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*Tolo Tolo*. Directed by Luca Medici. Medusa Film and Taodue Film, 2020. 90 minutes.

Checco Zalone, professional pseudonym of Luca Medici and the name of the character he habitually embodies on screen, has been for more than a decade the most successful comic figure in the Italian film industry, scoring domestic box office hits that have consistently outstripped historical records. Directed by Gennaro Nunziante and co-written with Zalone himself, the first four feature films in which he stars earned him an enormous fan base that cut across the social spectrum with their entertaining characterization of the narcissistic and generally clueless *italiano medio*. *Tolo Tolo*, Zalone's fifth film as leading man and his first as director, was released on January 1, 2020, immediately achieving the highest box office results ever recorded in Italy for any film on its opening weekend. In the period that followed, however, some members of the public, including a handful of right-leaning commentators, shared their disappointment upon viewing the much-anticipated film. Box office takings then slowed down to some degree. The ambivalent reception accorded to *Tolo Tolo* may be linked at least in part to the misunderstanding generated among some sectors of Zalone's fan base by a promotional clip—more music video than conventional trailer that circulated widely before the film's release.

"L'immigrato"—the video's title song and a parody of Toto Cutugno's "L'italiano"—is accompanied by a sequence of short scenes featuring the familiar Checcho, whose personal space is perpetually being invaded by a young African immigrant. This pesky intruder appears as a would-be gas station attendant; as intrusive windscreen washer; as shopping-cart wrangler; and eventually as uninvited guest at the home of the well-meaning Italian. Worse yet, one day the African succeeds in replacing Checcho in his customary spot in the marriage bed. The immigrant thus becomes a veritable colonizer of the Italian citizen's space and seducer of his domestic companion. In the video's final moments, relegated to the edge of the bed and adopting a loud stage whisper, Zalone faces the camera and invites his viewers to see the upcoming film, due to open in cinemas on January 1. It is perhaps unsurprising that, shortly after seeing the clip and obviously missing its satirical edge, Matteo Salvini announced at a rally that Checcho Zalone should be appointed Senator for life.

The ensuing film, however, does not mirror the circumstances reflected in "L'immigrato." Based on an idea originally presented by Paolo Virzi (who co-wrote the script with Zalone and was originally slated to direct the film), *Tolo Tolo* is the entertainer's most serious undertaking to date. Though conceived, like all of his films, as a comedy, it sets out to address a highly contentious topic of national importance: mass immigration from the Global South.

In the pre-title sequence, the film introduces its central character as simply another variation on the familiar Checcho Zalone type. Riddled with debt and unpaid taxes, he has recently managed to set up an extravagant sushi restaurant in his sleepy hometown on the Murgia plateau by hoodwinking ex-wives and family members into investing in the project. Failing to capture the enthusiasm of the locals, it is soon forced to close, and creditors descend upon the family to confiscate their possessions. Identifying himself as someone "born to dream," Checcho sees no option other than to flee the country, his debts, and the wrath of his family.

As the scene shifts to a fictional sub-Saharan state named St. Jacques, the newly arrived Italian is working as a waiter at a luxury resort, a job that enables him to offer unsolicited financial advice to wealthy Italian tourists and presumably to envision another hairbrained business scheme. There is more than a hint of colonial ambition in Checcho's hope of reaping success in Africa, for his attitude is far from that of a humble migrant. Rather, he has deliberately chosen a destination where, he claims, "corruption is a hundred percent honest," and where you can bribe an entire ministry for the same price as bribing a minor official in Italy. He is also smitten with desire for a local woman named Idgiaba, perceived through his eyes as the stereotypical Black Venus, whom he continues to pursue even after his advances are abruptly rejected.

Checco's dream of staying in Africa is soon derailed by the outbreak of civil war. Distracted by his own petty needs, he manages to escape the deadly violence only through the intervention of a fellow waiter, the smart, multilingual Ouman, who knows more about Italian cinema and culture than Checcho himself and hopes to eventually travel to Italy to become a filmmaker. As *Tolo Tolo* morphs into a road movie whose narrative contours have some resonances with Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994), Checcho and Ouman are propelled forward by circumstances that result in their joining a group of migrants—including Idgiaba and her presumed son, Doudou, for whom Checcho establishes a growing affection—heading north across the Sahara in the hope of reaching Italy.

