



The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ Phone: 312-372-5111
E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

BELLA

These days a movie can have two lives: the first and shorter life is the time it spends in the theaters, projected on to the big screens; and the second and longer, much longer, life is the time it is available on DVD, either to be purchased or to be rented. This piece is an essay about a movie, but it is done very much in the style of the book reports we used to have to write in grade school, the purpose of which (aside from trying to convince the teacher that we had actually read the book) was always to make the book sound terrific so that others would want to read it. This movie is indeed terrific – it was deserving of a longer run than what it had in the theaters, even though it had a pretty good one there, and it is deserving of a very long run on DVD. If you are so minded, you can rent it before deciding to buy it, or you can save yourself the rental fee and go directly into purchase mode, for this is a movie that you will want to keep on hand. Although definitely not a comedy and not even all that upbeat, it is a film that encourages its viewers about life generally, and so is an excellent, non-pharmacological way to ease out of the depressions and dark valleys that everyone ends up in from time to time.

The story behind the story of *Bella* is nearly as interesting as the movie itself. It was made by a trio of novices to the world of film production, who had an idea of what they wanted to do, but not a lot of money with which to do it. They wrote it, cast it, and headed into production in a way that made it painfully clear to everyone that no one associated with the project could possibly be in it for the money. Indeed, their poverty gave an opening for the movie's Franciscan

connection. The story is set in New York, a city that is very expensive to film in. They had their schedule honed to where the New York work would only require several weeks, but they did not have the funds to house the whole cast and crew in hotels. So they knocked on the door of one of the larger houses of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, asking if they could crash there for the New York shooting. When the Friars learned what the movie would be about, they readily agreed, and were “paid” by having a few of their number appear for several microseconds in the movie – you can see them in their beards and bluish grey habits, standing in the subway train as José and Nina sit silently and as the drum group pounds out its rhythms.

Once the film was finished, they had to find a way of getting it into the theaters, and they decided on the film festival route. They submitted it to the Heartland Film Festival, where it won the grand prize. This was a welcome surprise, but they really needed a more high-powered festival to show it, and so they submitted it to the Toronto International Film Festival. Every year thousands of movies are submitted to this event, and the producers of *Bella* were hoping that the movie would be one of the hundred or so chosen to be actually screened at the festival. This would allow them to push the movie as a “selection” of the prestigious Toronto Festival when it came to finding a distribution agent. What happened exceeded their wildest dreams. Their film was not only chosen for screening, it won the People's Choice Award. This guaranteed that it would find its way into the movie theaters, and it did, even if not as many as had been hoped.

On October 26, 2007 *Bella* opened in 156 U.S. theaters in what is called a “limited release.” In spite of the relatively small number of openings and a very limited publicity budget, the movie had the second highest average per-screen box office take on its opening weekend. More importantly, it had remarkable staying power over the holiday season – four months later, it was still being shown in the theaters. And now it has entered the market of DVD rentals and sales.

For those who do not want to know the story line and characters of the movie, now is the time to stop reading... at least until you have seen it.

The film opens with the only voice-over line we hear, and it is a great one: “My grandmother used to say, ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.’” We don’t meet that grandmother in the course of the film, but she knew. Any story involving an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy is likely to be about plans gone awry, but in this story it is especially so. *Bella*, the title character, is on the screen for only a few moments, and one of those moments is at the very beginning. She is playing on the beach, at the water’s edge. Farther away from the water, on a slight hill, sits a man who is dark in at least a couple of senses of the word, a kind of brooding presence. A couple on the beach with their two little girls sees him and responds by calling the girls back to them as a protective move – these days you just never know who or what is safe, and this man may not be safe.

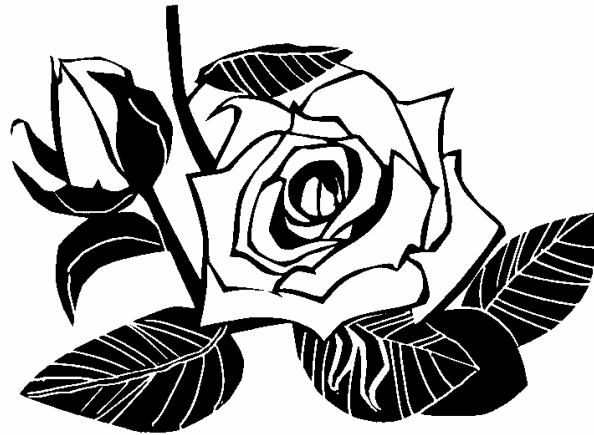
The story is told as a long flashback and as flashbacks within flashbacks, but we never get lost or confused. From the beach we go to the city, back some years, and to a younger version of the man. He is an athlete, already something of a star in the world of soccer, who has just turned pro. He and his manager have signed a

\$2.2 million contract with a new team and are on their way to a press conference. This time line advances slowly, in bits and pieces, for the first part of the movie, but eventually we learn what happened that day. It could not be said that José was driving recklessly, but perhaps if he had been more attentive he might have seen the little girl, maybe four years old, who darted out into the street from between parked cars and who never had a chance. His manager urges him to step on it and drive on, intuiting that in that moment everything they have worked for might be lost. José, knowing better, knowing that it and so much more is already lost, shakes his head and croaks, “No puedo,” I can’t. Lucy’s

mother comes from behind their house, sees the body of her daughter and by turns cries for help and an ambulance, and rages at the man who has just taken the little girl’s life.

