Zeffirelli's *Tea with Mussolini* – A summary and review

Have you ever heard of Franco Zeffirelli? If not, you have almost certainly heard of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet — the play that became the basis for Zeffirelli's most celebrated film, a work that earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Director and remains a touchstone in cinematic adaptations of the Bard. For many, that tragedy epitomizes Italy itself: a country remembered for its romance, its poetry, and its timeless backdrops, from Verona's streets to Florence's piazzas. Yet the Italy of the 20th century was not always so idyllic. Like Shakespeare's tale of love undone by hatred, modern Italian history often revealed how easily people can be carried away by division, suspicion, and fear.

It is against this backdrop that Zeffirelli's 1999 film Tea with Mussolini unfolds. The story begins in Florence in 1935, the city of Dante and the resting place of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. By her grave we encounter a group of cultured, eccentric English expatriates who turn their daily tea into a kind of ritual, equal parts homage to art and display of temperament. To the American archaeologist Georgie Rockwell, they are the Scorpione, formidable, sharp-tongued women who nevertheless rally together when a young boy enters their lives. That boy, Luca, has just lost his mother, a seamstress abandoned by her lover. His father, unwilling to care for him, leaves him in the hands of Mary Wallace, one of the Scorpione, whose reluctant guardianship marks the beginning of his unusual upbringing. For Luca, this curious circle of women becomes both a home and a school of values, though always under the growing shadow of Mussolini's Italy, where foreigners and their lofty ideals are met with mounting suspicion.

We are soon introduced to Elsa, an American widow whose arrival feels almost miraculous to young Luca, overturning his world overnight. Out of gratitude to his late mother, who had once been her seamstress, Elsa establishes a trust to support the boy's upbringing. At first, this generosity seems extravagant, perhaps even reckless, but it reveals the depth behind her glittering, seemingly frivolous persona. For a moment, Luca's life begins to resemble a dream. Yet the illusion shatters when Fascist violence intrudes, most strikingly in the attack on the café where the Scorpione gather. This outburst underscores both the precarious place of the

expatriates and the tightening grip of Mussolini's regime, leaving Luca's future suddenly uncertain.

With this, we are drawn deeper into the rigid world of Lady Hester, the matron of the Scorpione and widow of a British ambassador. Fiercely traditional and unbending, she clings to her faith in Mussolini, convinced that his word is protection enough. Her private audience with the dictator, where he assures her of diplomatic immunity, encapsulates both her naiveté and the expatriates' dangerous indifference, a belief that brutality cannot touch you so long as you remain above it. The film's title, Tea with Mussolini, distills this irony: the genteel rituals of out-of-touch English society colliding with the deceptive promises of a Fascist regime.

Meanwhile, Luca's father reappears, seizing the moment to send his son away to an Austrian school, a decision that signals both escape and estrangement. Time advances abruptly, and with it comes a glimpse of how precarious the expatriates' position has become. Their gatherings in Florence dwindle, and the certainty of war drives many to flee. For those who remain, Lady Hester, her companions, and her grandson disguised as a girl named Lucy, survival soon depends on retreating to the hill town of San Gimignano, where art, memory, and loyalty will be tested against the forces of history.

At this stage, Elsa reappears, still shielded by her American citizenship, and therefore not officially at war with Italy. She enlists Luca, now returning to Florence to pursue his studies in art, as a messenger in her quiet but daring schemes to save Jews from persecution. For the women of the Scorpione, conditions improve slightly when they are moved from a dilapidated former school to a hotel, though Lady Hester, clinging to her photograph with Mussolini, mistakes this as evidence of her influence rather than the dictator's deceit.

The war deepens, and Elsa's true identity as a Jewish woman comes into sharper focus. Protected by her American passport, she risks her safety by supplying false documents with Luca's help. For Luca, this alliance is also personal: he grows infatuated with Elsa, even as she turns her heart toward an Italian lawyer, Vittorio. To Elsa, Vittorio embodies strength and goodness, a saintly figure who becomes her great love, even as the world around them collapses.

By 1941, with America's entry into the war, Elsa and Georgie are no longer shielded. They too are branded enemies and share the fate of the English women they once regarded with irony. Yet within the group, divisions remain. Lady Hester, fiercely proud and deeply suspicious of Elsa's American outlook, condemns her permissiveness and modernity. In these tensions, the film crystallizes one of its sharpest contrasts: the stiff resilience of the English matron against the daring independence of the American widow, each defined and reshaped by the pressures of war.

The climax of the film reveals Vittorio's treachery: he has embezzled Elsa's art collection and money, planning to turn her over to the Gestapo while convincing her he is arranging her escape to Switzerland. Luca and Mary discover the plot and race to warn Elsa of his betrayal, even as Lady Hester initially refuses to believe it and Mussolini's forces threaten her arrest. Eventually, Elsa is persuaded by Hester, in a moment of awe and recognition, that all the acts of kindness she experienced were her own, not Mussolini's. This confrontation highlights the collision of two very different worlds, brought together by trust, deception, and the men they had once relied upon.

The wartime chaos forges an unexpected alliance that ensures Elsa's survival. Luca, letting go of his earlier jealousy, donates the trust money to the Italian resistance. Among the resistance fighters is Wilfred, who has been disguised as Lucy to protect himself and is weary from maintaining the ruse. With his help, Elsa is finally aided in her escape. She confides to Luca that, by a miracle, she had helped his mother through pregnancy, a revelation that adds an intimate sense of closure

By 1944, as British forces advance on San Gimignano, the eccentric Arabella, played by Judi Dench, bravely defends the town's Frescoes and the Tower from German demolition. She is joined by the other women, forming a heroic line of defense. While the arrival of the British ensures their survival, this apparent Deus ex Machina does not diminish the significance of the women's actions. Their courage, vigilance, and readiness to protect the art exemplify true resilience: even if they had fallen, their moral and cultural victories, their willingness to defend beauty and humanity against destruction, would remain undeniable.

In the aftermath, the surviving women continue as the Scorpione, curated by Lady Hester, who reasserts her authority while adapting to the changing times. Mary Wallace's quiet growth, from reluctant guardian to maternal figure, mirrors Luca's own development. Her steadfast morality and care provide the foundation for Luca to become a virtuous man, navigating a world surrounded by deceitful, fragile-egoed men and women more concerned with fame than substance. Likewise, Arabella's courage and love for art inspire him, fostering his decision to return to Florence to study art and embrace the values of beauty, integrity, and cultural preservation. Under their guidance, Luca matures into an artist and gentleman, embodying the virtues his mentors valued above all else.

Through its stellar cast, Cher as Elsa, Lily Tomlin as Georgie, Maggie Smith as Lady Hester, Judi Dench as Arabella, and John Plowright, Tea with Mussolini becomes more than a historical drama. It is a remembrance of a dark period in history, told with humor, grace, and affection. Personally, I find the film remarkable for how it balances historical reflection with the quirks and eccentricities of its characters, showing that even flawed, idiosyncratic people can be heroic. Zeffirelli's direction captures both grandeur and intimacy, and his own childhood perspective imbues the story with authenticity and warmth. The film celebrates the resilience of women who remain true to art, courage, and themselves, and it conveys a deeply human message: that creativity, kindness, and bravery endure, even when faced with oppression and moral collapse.