The Bicycle Thief
Ladri di Biciclette
(Italy)
By VARIETY STAFF
PDS. Director Vittorio De Sica; Screenplay Vittorio De Sica, Cesare Zavattini, Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gherardi, Garardo Guerrieri; Camera Carlo Montuori; Editor Eraldo Da Roma; Music Alessandro Cicognini
Lamberto Maggiorani Lianella Carrell Enzo Staiola Elena Altieri Vittorio Antonucci Gino Saltamerenda

Made with a cast of principals who were picked up in Rome's streets and had never before faced a camera, and with a story [from a novel by Luigi Bartolini] incredible in its simplicity as a basis for a 90-minute film, the picture is a pure exercise in directorial virtuosity. The beauty of it, however, is that that is never apparent. There are no obvious tricks and no obvious striving.

On the surface it is nothing more than the theft of a bicycle from one of the army of unemployed in postwar Rome and his efforts to find the thief and recover the vehicle. In the bicycle Antonio sees the security of himself and his family, necessary to his job in a city where jobs are scarce. He sets out with his young son on a Sunday morning to find the bike before nightfall so that he won't be without a job when it comes time for work on Monday morning.

The pair visit Rome's secondhand bicycle mart, get into an evangelical free-lunch mission and even into a brothel, several times see the bike and its thief, finally catch him, and then can't prove he stole it. Antonio, in desperation, is finally driven to stealing one.

As the son Bruno, Enzo Staiola is the star of the film, if it has one. His funny face, serious but urchin-like manner and ability to win laughs with the minor troubles he gets himself into rank him as a top moppet performer, despite lack of any previous experience. Likewise a tyro who turns in a touching performance is Lamberto Maggiorani as Antonio.

Picture moves along at an unaccustomedly good pace, except for one slack spot midway. Fortunately, there are plenty of laughs to balance the more serious drama. Photography throughout is firstrate in a hard documentary manner.

1949: Best Foreign Language Film

(B&W) Available on VHS, DVD. Extract of a review from 1948. Running time: 90 MIN.
Again the Italians have sent us a brilliant and devastating film in Vittorio De Sica's rueful drama of modern city life, "The Bicycle Thief." Widely and fervently heralded by those who had seen it abroad (Where it already has won several prizes at various film festivals), this heart-tearing picture of frustration, which came to the World yesterday, bids fair to fulfill all the forecasts of its absolute triumph over here.

For once more the talented De Sica, who gave us the shattering "Shoe Shine," that desperately tragic demonstration of juvenile corruption in post-war Rome, has laid hold upon and sharply imaged in simple and realistic terms a major—indeed, a fundamental and universal—dramatic theme. It is the isolation and loneliness of the little man in this complex social world that is ironically blessed with institutions to comfort and protect mankind.

Although he has again set his drama in the streets of Rome and has populated it densely with significant contemporary types, De Sica is concerned here with something which is not confined to Rome nor solely originated by post-war disorder and distress. He is pondering the piteous paradoxes of poverty, no matter where, and the wretched compulsions of sheer self-interest in man's desperate struggle to survive. And while he has limited his vista to a vivid cross-section of Roman life, he actually is holding a mirror up to millions of civilized men.

His story is lean and literal, completely unburdened with "plot," and written by Cesare Zavattini with the camera exclusively in mind. Based on a novel by Luigi Bartolini, it is simply the story of a poor working man whose essential bicycle is stolen from him and who hunts feverishly to find it throughout one day. The man is a modest bill-poster; he must have a bicycle to hold his newly found job; he has a wife and small son dependent on him; the loss is an overwhelming blow. And so, for one long, dismal Sunday he and his younger scour the teeming streets of Rome, seeking that vital bicycle which, we must tell you, they never find.

That is the picture's story—it is as stark and direct as that, and it comes to a close with a fade-out as inconclusive as a passing nod. But during the course of its telling in the brilliant director's trenchant style, it is as full and electric and compelling as any plot-laden drama you ever saw. Every incident, every detail of the frantic and futile hunt is a taut and exciting adventure, in which hope is balanced against despair. Every movement of every person in it, every expression on every face is a striking illumination of some implicit passion or mood.

Just to cite a few episodes and crises, there is the eloquent inrush of hope when the workman acquires his bicycle after his wife pawns the sheets from their beds; there is the horrible, sickening moment when he realizes that the bicycle is gone, seized and ridden away before his own eyes by a thief who escapes in the traffic's swirl; there is the vain and pathetic expedition to hunt the parts of the bicycle in a second-hand mart and there is the bleak and ironic pursuit of a suspect into a church during a mass for the poor. There are also lighter touches, such as a flock of babbling German seminarians rudely crowding the father and boy out of a shelter into the rain and a dash after the thief into a bordello, with the little boy compelled to remain outside.

Indeed, the whole structure of this picture, with its conglomeration of experiences, all interlocked with personal anguish, follows a classic plan. It is a plan in which the comedy and tragedy of daily life are recognized. As a matter of fact, both the story and the structure of this film might have been used by Charlie Chaplin in the old days to make one of his great wistful films, for "The Bicycle Thief"
is, in essence, a poignant and bitter irony—the irony of a little fellow buffeted by an indifferent world.

As directed by De Sica, however, the natural and the real are emphasized, with the film largely shot in actual settings and played by a non-professional cast. In the role of the anguished workman, Lamberto Maggiorani is superb, expressing the subtle mood transitions of the man with extraordinary power. And Enzo Staiola plays his small son with a firmness that fully reveals the rugged determination and yet the latent sensitivity of the lad. One of the most over-powering incidents in the film occurs when the father, in desperation, thoughtlessly slaps the anxious boy. Lianella Carell is also moving as the mother—a smaller role—and Vittorio Antonucci is hard and shabby as the thief. He is the only professional in the large cast.

One further word for the music which has been aptly written and used to raise the emotional potential—the plaintive theme that accompanies the father and son, the music of rolling bicycles and the “morning music,” full of freshness and bells. De Sica has artfully wrapped it into a film that will tear your heart, but which should fill you with warmth and compassion. People should see it—and they should care.

Excellent English subtitles translate the Italian dialogue.

THE BICYCLE THIEF, story and screenplay by Cesare Zavattini, based on the novel of the same name by Luigi Bartolini; directed by Vittorio De Sica; produced in Rome by De Sica Production Company, and released here by Mayer-Burstyn. At the World.
Antonio ...... Lamberto Maggiorani
Maria .... Lianella Carell
Burno ...... Enzo Staiola
The Medium ..... Elena Altieri
The Thief ..... Vittorio Antonucci
Balocco ..... Gino Saltamerenda