José served a four-year prison sentence for this, and for a year now he has been working as the chef in his older brother’s restaurant. Manny is not an

easy person to work with, not even if you are related to him. He is very much a perfectionist, and assumes that everyone else is too, or could be if they would only do what he tells them to do. A man with this kind of attitude is going to be angry and upset a great deal of the time, and on this particular day his anger is directed at Nina, one of the waitresses, who in the past week called in sick once and showed up late for work twice. We know (as Manny does not at the moment he fires her) that Nina has just confirmed her worst suspicion, that she is indeed pregnant. Her things are cleaned out and thrust into her arms, and as she whirls away a small teddy bear falls out to the ground. José, who has seen all of this, picks up the toy and follows her down into the subway. She is still upset, and protests to José that his brother was wrong in thinking that she was hung over – she was really sick, she is pregnant. “So, what now?” he asks.



She says she's going to have to figure that out, he asks if she wants to talk about it, and she silently passes him her Metro card through the fence that has been separating them as they were talking. He swipes the card, passes through, and they spend the rest of the day together.

While Manny has to struggle to keep the restaurant working over the lunch rush hour, José and Nina go first to another, more upscale place for lunch. José knows the owner, and in the course of their meal, he finds Nina a new job and finds out that she is going to have an abortion. She resents the baby's father, who has told her that she should get "it" taken care of, as if, she says, it were no more than a wisdom tooth that needed pulling, but she has to agree that he is right. She has no money, no husband, she's not sure that she likes kids, and even if she does, she is not ready now. "I can't even take care of myself," she says, "How am I going to take care of a kid?"

He asks her if she'd like to go to the beach; his parents have a house near the ocean on Long Island. On the train ride out they talk of this and that, and he asks if she has considered adoption. She has, and has rejected it. I can't carry something in me for nine months and then leave in on the doorstep of a stranger. It doesn't have to be a stranger, he objects. She then gives him the first installment on her family history, and it is clear that she has no one. I tell you what, she says sarcastically, you take it and raise it.

At the house, we see that Nina is not the only one estranged from her family. José has obviously not been home in quite a while. In a series of conversations she learns about his accident and the end of his soccer career. She also learns that Manny, the oldest son and the one who had fired and humiliated her earlier in the day, was an adopted child. Indeed, we learn almost as much about Manny as we do José – how he saved the youngest brother from drowning and how he stood by José throughout his trial and imprisonment. The context for all this discovery is a wonderful dinner the parents put on for that youngest son and his new love interest. This kid seems to be the only one of the three brothers who is genuinely happy, and he provides some

much needed comic relief. The music, the food, the table, the obvious delight that these people have in each other's company – none of it is perfect by any means, and yet it all has perfect pitch for what family life can be and is, often enough.

In the end José decides to take Nina up on her totally unserious offer to take her child and raise it himself, and he offers to adopt the baby. She agrees, changing her mind about the abortion at the last minute. We know nothing of the remaining months of the pregnancy, nor are we told anything of what happens to Nina after her daughter's birth. We only know that she has not seen Bella since then, and now as she comes for the first visit none of her fingers is wearing a ring. Nor are we told anything of what happens after this visit. Most of the people I saw this with seemed to think that José and Nina will now go forward together, but I am not so sure. There are some wounds that cannot be healed this side of the grave, and José had been cut deeply. Early on we learn how he cannot see a little girl, any little girl, without being hurled back in time to the moment when he ran down and killed another little girl. Our first view of him is a bit unsettling, and that is not erased by what we later see of his goodness and pain. What is it like to watch your adopted daughter grow up, and every time you see her, every time you hold her, you are visited in that same instant by the memory of the little girl you killed and the mother who has lived these many years never touching her child as you are touching yours? How do you live with a remorse that dogs your love all the way to its depths? Of course, there are ways out and up, and in some sense José's struggle is Everyman's struggle. Still, I wonder.

Given the film's message, story and tonality, there is no wonder why it couldn't be made and wasn't made in Hollywood, nor why it had only a "limited distribution." But it's out there now, and very much worthy of a long and prosperous movie's second life. It will live in its second life pretty much as it lived in its first, namely by word of mouth. Happy talking.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

