is best represented by *Miracle in Milan* (1951), Vittorio De Sica’s uplifting sui generis fable. As adapted from a novel by Cesare Zavattini, *Miracle* depicts a poor young man whose boundless generosity and optimism allow him to obtain the supernatural power of granting wishes to his fellow shantytown denizens. Though not the first director to expand the dimensions of neorealism, De Sica was the first to use the mode to tell what amounted to a fairy tale—in 1948, Roberto Rossellini had begun work on the dark comedic fantasy *The Machine That Kills Bad People*, but due to production issues he was forced to complete the film four years later. *Miracle* not only offered viewers an initial showcase of what could be accomplished within the apparently stringent parameters of neorealism’s gritty, grounded style, but it also took the risk of alienating critics and viewers who believed in the inviolable artistic and political sanctity of the neorealist movement.

Indeed, with *Miracle in Milan*, De Sica was departing radically from the work—most notably *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)—that had placed him at the forefront of that movement. Where his previous films depicted in somber and unflinching detail the everyday travails of the working class, *Miracle in Milan* interjected outlandishly preternatural and humorous events into the world of Italy’s most impoverished citizens. Not surprisingly, De Sica was initially drawn to Zavattini’s story (which the writer first penned in 1940 as a script titled *Totò il buono*) by “the humanity of the central figure, who, beneath his present disguises, is again closely related to the characters of the worker and child in *Bicycle Thieves* and the boys in *Shoeshine*.” Zavattini envisioned that this central figure would be played by actor Antonio de Curtis (best known by his stage name, Totò), who inspired the protagonist’s name. But in the decade that passed between the publication of *Totò il buono* and its cinematic adaptation, Totò had become too much in demand and had set his sights on other projects. De Sica and Zavattini would have to find a new leading man.

In the meantime, tension grew between De Sica and Zavattini. The two had begun working together with *The Children Are Watching Us*

(1944) and then collaborated on a string of enormously influential successes, including *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves*. But De Sica felt Zavattini was asking for too much money for the rights to *Totò il buono* and balked at paying until producer Alfredo Guarini negotiated a fair fee. Then, as was customary in a postwar Italian film industry where producers often hired superfluous personnel, *Miracle in Milan* added several others to its screenwriting team: Suso Cecchi D’Amico, Mario Chiari, and Adolfo Franci. According to Zavattini biographer David Brancaleone, these writers—who, to Zavattini’s chagrin, received coauthorship credit—did not care for or understand *Miracle in Milan* and made no contributions to its script. De Sica would eventually take pains to credit Zavattini as the sole author of *Totò il buono* and his only coscreenwriter for the story’s cinematic adaptation.

In bringing the *Miracle* script to life, De Sica and Zavattini adhered to neorealist principles by choosing novices for the most important roles while looking to nonprofessionals for the extended cast. The part of the kindhearted and inventive Totò was given to cherubic Francesco Golisano, possessor of two prior film credits, while the part of his adorably shy romantic interest, Edvige, was given to Brunella Bovo. Best known today for her leading role in Federico Fellini’s *The White Sheik* (1952), Bovo was, with *Miracle*, appearing on-screen for only the second time. For the inhabitants of the film’s shantytown, De Sica and Zavattini scouted Milan’s blue-collar districts. Several homeless men and women won bit parts and roles as extras, and De Sica exercised one of his greatest directorial strengths—working with nonprofessionals—to obtain effective performances from people who had never before acted or stood in front of a camera.

