



The Beauty of **BELLA**

Eduardo Verastegui (above) and Tammy Blanchard (left) portray the leads in *Bella*, which won the People's Award at the Toronto Film Festival.

BY AMY UELMEN



AT FIRST GLANCE, *BELLA* IS quite an ordinary movie. The backdrop for the film is the New York as ordinary working-class New Yorkers know it: cramped and at times dingy apartments, drug stores, low-priced ethnic restaurants, commuter trains and one of those public beaches close enough to a city bus stop. There are no special effects, no stunts to speak of, no exotic scenery. For those who are used to movies as an experience of fast-paced eye-popping action, it might take a moment to adjust to the light.

Beneath the surface, *Bella* is a breathtaking dive into the darkness of those ordinary tragedies that may very well lurk behind the door of any suburban home or city apartment. What family has not been touched by the sorrow of unexpected death, or suffered through the disgrace of a failure or a scandal? What family does not struggle with the deep scars that these sufferings leave in the hearts of each family member and in the family as a whole?

In *Bella*, one woman's drama of how to handle an unexpected pregnancy is just a sliver of a much more complex weave of suffering, disappointment and loss. And the film is candid: for most people,

for most families, the weight is not easy to bear, there are no quick solutions, and there are no heroes who appear on the scene and magically put the pieces together.

On a still deeper level, *Bella* is a picture of what this ordinary, tragic, hard-to-handle world might look like if even just a few people decided to open their hearts and pay attention to the suffering of the people around them. Focolare founder Chiara Lubich, once described what would happen if people were to live unity in the most varied circumstances of their lives: "We would suddenly see the world stop in its tracks, and like a film running backwards, retake its course

in the opposite direction." *Bella* gives a glimpse of this "backward"-running world, where one person goes beyond his own sufferings and problems in order to offer to another the spark of hope that selfless and disinterested and generous love can give.

And within this picture, we also see an image of the culture of life in its most complete and most compelling dimensions. One cannot emerge from *Bella* without a crystal-clear picture of how the hope for sustaining unborn life hinges on a profound commitment to improving the social structures that make it possible to sustain a family, including fair wages, respectful work

conditions and decent housing. As the U.S. bishops recently wrote in their statement on political participation, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our opposition to acts that are always wrong, such as abortion, "should also open our eyes to the good we must do." *Bella* is the story of how one person with his eyes wide open, and with the support of his own family, made an effort to heal one of our society's deepest wounds.

The ultimate choice made is not clear until the last moment of the film. In case you have not seen it, we will not spoil it for you. But see it simply because it is beautiful. ■

Young People's Comments after Seeing *Bella*

"This is a movie that does more than entertain your mind—it engages your soul." *Christine Murphy*

"Since seeing it I have started to slow down. I felt like time was going slower to help me see how precious the other people around me are. And being in New York City, which is one of the hardest places to "slow down"

and is filled with hot-tempered people, it surprised me even more. I started to see the people of New York City not as a stampede of humanity, but as a sea of individuals who all have their own unique story to tell. After seeing the film, I feel I want to be the person who sees the world as a collection of short stories waiting to be read and who smiles when the book is done." *Chrystal Giambastiani*

"The film made me question what the essentials are in my life, whether I stop to realize, question or really get to know some of the people that I see every day. I even questioned the emotional connections I have with others. *Bella* is a movie that really shows you the importance of love, the value of life, and the pain of death. From this movie, I learned that love can be the most rehabilitating force out there, as well as the power of forgiveness. I also learned more about how to love and how to trust." *Naja Pazant*

"*Bella* has helped me reflect on the reality of God. Sometimes, when people go through hard times, they feel that God is punishing them, and they feel as if God does not love them. This philosophy, though, is wrong. God loves each and every one of us, and he puts us through some hard times because he knows that we can get through them and that we are going to learn from them." *Elyse Meys*

"As a teen, if I already forget about what matters the most in life, then what

is going to happen when I am older, and have less time to reflect on life and how I can be of service to others? This movie made me realize that I do not want to live my life only for me. I can make a difference in a stranger's life, as well as in the lives of the members of my family." *Nicole Trotta*

"As a Hispanic, I was happy to see that the film presents the Latino community in a positive and realistic light." *Maggie Delgado*

—*Maria Ronconi*