

The Life Ahead: A Modern Love Story - Movie Review

Kathy Winings
December 14, 2020



A new Netflix film, "[The Life Ahead](#)," brings back to the screen the legendary [Sophia Loren](#) after more than a decade since her last film. Her performance in this film shows that age does not matter when it comes to giving an Oscar-worthy performance.

Directed by her son, Edoardo Ponti, and adapted from the novel, *The Life Before Us* by Romain Gary, "The Life Ahead" is the story of Madame Rosa (Loren), a Holocaust survivor and former prostitute who understands the challenges of young streetwalkers who are mothers, and Momo, a 12-year-old street-wise orphan from Senegal.



Kathy Winings

Finances are tight and as Rosa is preparing to sell her silver candlesticks, a young African street boy rushes in, pushes her down and steals her bag as she is waiting in line. The boy, Momo, played by young new actor Ibrahima Gueye, has been placed in the care of a local older physician, Dr. Coen, a friend and doctor for Rosa.

When he learns what Momo has done, he takes him to Rosa to apologize to her for stealing her silver. Rosa, a crusty elderly woman who has seen it all, is skeptical of his sincerity, questions his apology, but grudgingly accepts it. The doctor then tries to convince Rosa to take the boy for a short period of time -- just a few weeks or two months at most -- believing she can do more for Momo than he can.

It is clear that he cares for Momo but his medical practice doesn't allow him to spend the time and guidance the boy needs and he thinks Rosa has the grit that will be good for Momo and she can provide the guidance to try to set him on the right path. Of course, her response is, "Are you nuts? Over my dead body!" But she eventually relents and agrees to take him in for a short time.

Like many street kids, Momo has had a hard life. He and his mother immigrated to Italy to escape his father and the poverty he knew so well in Senegal. However, soon after arriving in Italy, his mother dies and Momo is all alone. He becomes part of the social welfare system and is eventually placed in the doctor's home. But also like many street kids, Momo is learning to develop a hard veneer to protect himself from feeling anything for anyone so he cannot be hurt.

To help him through this process, Momo develops an imaginary lioness who becomes a constant companion. The doctor, who knows of Momo's lioness, believes this represents Momo's mother since the

visions soothe Momo and help him hang on to his childhood a bit longer. He is also learning how to financially survive on the streets. Soon after he begins to live with Rosa, Momo finds the nerve to approach the local drug dealer and convince him to give Momo one of his routes. He agrees and it quickly becomes clear that Momo is good at selling drugs and can be trusted with money. Of course, Momo keeps this part of his life secret from Rosa.

While living at Madame Rosa's, Momo has two experiences that begin to open his heart. On one rainy day, Iosif, another boy Rosa is taking care of, tells Momo there is something wrong with Rosa. She is on the roof of the building, just sitting in the rain in a kind of trance. Momo rushes to the roof, helps pull her out of her trance and gets her back to the apartment. On another occasion, he sees Rosa going down to the basement of her building again as if in a trance. He tries to follow her to see where she is going and why.

After several attempts, he ultimately learns she has created a sanctuary where she goes to feel safe. This is where Momo learns she is a Holocaust survivor, though he does not know what that means. By this point, Momo realizes Rosa is not well. In a moment of candor, Rosa gets Momo to promise that if something happens to her, he will not let anyone put her in a hospital, telling the boy that the doctors will do all sorts of experiments on her and she doesn't want that to happen. Momo agrees. This is when we see his heart begin to open up as if to protect her.

The second important experience is when Rosa introduces Momo to another friend, Hamil, a Muslim antiques dealer in the neighborhood, hoping he can provide Momo with some work in the store to give him something to do during the day. More importantly, Rosa is thinking that Hamil might be a good influence on Momo, someone who can connect to him through their common Muslim heritage, though it is clear Momo knows very little about Islam.

However, over time and through Hamil's patience, we see Momo fighting within himself -- trying to keep his harsh veneer while simultaneously opening up to Hamil. This is particularly poignant when Hamil asks him to help repair a Turkish carpet containing the image of a lion in it. This becomes an opportunity for the antiques dealer to explain the meaning of the lion in Islam, something that connects well to Momo's imaginary lioness. It is through Momo's relationship with Hamil and the Islamic precepts Hamil tries to share with the young boy that eventually convinces him he needs to stop selling drugs and that his decisions now are important in shaping his future.



