MOVIE REVIEWS

Spanning the Decades
With Rand’s Message

**½ WE THE LIVING. (Unrated) Italian film based on Ayn Rand’s first novel was filmed in 1942 and promptly banned by Mussolini. Epic tale of love and politics in post-Revolution Russia intrigues and involves. Stars Alida Valli, Rossano Brazzi and Fosco Giachetti. Italian, with subtitles. Directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. At the Carnegie Hall Screening Room and the Bleecker St. Cinema in Manhattan.

By Mike McGrady

WHY ON EARTH would anyone today buy tickets to see a three-hour, black-and-white, subtitled, Italian-language movie made way back in 1942? A 46-year-old film based on a 1936 autobiographical novel by “objectivist” philosopher Ayn Rand? A film directed by the barely remembered Goffredo Alessandrini and starring actors who have either perished, retired or faded into character roles?

Let me suggest one reason: Nothing stirs the soul quite so much as buried treasure. “We the Living” has been buried in various vaults since it was first made nearly a half-century ago. And it qualifies in every respect as film treasure.

Perhaps the greatest surprise will be that “We the Living” seems so up-to-date. For one thing, the film’s central portrait of Kira, author Rand’s alter ego, is amazingly current, a near relative of modern feminists. An engineering student in post-Czarist Russia (“I want to build skyscrapers of steel and glass. I want to build a shining bridge over a blue river”), Kira is a strong-willed woman who insists on her right to live and love as she desires, not as the Communist Party would dictate it.

Equally modern are the dazzling performances by the young and astonishingly attractive Alida Valli and Rossano Brazzi along with a powerful contribution by Fosco Giachetti, then Italy’s foremost movie star. Director Alessandrini brilliantly blends glamour, romance, politics, intrigue and danger. His lush black-and-white cinematography, using many soft closeups, is typical of that era’s romanticism, but when he switches to harsher political scenes in sharp blacks and whites, he foreshadowed Italy’s post-war realism.

Eighteen-year-old Kira (Valli), an engineering student in Russia, falls in love with Leo (Brazzi) a counter-revolutionary on the run from the secret police. In order to find funds for treating his tuberculosis, Kira conducts a simultaneous affair with Communist Party official Andrei (Giachetti). This perilous romantic triangle seems far ahead of its time; I can think of no other film of this era that would allow a heroine to walk so guiltlessly from one man’s bed to another’s, and back again.

Though the setting (Russia in 1924) is vital, the film is neither about Russia nor about communism; it is about human beings whose freedoms have been curtailed by the state. More specifically, it is an attack against any theory that suggests man should exist for the state and not the other way around. Although Kira’s life parallels Rand’s, the author insisted that the only autobiographical links were philosophical: “The specific events of Kira’s life were not mine; her ideas, her convictions, her values were and are.”

Ideas are a rare, welcome and surprising addition to an essentially romantic movie. But then, this is a film that avoids the predictable every step of the way. How are we to react, for example, when the once-heroic Leo becomes a wealthy philanderer and black-market profiteer while the Communist Andrei, “the last pure revolutionary,” displays a fatally unshakable nobility of character?

“We the Living” is a talky movie and much of the talk, even in subtitle form, is pure Rand — a dramatic restatement of the author’s theory of rational selfishness, an insistence on individual liberty over and above all restrictions invented by any collective mind. The philosophizing adds an intriguing dimension to what might otherwise have been a melodramatic love triangle. In other words, politics makes more interesting bedfellows.

If there had been no state censorship, “We the Living” would have been one of the best movies of 1942. It must be reckoned, instead, one of the best movies of 1988.

Italian star Alida Valli as Kira in the long-buried 1942 film ‘We the Living’