With *Tolo Tolo* the filmmaker walks a difficult line, aiming to keep his audience entertained with the absurdities that have made his alter ego famous, while at the same conceding tacit respect for the life-threatening realities providing the imagined backdrop for his madcap adventures. Attempting to maintain a balance between the hilarity habitually generated by the iconic Checcho and the harrowing images associated with stories of migrants and asylum seekers, the film places its clueless Italian protagonist at the center of several typical scenarios characterizing 21<sup>st</sup> century migration from sub-Saharan Africa: the difficult desert crossing aboard overloaded cargo trucks; the arrest and detention of migrants by corrupt Libyan officials; a sea crossing arranged by traffickers that results in shipwreck and near drowning; the rescue of endangered migrants by an NGO vessel; the delays experienced by the rescuers in obtaining landing rights due to EU policies intended to deter their presence in the Mediterranean; and the inhumane processing of migrants upon arrival. The deployment of these scenarios is nonetheless sanitized. Among those shipwrecked on the migrant vessel no one dies. Also, when imprisoned in the Libyan detention center, neither Checcho nor his fellow travelers are subjected to abuse. Instead, thanks to Idgiaba, who turns out to be a freedom fighter, everyone is unexpectedly set free. These narrative concessions allow the film to remain within the range of Zalone's customary comedic register and they may well serve to keep some of his conservative fans under the impression that the film is, after all, a matter of pure entertainment.

In each sequence catchy songs are featured on the soundtrack, including new compositions created and performed by Zalone as well as a number of vintage hits by popular *cantautori*, lightening the effects of the narrative content. Many of these songs coincide with fantasy sequences visualizing Checcho's delusional interpretation of the events around him. Though less frequent than in Zalone's other films, gags are not absent in *Tolo Tolo* and, as usual, most of the humor is at the expense of Checcho himself. The principal African characters, Idgiaba, Doudou, and Ouman, are more complex than might be expected in a mainstream Italian comedy. Despite his educated and courteous demeanor, Ouman betrays his fellow travelers to the Libyans for money in order to pursue his own ambitions. Idgiaba, who is initially perceived by Checcho as a sex object, turns out to be a freedom fighter whose armed intervention enables Checcho and others to escape the Libyan prison. And the young Doudou, who eventually finds his African father in Italy (and will thus, one hopes, grow up Italian), recalls the wise male children (all of whom are white) who have occupied a crucial role in several well-known Italian films since the neorealist period. In contrast to these evolving African characters, the would-be humanitarian Frenchman who rescues Checcho and his companions in the desert turns out to be irredeemably narcissistic and superficial.

Through its depiction of Checcho and his Italian interlocutors, *Tolo Tolo* offers an implicit critique of various purported flaws of Italian society: the diffusion of a myopic, self-interested worldview epitomized in the catchphrase "Italians first!"; the dominance of crass consumerism; the absorption of the fascist racist legacy expressed in attitudes toward immigration; the meteoric rise to power of poorly qualified individuals, exemplified by an ambitious but mediocre young man from Checcho's hometown; the distortions perpetuated by mass media; and the inhumane logic underlying Italian and European migration management.

The film's most explicitly political moments are found in the comically executed scenes where Checco, confronted with unfamiliar situations, suddenly adopts the posture of Mussolini and begins to spout the fascist rhetoric of race. In the second of these scenes, one of his fellow-travelers, an African doctor, tells him that all people have some fascism inside them, like a virus that can be activated at moments of heat or stress. "Just like candida," Checco adds, as the information sinks in. The only remedy for these "attacks of fascism," according to the doctor, is love. In the blissful fantasy sequence that follows, to the tune of di Mino Reitano's "Italia" (1988), Checco tours Venice, Florence, and Rome with his beloved Idgiaba, observing that all of Italy's occupants—including the national soccer team, the gondoliers of Venice, and Michelangelo's David—are now without exception people of color. Sequences like this suggest that Checco is on his way to a personal conversion, but the film ultimately leaves this issue in doubt.

The animated sequence placed at the conclusion *Tolo Tolo* remains ambivalent, at best, regarding the protagonist's ability to change. Prompted by an encounter with a group of African children in Trieste who are apparently destined for deportation, Checco attempts to reassure them that their birth in Africa occurred through no fault of their own. Dressed in a safari suit and hat (with instant colonial associations), he then projects himself into the Disneyesque sequence, traveling above the earth in a hot air balloon accompanied by Black children to whom he sings a sweet song titled "La cicogna strabica" (The cross-eyed stork) about the randomness of birth. Apparently intended to highlight the common humanity of all newborns, regardless of birthplace, the song could perhaps be read as a statement of universal equality. Yet the sequence visually constructs its African location as a much messier, more unpleasant birthplace than the locations shown in the Global North, as if this difference were a natural and inevitable feature of Africa itself. At least some of the film's viewers will realize, of course, that Africa's economic and political woes are largely the legacy of European colonialism and its offshoots, a fact that still escapes Checco's limited world view and is probably missed by a large segment of the audience as well. Unlike the transformative arc attributed to Checco in previous films, *Tolo Tolo's* version of this character is denied any significant change by the film's end. Indeed, in his concluding display of benevolent paternalism, he has not strayed far from the patronizing European traveler who deigned to teach the young Doudou to swim on their journey through Africa. Notwithstanding the ambivalence of the film's conclusion, it is worth acknowledging that Luca Medici, though customarily more populist than left-leaning, has already inserted an important political declaration into the fabric of *Tolo Tolo* by reminding us that "attacks of fascism" are likely to break out at any moment, "just like candida."

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