The official trailer for "The Life Ahead" (courtesy Netflix).

As time goes by, though, it becomes clear Rosa's health is declining as her trances become more frequent. While those around her have been trying hard to shelter her, eventually she collapses and is taken to the hospital. When Momo visits her, he remembers his promise to keep her out of the hospital. Though he is not physically big, the young pre-teen finds a wheelchair and wheels her through the streets back to her apartment. He takes her down to her sanctuary in the basement and takes care of her, feeding her, comforting her and protecting her from being taken back to the hospital. But it does not last long. She quietly passes away one evening.

"The Life Ahead" brings to life multiple problems with which many of our communities must wrestle. The European communities in particular have experienced several waves of immigration from diverse cultures, ethnicities and nationalities over the last five years which have presented numerous issues. The

film hints at the challenges of the thousands of street children that inhabit most major cities throughout the world. UNICEF estimates there are 33 million youth living in a country that is not their birth country. In Italy's case, there are 6.3 million immigrants with 8.6% of them under 19.

The challenges faced by immigrant children include schooling, healthcare, access to clean water, and protective services. Many of us may have encountered such youth in our life. It is easy to assume they are unreachable because of the harsh image they present. We may even assume they are lost forever. But this film shows the impact of love, kindness and compassion coming from the significant adults in the life of these youth provided the adults persevere and are patient and genuine with these youth as they ride out the emotional storms and challenges thrown at them by the children.

For Momo, he was lucky enough to have four adults who took the time to persevere with him. They were able to not just teach through their words but through their actions that to love is not a weakness and that his decisions and actions matter even at the young age of 12. At the same time, the film challenges us to think about what society can really do about the thousands of children and teens living on the streets of every major city around the globe. If it does take a village to raise a child, what can we do to create such a village?

The film also sheds a light on the invisible children whose mothers are prostitutes. What Romain Gary has done is tell a story in which one of the main characters is a former prostitute who has found a way to help other streetwalkers, recognizing that in addition to being invisible, they are also not seen as human beings with the same issues, concerns and challenges as traditional mothers.

The other dynamic raised by the film is of intergenerational relationships, highlighting that between our senior population and youth. Rosa and the doctor are clearly senior citizens and Hamil is not far behind. In the beginning, Momo only sees them as old people to be tolerated, questioning what they can offer him. But over time, Momo learns what it is they provide for him -- they are there for him, they are consistently present for him. It is because of that presence that Momo's need to feel loved and a sense of belonging is satisfied.

Ultimately, this film is a love story -- but not the kind of love story we are used to. It is a love story for the 21st century. The film challenges us to ask: What does it take to love another person? How do we love the seemingly unlovable? How does one love someone unconditionally? What is the meaning and role of family for those for whom it may be just a dream -- an impossibility? How do we become a genuine presence for those around us? The closing song's lyrics say it best:

*When you run out of words, I'm here. I'm here.
Maybe the only words you'll ever need are I'm here. I'm here.
When you learn to survive and accept the impossible
No one believes you, I will.
I don't know what your destiny will hold
But if you want, if you want me, I'm here
No one hears you, but I will.
When you lose your way, I'm here. I'm here.
You run away or put up defenses, I'm here. I'm here.
When being invisible is worse than not being alive
No one sees you, I will.*

At the end of the day, isn't that what all of us want to feel?

"The Life Ahead" (rated PG-13): Running time: 94 minutes. Directed by Edoardo Ponti; written by Edoardo Ponti and Ugo Chiti (based on The Life Before Us by Romain Gary). Main cast: Sophia Loren, Ibrahima Gueye, Renato Carpentieri, and Babak Karimi. See IMDb for full details. Streaming now on Netflix.

Dr. Kathy Winings is Professor of Religious Education and an educational consultant. She is former Director, Maryland Instructional Site, and former Director, Doctor of Ministry Program at UTS. She received her Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University.