

Life is Beautiful 1997/Certificate PG

Synopsis of the film

Life is Beautiful is the tale of Guido Orefice, a charming and lovable character who falls in love with Dora, after meeting her through a number of bizarre coincidences. In a beautiful scene in which he declares his love for her in front of her fiancé, they ride off on a decorated white horse to begin a new life together. The film continues after the birth of their son Giosue, who is loved dearly by both Guido and Dora. Guido has become the owner of a quirky bookshop, and we see the close relationship father and son have as Giosue works alongside Guido.

It is only at this point that we realise Guido is Jewish, as German forces begin to occupy Italy. Guido gets taken away for questioning, and when he pulls down the shutters at the end of the day, we see they have been painted with graffiti. The family continue to be playful and at dinner that night we see Giosue's love of hiding anywhere and everywhere. The next day Dora comes home to find that their house has been ransacked, and both Guido and Giosue have been taken away. She races to catch up with them and finds them boarding a train. Unable to bear living without them, she demands to be let onboard the train too.

When they arrive in the camp, Dora is sent to the women's section whilst Guido and Giosue are sent to the men's. Continuing his comic behaviour, Guido tells Giosue that they are playing a game, and they have to collect points to win a big tank. By using Giosue's love of hiding and his own playful nature, Guido manages to keep Giosue safe even when the other children are taken away.

Towards the end of the film, the Germans begin to flee and the camp is plunged into mayhem. Giosue is scared, but Guido manages to convince him that this is the end of the game and they have nearly won. Guido gets him to hide and sets off to rescue Dora. Unfortunately Guido is marched off by a German soldier, and even to the last, Guido maintains his slapstick humour, goose-stepping as he is walked away – much to Giosue's amusement.

Giosue is rescued by American soldiers who have liberated the camp and have a tank. Giosue assumes that this is his prize as promised by his father and gleefully allows the American soldiers to place him on top as they roll out of the camp. As they drive away, and

the other prisoners slowly make their way from the camp, Giosue spots Dora and mother and son are reunited.

When it was made and where

The film was shot in Arezzo, Italy in 1997 and won critical acclaim at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. It was named Best Foreign Film at the Oscars in 1999 and Roberto Benigni won Best Actor for his role as Guido.

Issues to be aware of

The film is in Italian with subtitles.

HMDT Review

Please note that the review may act a spoiler for the film.

The contrast between the first part of the film and the second is very stark. The ease with which Dora and Guido live at the start is starkly juxtaposed with their existence once the war has started. Guido's affable temperament is also at odds with the second part of the film, and this helps to build a feeling that by remaining practical and focusing on surviving, the family will be reunited.

The fact that we do not know Guido is Jewish until the second part of the film highlights how ordinary Jews were suddenly targeted and their lives torn apart.

There are several parts which are unrealistic such as Dora's insistence on being taken with Guido and Giosue to the camp, and when Guido and Giosue break into an office and use the loudspeaker to reassure Dora that they are still alive.

Despite the fantastical parts of the film, we recommend it because it represents the sacrifices that many made to protect their loved ones during the Holocaust. As with all films portraying the Holocaust, if you are going to show it as part of a Holocaust Memorial Day activity, you should watch it in its entirety first, and not present it as fact.

The film is a tale of love and overcoming adversity. The film is narrated at times by the adult Giosue, who only realises his father's sacrifice many years later. Whilst Dora and Giosue are reunited at the end of the film, it is very bittersweet.

The camp portrayed is not any camp in particular, instead merely being shown as a generic concentration camp.

You can use HMD resources to find out more about life in the camps
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/life-in-the-camps>

Liberation, resistance and rescuers <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/liberation-resistance-and-rescuers>

And you can also use our image library to explore issues raised in the film.
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/image-library>