



# Italian for beginners

**Director:** Lone  
**Country:** Denmark  
**Date:** 2002

A review by Stephen Holden for *The New York Times*:

Lone Sherfig's warm and fuzzy romantic comedy "Italian for Beginners" is the first movie directed by a woman to follow the rigorous aesthetic principles of the Dogma 95 film makers who insist on natural lighting, hand-held cameras and other supposedly purifying cinematic techniques. It is also the first time that the style has been applied to a light romantic comedy, in this case the story of six lonely singles in their 30's who pair off and travel together to Venice. The result is a movie that looks like a John Cassavetes film but ends up emitting the benign feel-good vibrations of a movie like "Enchanted April."



What prevents "Italian for Beginners" from turning into a puff ball and blowing away are the scenes in which two of the characters are cruelly berated by sick, elderly parents. These harshly discordant notes are a bit like finding discarded fragments of an Ingmar Bergman film shoehorned into a giddy Nora Ephron romp. But they lend the movie enough weight to keep it moored to the ground.

In demonstrating that the application of Dogma principles to material this light can work, Ms. Sherfig has done her fellow dogmatists a service. Until now the style -- with its jerky *cinema verite* rhythms and unvarnished visual texture, which evoke a pseudo-documentary authenticity -- seemed best suited to a bitter confrontational satire like Thomas Vinterberg's "Celebration." Here they effectively undercut the story's superficiality and allow more intimate glimpses of its characters than a more polished approach would have permitted.

"Italian for Beginners" is Ms. Sherfig's third feature as a director and the first for which she has written the screenplay. The closest thing to a main character is Andreas (Anders W. Berthelsen), a youngish, recently widowed, Maserati-driving minister who has been hired as a temporary substitute for the regular pastor at a church. Its embittered longtime pastor, who appears briefly near the end of the film, has been suspended for making misanthropic statements from the pulpit.

The mild-mannered cleric enrolls in a class in elementary Italian that becomes the story's romantic flash point. Attending a class that has its own problems, including low attendance and the sudden death of an instructor, Andreas meets Olympia (Anette Stovelbaek), a sweet, self-effacing woman who works in a bakery and cares for her ailing, abusive father.

Andreas stays in a hotel managed by Jorgen (Peter Gantzler), a gentle, shuffling milquetoast who confesses to the minister that for the last four years he has been sexually impotent. Although Jorgen is pining for a relationship, he is frightened to begin one lest his problem short-circuit any romance. The object of his devotion is Guilia (Sara Indrio Jensen), an attractive Italian cook who works in the hotel restaurant.

Jorgen's temperamental opposite is Hal-Finn (Lars Kaalund), that restaurant's overly aggressive manager and a rabid sports fan. A comical bully, Hal-Finn rails at customers for their sloppy manners. But beneath

his severity lurks a softer side that comes out when he visits Karen (Ann Eleonora Jorgensen), an attractive hairdresser, for a trim. The moment she touches him, a current is sparked, and it is only a matter of time before professional caresses evolve into passionate kisses.



Karen is also caring for an ailing parent. And when her hospitalized mother demands a stronger infusion of morphine, Karen violates the doctor's orders and obliges her. In the movie's roundelay of connections, Karen and Olympia turn out to share a familial bond.

"Italian for Beginners," which the New York Film Festival is showing tonight and tomorrow night at Alice Tully Hall, is buoyed by the sly comic edges that the likable cast members impart to their characters. But despite its hip, off-center style and pointed de-glamorization of its singles, the movie adds up to little more than feel-good fluff. As Scandinavian comedies go, it pales in comparison with the recent Swedish film "Together," which gazed wryly into the heart of a 70's commune and its crumbling political ideals. The only thing "Italian for Beginners" finally has on its giddy mind is match-making.

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