



Venice 2022 review: Vera (Tizza Covi & Rainer Frimmel)

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“Vera is a challenging film, a heart-wrenching meditation on ageing and beauty in a culture driven by youth.”



Growing older is never easy, especially when you are in a position where each passing year just reveals more harrowing truths about reality, which often erode the innocent naivete that we all possess when we are younger. Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel aim to provoke questions around this phenomenon, as well as a range of other quandaries, which are the foundation for *Vera*, their fascinating glimpse into the life of a woman on the verge of a breakdown. It centers on a few weeks in the life of Vera Gemma, playing a fictionalized version of herself, as she navigates some challenging surroundings while balancing the burden of being the daughter of Giuliano Gemma, one of Italy’s most cherished movie stars, and someone in whose shadow she has always lived. *Vera* is a challenging film, a heart-wrenching meditation on ageing and beauty in a culture driven by youth. We observe her deft navigation between different experiences, watching as she undergoes various crises, whether tangible or those in which she questions her identity, resulting in one of the most complex and riveting character studies of the past year and a true gem of a film.

We are currently in something of a renaissance in terms of social realism, and it is clear that few nations have been able to capture the raw experience of being alive quite as well as Italy, with neo-realism as a historically resonant movement that continues to be significant today. *Vera* is certainly cut from the same theoretical cloth, with the directors going in search of a story that is as genuine as possible, making very little use of sensationalism or unnecessary sentimentality in telling this story. We are drawn into the life of the main character, peering into her daily routine for a short but meaningful period of time. There’s a starkness with which Covi and Frimmel approach the material that feels extraordinarily authentic, with the membrane that divides the art from the viewer slowly eroding as the story progresses, to the point where we feel fully immersed in the world being constructed on screen. We often forget that we are watching a work of narrative fiction, especially since the story is constructed from fragments of reality which have been creatively pieced together to tell a fictional story of the titular character. The tonal balance is helpful, with the directors finding a nuanced, quiet humour in the smaller moments that help supplement the more sobering details of the narrative, ultimately developing *Vera* into a multi-layered and reflective meditation on the past, shown in vivid detail.

The choice to construct the entire film around Vera Gemma was certainly an intriguing one, especially when she is essentially playing herself, a much more difficult undertaking than some may realize. *Vera* marks her first screen appearance in nearly twenty years, having

spent the previous two decades in relative obscurity. This is a compelling return for someone who was not commonly seen as a supremely gifted actress, but did possess a certain charm that made her work memorable when she chose to act. *Vera* is an absolute triumph and she is a revelation in the role, playing the part with conviction and an impressive level of commitment, a self-awareness that single-handedly elevates this to one of the finest performances of the year. How close this film veers to her real life remains to be seen, but this version of Vera is truly enchanting – she’s a wayward soul, traversing all the roads not taken, and exploring the world with a youthful curiosity that brings her into contact with a range of characters who benefit from her deep humanity. There is an argument to be made that the directors constructed *Vera* along the guidelines of a western film – an older, lonely individual drifts into untrodden terrain, and becomes a mysterious saviour to those who need it the most. Considering her father is best-known for his work in spaghetti westerns, it’s certainly possible that there was something much deeper to this performance than just the recurring appearance of her brightly coloured Stetson hats.

It is almost impossible to imagine anyone else taking on this role, since it was tailor-made for Gemma not only in terms of the name and persona but the entire purpose of the character, which contributes to the complexity of the story. Ultimately, *Vera* is a work of staggering humanity and endless compassion, carefully curated by a directing duo who knew how to put together a story that was deeply moving but also realistic enough to feel like it is drawn from a place of authentic curiosity rather than just being sentimental for the sake of evoking certain emotions. It touches on many themes, looking at someone who has grown more inquisitive during the process of ageing, which puts her in a position of not only questioning her own identity, but the very nature of the world that surrounds her, setting her off on a voyage of self-discovery. She encounters new companions along the way that help ease the loneliness, and she begins to unearth the secrets that have been eluding her over the years. Beautifully poetic, tenderly funny and endlessly warm, *Vera* is a charming character study that dares to ask some of the more difficult questions with sophistication and genuine curiosity.

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