

“SPINOZA”

Logline:

What is a good life? Searching for the key to a harmonious and true existence, Baruch de Spinoza is confronted with horrifying obstacles. Due to his unorthodox ideas he becomes the most feared pariah of the Golden Age and an important forerunner of the Enlightenment.

Premise:

You need to strive for the truly good in order to find fulfillment in the kind of love that has no hope of being loved.

Synopsis:

He is called Bento, *the blessed one* in the language of his parents, who barely escaped being burned at the Inquisition's stake. Bento is six years old when he gets the shock of his life. Clasped in his dying mother's arms, a wave of blood gushes over him from her mouth. His father tries to console him: mama's soul will be with him forever. This sounds nice to Bento but, he asks everybody, what is a soul? Nobody knows. Not even his teacher, reb Morteira, who tells the child about the four forbidden questions. The questions about what is up there in the heavens and what in the hellish depths. About what preceded Creation and what might one day happen. Bento is not only forbidden to ask questions about such matters, he is not even allowed to think about them...

The soul and the four forbidden questions keep haunting Spinoza. There is nothing for it but to try and solve the riddle. And so to find an answer to the question why he experiences life as a threat. Bento finds little to his liking in the Jewish faith of his father, especially after his uncle Uri is violently banished from the synagogue for heresy and commits suicide. Uncle Uri once told him that thinking is dangerous, but immediately added that your mind offers the only solution: if you understand the laws of existence, you will be a free man.

The search of the young merchant Spinoza quickly brings him into conflict with the people around him, among them the rabbis of the synagogue, who, at the order of the Amsterdam mayors have to nip every possible sign of heresy in the bud. In 1656, using scathing words that were unprecedented, reb Moreira declares Bento anathema. Nobody is allowed to talk or do business with him, offer him shelter, feed him or love him. Twenty-three-year old Bento is an outcast. When, shortly after his father dies, his sweetheart leaves him and there is an attempt on his life, the smoldering fire of his existential angst (the driving force behind his search) blazes up. He is plunged into a deep crisis, which more than ever before forces him to look for an answer to his big question: how do I lead a good life? Is there such a thing as salvation?

With his Big Question, Bento retreats to Rijnsburg, where he alternates studying with his livelihood, polishing lenses. There, his new friends visit him frequently: freethinkers who point out to him the dangers of his radicalism. Even in tolerant 17th-century Holland it is still dangerous to file a complaint against Protestant ministers for their tyranny, to demand freedom of speech or argue for a separation of church and state. When he and his friends are molested in an inn by a group of Orangists, it's evident how paper-thin the tolerance is. Bento, a dagger pointed at his throat, barely escapes being beaten up or worse by reciting the Lord's Prayer.

One of the insulted ministers goes to the highest placed governor Johann de Witt, to exact measures from him against 'the renegade Jew, an atheist'. Even though 'atheist' is the most subversive term of abuse De Witt knows, Freedom is more important to him than anything else. If not out of principle, then certainly because it is at the basis of the enormous prosperity of the Republic of the Netherlands. De Witt refuses to act against Spinoza.

When one of his friends is sentenced because of a publication and dies in the Amsterdam 'Rasphuis' (a prison), Spinoza knows he has to be very careful. Steadily but secretly, he works on the *Ethica*, his all-encompassing book on God, reason, freedom, emotions and a great deal more. But his hopes for its publication are dashed completely when Johan de Witt is murdered in 1672 in a gruesome way by scum from The Hague with tacit permission from the Prince of Orange, who assumes power over the state. Spinoza is beside himself with rage and devises a political plan to turn the tide, a daredevil plan which fails and almost costs him his life.

Spinoza is aware that knowledge is the only defense against bloodshed and terror, whether or not it is the Inquisition or the disgruntled masses on the The Hague streets who are responsible. Only the book on 'the truly good' to which he has devoted his life, can point humankind the way to Enlightenment. In 1675 the *Ethica* is completed. Bento travels to Amsterdam and entrusts the manuscript to the typesetters working for his friend, the printer Rieuwertsz, who promises to publish it anonymously.

While the *Ethica* is being typeset, Rieuwertsz is attacked with brute force by a clique of religious fanatics and Orangists. Spinoza realizes danger is coming too close and does not want to risk his friends' lives. In a fit of rage he takes the boxes with lead letters and smashes them to smithereens on the printer's floor.

Not much later, the philosopher, founder of the Enlightenment, dies at the age of forty-four, victim of the same lung disease that killed his mother. He never saw his book in print.

But there is a kind of happy ending: less than a year after Spinoza's death, his complete work is for sale in Europe thanks to the ingenious, clandestine approach of his friend Jan Rieuwertsz, the printer. By way of precaution, the title page of the *Ethica* does not mention a publisher. It does name the writer, however. He is beyond the reach of the authorities, secular as well as clerical. For all eternity.

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