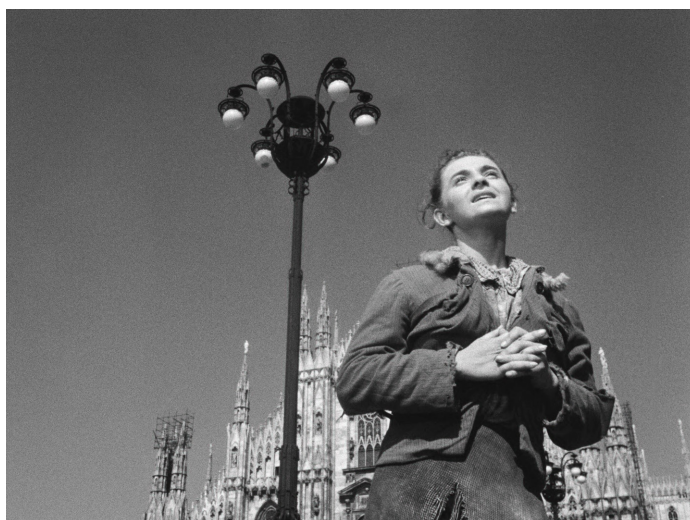
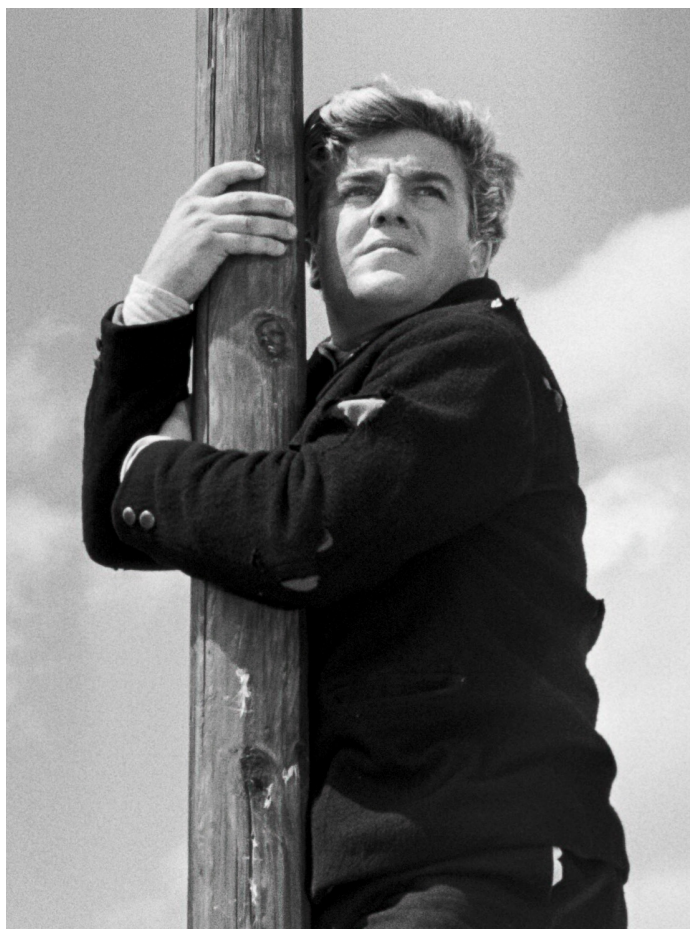
Preproduction involved the all-important selection of the film’s primary exterior location, which had to convincingly represent the sort of urban outskirts where real-life homeless villages had developed as a result of Italy’s postwar housing crisis. For this purpose, De Sica and Zavattini utilized a barren stretch of wasteland in Ortica, a district along the outer limits of Milan. There the production crew constructed the shantytown that becomes as much of a character in *Miracle* as Totò or Edvige. To evoke varied weather, the crew used overly bright electrical illumination to



imitate rays of cloud-piercing sunshine, artificial vapor to imitate fog, and chalk to imitate snow. Most unconventional of all, at least for a neorealist film, was the enlistment of Hollywood veteran Ned Mann for the production's special effects. Mann had worked in the industry since 1925 as a visual- and technical-effects expert on more than two dozen titles, and *Miracle* would be his last. Mann died in 1967 at the age of seventy-four.

Miracle in Milan premiered in Italy in February 1951 and was then shown two months later at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Grand Prize. At the end of the year, *Miracle* was received

positively in the United States, where it won the Best Foreign-Language Film award from the New York Film Critics Circle. But both ends of Italy's political spectrum viewed the unconventional film with suspicion. For left-wing critics, *Miracle* evaded social realities by engaging in religiosity and whimsy, while for right-wing critics the film exaggerated and exacerbated the class conflict between rich and poor. Zavattini later countered criticisms of the film with a reminder that in fables fantastical situations and happily-ever-after endings offer not mere escapism but a vision of a better world, by placing into relief "the immense sadness of life being the way it is and not as it should be." ●



TRIVIA

Because of Totò's ascendance as a film star during the 1940s, Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini changed the title of their film from *Totò il buono* (*Totò the Good*) to the ironic *I poveri disturbano* (*The Poor Are a Nuisance*). The film's producers, as well as Christian Democrat censors, deemed this new title too controversial, however, and De Sica and Zavattini settled on *Miracle in Milan*. Zavattini later commented on the controversy: "The truth is that the poor really are considered a nuisance, and that's why they wanted to prevent us from saying so."

Zavattini wrote about the making of *Miracle* for the Communist daily newspaper *L'Unità*. In his account, he describes the moving sight of a homeless Ortica couple living under a tarpaulin, immersed in fog. Zavattini suffered a chest infection from breathing in that fog.

The original ending of *Miracle* would have depicted the shantytown's inhabitants flying around the world, only to find "private property" signs everywhere they tried to land.

The film's score was composed by Alessandro Cicognini, the most influential film musician in Italy after World War II. He and De Sica often worked together throughout their careers, including on *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Umberto D.*

The film cost 180 million lire, triple the amount it had cost to make the low-budget *Bicycle Thieves*. De Sica never worked with special effects again.

Director Miloš Forman said the film was his most direct influence. "Although it was banned, we were able to see it at the film school," he said. "I saw it maybe fifteen or twenty times."

The song from the film ended up being a rallying cry for students in Prague in 1968. The film was also highly censored in the Soviet Union when it first came out because officials thought the characters were flying "to the West" at the end of the film, and that the film would encourage people to try to escape the USSR.