IO NON HO PAURA (I am not scared)


In "I'm Not Scared," children play among swaying stalks of wheat as farm machinery idles ominously at the top of the hill. The amber waves of innocence are about to get a threshing. Such visual metaphors fill "I'm Not Scared," a beautifully shot and compelling blend of thriller and coming-of-age drama. Contrasting scenes of brilliant summer sunshine with others of pitch-black despair, director Gabriele Salvatores ("Mediterraneo") and cinematographer Italo Petriccione explore the darkness below the bucolic charm of a 1970s Italian village. And there is something disturbing beneath the surface, quite literally. After playing with friends near an abandoned farmhouse, 10-year-old Michele (Giuseppe Cristiano) lifts a crude piece of aluminum to reveal a large hole containing evidence of a serious crime. He reacts as you would expect, pedaling his bicycle furiously away from the scene. But it's the ways in which he defies expectations that keep this picture, written by Niccolo Ammaniti and Francesca Marciano from Ammaniti's novel, so involving. Scared but curious, the boy tells no one, eventually hatching his own plan to confront the crime. This unlikely scenario becomes more plausible as the film progresses. Possessed of a vivid imagination, Michele uses a flashlight and bedsheet tent to regale himself with stories at night. To him, the secret of the hole is the best story yet. The picture reveals the criminals' identities a little too early, but the boy's investigation retains urgency thanks to young Cristiano's careful performance. Unlike many child actors, Cristiano doesn't telegraph his character's intentions. His subtlety is crucial because Michele must never let on what he knows to the tiny village's adults. Their proximity to the crime scene makes them suspect. It is never the adult perspective that interests us anyway. "I'm Not Scared," told from Michele's viewpoint, presents a child at first too naive to perceive real danger. Cristiano's Michele, more emboldened than frightened, lurks near the hole searching for signs of criminal activity. You get the feeling the kid would be doing this kind of thing anyway, just to relieve his summer boredom. The picture captures the rhythms and rivalries of childhood. Surrounded by the few buildings that make up the village, the children engage in a game of "statue," posing stock-still until somebody gives. Another contest ends with the cruel demand that a chubby, picked-on girl shed her clothes. Michele, the lone conscience in the group, intercedes on her behalf. Still, the weight of his discovery eludes the boy until another, seemingly innocuous childhood interaction occurs. Michele offers to exchange his secret for another boy's toy truck. When the friend recoils at the shocking news, Michele realizes for the first time that his summer adventure will have life-altering consequences. We are witnessing the heartbreak of a child forced to grow up too soon. -- Advisory: This film contains violence, raw language. E-mail Carla Meyer at cmeyer@sfcchronicle.com.

http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/04/23/DDG1B68S3S1.DTL
"The Keys to the House" is a beautiful film on a very disturbing subject. Painfully honest and witheringly compassionate, this work by the brilliant Italian filmmaker Gianni Amelio is about a young unwed father, also named Gianni (Kim Rossi Stuart), who after years of neglect tries to form a bond with his disabled teenage son, Paolo (Andrea Rossi).

Paolo is "a super kid," according to stern Alberto (Pierfrancesco Favino), one of the relatives of Paolo's mother who's been helping care for him all these years—but he's also "different." Victim of a birth injury, he walks and moves with great difficulty and needs frequent therapy at a German hospital, which is where his Italian dad meets him. When Paolo talks, he has the look of an inquisitive, twisted little bird, his head curling up from a permanent crouch, a big loose happy grin breaking out on his face. In many ways, he's still a child—with all the joy and hardship that suggests.

Paolo certainly is a super kid—as we and Gianni will learn—but he's also the kind of child who is often neglected, even ridiculed. As for Gianni, he is hardly a super father; but the film shows him trying to make up for lost time, trying to assume emotional responsibility. So the two meet, bond, leave the facility—and form a friendship with another parent of a disabled child, Nicole (the multilingual Charlotte Rampling).

And the trouble starts: the problems of parenting, redeeming the past and learning to live with a boy who's had to live his life apart.

Amelio, one of the true modern heirs of the great Italian neo-realist tradition, is a filmmaker of great subtlety, emotional precision and socio-psychological acumen—and though his filmography contains only six features so far as director, three of them (1990's "Open Doors," 1992's "Stolen Children" and 1994's "Lamerica") won the European Film Critics best film award in their respective years. Though "Keys" is not Amelio's best, it has an emotional power almost equal to anything he's done.

"Keys" has a theme and structure similar to his other films. It's about fatherhood and family, constructed around a journey that becomes a moral and emotional pilgrimage. It also has an extraordinary sense of truth, mostly due to the actors and their performances: Stuart's absurdly handsome, increasingly poignant Gianni, Rampling's profoundly hurt and wise Nicole and, especially, Andrea Rossi's Paolo.

Rossi is himself disabled, and this heightens our response to him. But, like Pascal Duquenne of "The Eighth Day," an actor with Down syndrome who shared the Cannes Film Festival best actor prize with Daniel Auteuil, Rossi isn't being exploited. Instead, he proves, with every moment of his finely calibrated, heartwarmingly spontaneous performance, that he's a person and artist, not a victim.

Directed by Gianni Amelio; written by Amelio, Sandro Petraglia, Stefano Rulli; photographed by Luca Bigazzi; edited by Simona Paggi; production designed by Giancarlo Basili; music by Franco Piersanti; co-produced by Karl Baumgartner, Bruno Pesery; produced by Enzo Porcelli. In Italian, with English subtitles. A Lion's Gate Films release; opens Friday at the Music Box Theatre. Running time: 1:45.

ENGLISH SUBTITLES AND FREE ADMISSION!
For information contact Prof. Concin 239-3221