Ayn Rand's 'We The Living' Reborn

As far as anomalies go, the recently revived *We the Living*, which was made in 1942, comes with one of the most intriguing pedigrees of any film in recent memory.

Produced and distributed in Fascist Italy during the height of the Second World War, the film adaptation of Ayn Rand's first novel provides fascinating insights into the enduring allure of one of the 20th century's most controversial writers and philosophers. That such a project—which in spirit if not letter is fundamentally true to Rand's work—would be attempted in a totalitarian state caught up in a war against America and a capitalist system which Rand would champion throughout her life, is nothing short of mind-boggling.

Interesting enough, *We the Living* has the look and feel of a Hollywood studio film of that era, due undoubtedly to the influence of director Giuseppe De Santis. Alessandri's film adaptation during his brief tenure at MGM studios in Hollywood during the early 1930s. His low contrast lighting that renders an angelic glow to the actors' faces, sweeping camera movements and soft focus camera work that caresses actress Alida Valli's face like an object of veneration brings to mind the style of filmmaking prevalent in America at that time.

As an epic, *We the Living* still works remarkably well despite its 45-year hiatus, where it was pulled from distribution by the Fascists five months after it opened and shipped to a storage vault where it gathered dust until it was "rediscovered" in 1968. Unlike similar large-scale life screen sagas as *Gone With the Wind* or *Dr. Zhivago*, *We the Living* — which was shot entirely on soundstages — is much more intimate, occasionally claustrophobic. *GWTW* and *Dr. Zhivago* counted on vast panoramic location shots and casts of thousands to create a sweeping sense of time and place. Nothing like the panning shots over the Atlanta railway yards filled with hundreds of wounded Confederate soldiers and demoralized civilian refugees that presaged the beginning of the end for the South in *GWTW* can be found in *We the Living*.

Rand's story of Kira Argounova (Valli) and her family's adaptation to the social, cultural and economic changes wrought on Russia by the Bolshevik Revolution centers more on the spiritual evolution of the 18-year-old engineering student and her tempestuous affairs with two men — the young aristocrat hunted by the GPU (the precursor of the KGB) and Andrei Taganov (Fausto Giachetti), a dedicated revolutionary and rising luminary in the Soviet hierarchy.

It is the relationship between Kira and Taganov that the Rand concept of objectivism — pursuit of the individual's self-interests above all other considerations including the state — is embodied and played out. Kira and Taganov are soul-mates. They each have their own strongly held personal ideological codes of conduct. Kira pursues her own happiness in the face of criticism and ostracization by her family, classmates and the communist society around her. Taganov works loyally for his Bolshevik ideals.

Ultimately Taganov is betrayed by the very revolutionary process that he envisions heralding the coming of a new order; his faith has been misdirected in the newly formed Soviet state system that merely serves as a breeding place of corruption for his more opportunistic comrades. He realizes his mistake too late to save himself.

In Rand's universe, Kira serves as the archetypal heroine, the woman who knows what she wants out of life and is willing to subjugate everything to the accomplishment of her ambitions. In the case of *We the Living* she is willing to sacrifice all — her personal dignity, her future career and her family's blessings — for her affair with the aristocrat, Kovalensky, who in the end proves himself unworthy of her love.

Love and happiness are not what life is all about for Rand. When Kovalensky falls ill with tuberculosis and is denied state-provided medical care, Kira accepts Taganov's romantic advances as an opportunity to raise through the gifts he lavishes upon her the money needed to send her lover to a sanatorium in the Crimea.

Neither man can understand her motivations. Kovalensky, who gradually loses his youthful optimism in the face of government harassment and replaces it with a self-destructive cynicism, eventually accuses her of cuckolding him and dumps her for another woman. Taganov then discovers that his relationship with Kira provides comfort for her loneliness. Both men fail to grasp and appreciate that the young woman has charted her own course and can do nothing but play it out to the final denouement.

Undoubtedly, *We the Living* will eventually be recognized as a masterwork and garner the accolades that it deserves. The efforts of Henry Mark Holzer and Erica Holzer — who, over the past 20 years, oversaw the restoring, re-editing and cutting of the film from its original three hours and 50 minutes to its present, more manageable length of two hours and 50 minutes — have not been in vain.

There is a mystic sweep to *We the Living*, a sense of history crossing a major transitional point, of lives forever altered. Add to this cinematographer Giuseppe Caracillo's gorgeous black and white photography, Alessandri's evocative storytelling ability and wonderful performances by Valli (who takes on the almost Garbo-esque quality in the innumerable close-ups which appear throughout like rays of sunshine) Brazi and Giachetti and you have one of the most engrossing, moving, occasionally infuriating films to come along in a very long time.

It will be a crime if very few people come see *We the Living* when it opens today at the Bleeker Street Cinema and the Carnegie Screening Room. But then again, it is a crime that this great film has remained hidden and forgotten for nearly half a century.