

## Other Than Entertaining, It's Difficult To Say Exactly What 'Vera' Is Trying To Do

Point to 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' or any number of similar entertainments as precedent, but 'Vera' is a slipperier creature in terms of its blurring of distinctions.



Vera Gemma in 'Vera.' Via B4 Films and MoMA



**MARIO NAVES**

Monday, August 7, 2023  
08:04:00 am



*Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel's 'Vera'*

*Museum of Modern Art*

*August 9-15*

There are two moments toward the beginning of "Vera," the new film from Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel, that are, to put it mildly, revealing. The first occurs during a scene in which the title character, Vera Gemma, stops at a bar for a quick drink. After some chit-chat with the bartender, she states that, with age, trans-women have become her ideal of feminine beauty. The woman serving drinks, who is considerably

younger than Vera, responds with a look that is difficult to decipher — a mixture, let's say, of bemusement and empathy.

The other moment occurs when Vera is auditioning for a film role. As the tryout is set to begin, the film's director (Luca Ragazzi) suggests that Vera should, in the future, confer more closely with her agent. The upcoming picture, you see, is a period piece and Vera is inappropriate for the picture as her features are "too modern." Those of us in the audience realize what the director is referring to and can't help but appreciate his diplomacy. Vera has had a significant amount of plastic surgery.

The director's demeanor shifts abruptly to adulation from polite caution after Vera drops the name of her father, Giuliano Gemma. "You don't mean *the Giuliano Gemma*?" When Vera confirms that she is, indeed, the daughter of the actor, the director can't get enthused enough, at one point asking an assistant to take a photo of him with Vera. When Vera strikes a well-practiced pose, the director looks at her, stunned, and says: "You *are* a professional." Yes, but, what kind of professional might that be?

For those not familiar with Italian cinema, particularly the genre known as "spaghetti westerns," Giuliano Gemma was an actual person who became a star while riding the range in pulpy fare like "A Pistol for Ringo," "Blood for a Silver Dollar," and "Arizona Colt." Vera lives in the shadow of her father's accomplishments — not so much his fame, though that did add its share of complications, but Giuliano's good looks. Vera has been haunted by her father's beauty; her surgeries are her means of matching it.

What is "Vera"? We initially take it to be a documentary. The opening of the film follows our provocatively attired, 50-something heroine as she traverses a glitzy media event. Yet the picture quickly shows itself to be something else altogether. Events transpire that run contrary to even the barest sense of verisimilitude. "Docudrama," I guess we have to call this kind of thing, and it's peppered with the self-aware theatrics typical of reality television. "In our work," Ms. Covi and Mr. Frimmel state, "reality and fiction always blend so much that ultimately we no longer know ourselves what is true and what we have invented."

In theory, this is troubling — particularly for an era in which deepfakes, AI, and "truthiness" are muddling the broader cultural discourse. We watch Vera — or do I mean "Ms. Gemma"? — begin a relationship with Daniel (Daniel De Palma), a down-

at-the-heels widower working in a metal scrap yard, and his young 8-year-old son Manuel (Sebastian Dascalu). We also witness Ms. Gemma — or do I mean “Vera”? — conversing with a true-to-life filmmaker, Asia Argento. “The other actors,” the directors make not-so-clear, “come from elements of [Vera’s] world.” Which world are we talking about: Fact or fiction?

Point to “Curb Your Enthusiasm” or any number of similar entertainments as precedent, but “Vera” is a slipperier creature in terms of its blurring of distinctions. Ms. Gemma will, I am told, be attending the opening night of the film for its U.S. premiere at MoMA. It’s a good bet she’ll be wearing her trademark oversized cowboy hat, shaggy vest, and otherwise revealing accoutrement. The audience, I’m guessing, will bestow her, as well as fellow attendees Ms. Covi and Mr. Frimmel, with a standing ovation.

They’ll deserve it: “Vera” is a compelling and bittersweet entertainment. That it remains puzzling all the same is testament to the contradictions it so promiscuously flouts.