

SEMPRE AVANTI

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MAYBE POGO WAS RIGHT!

By Dona De Sanctis

A couple of months ago, Rudy Giuliani's White House aspirations were the topic of a popular daytime talk show on national television.

"But is the country ready for a president whose name ends in a vowel?" one of the hosts asked rhetorically. Even more disturbing than the discrimination implicit in the question was the fact that the person who asked it was Italian American.

Was Pogo right? Is the enemy "us?"

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT?

A casual survey of Italian Americans in the U.S. entertainment industry reveals that most actors, directors, writers and those very few producers who are of Italian descent appear oblivious to how persistently and unfairly people of their shared heritage are portrayed by Hollywood and television.

Among these entertainment figures is a small but powerful group of Italian Americans, who are immensely talented and successful to the point that any one of them could write his own ticket to produce, direct and/or star in a movie or TV series.

Sadly, however, they are all also immensely indifferent to the defamation issue perhaps because some of their most successful and critically acclaimed work perpetuates these stereotypes.

Among these “movers and shakers” we find Martin Scorsese (“Goodfellas”), David Chase (“The Sopranos”) and the “Godfather” triumvirate: Francis Ford Coppola, Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro.

None has ever used his immense show business clout to write, direct or produce a movie or television series that portrays Italian Americans without reference to the Mafia. Why?

When this writer asked Sylvester Stallone, he was refreshingly candid. “The Mafia theme is still a quick way to get a movie made or to get on TV, thanks to the success of “The Godfather,” he said.

So what can organizations like the Sons of Italy do to encourage casting characters with Italian last names as brain surgeons, astronauts or lawmen instead of gangsters?

“Not much,” Stallone said. “The power in Hollywood lies with the people in creative positions. It’s the Italian American writers and producers who will make the change come. Like “Field of Dreams,” if you build it, they will come so if you write it, they [the American public] will believe it.”

WHO’S TO BLAME?

Clearly, the problem lies with the writers and producers, who are not looking for properties that present Italian Americans in a positive, life-affirming light. The problem is not with the journey-men actors who play the roles that stereotype Italian Americans. Most of these actors are unlikely ever to become stars. They are character actors, like James Gandolfini, Vincent Pastore and Michael Imperioli, who, before their enormous success in “The Sopranos,” toiled for years in “the business,”

largely unknown, trying to put bread on the table. Typecast by their own industry, these actors have little choice but to accept the Mafia roles offered them since nothing else is available. Can you see James Gandolfini playing a doctor, a lawyer or the president of the United States?

For that reason, Italian American organizations like the Sons of Italy and its anti-defamation arm, the Commission for Social Justice, never attack the actors who accept these roles. With one major exception. Robert De Niro.

THE DE NIRO CONTROVERSY

In 2004, Robert De Niro voiced the role of Don Lino, a “godfather” shark, in Steven Spielberg’s *Shark Tale*. Opposition to this film united the Italian American advocacy movement, which formed a coalition of more than 20 organizations of all sizes, coast to coast, to bring media attention to the inadvisability of inculcating in young children the images of Italian Americans-as-gangsters.

In August 2004, the full-length cartoon had one of its premieres in St. Mark’s Square in Venice. Shortly after that, De Niro was to go to Rome to accept an honorary Italian citizenship from the president of the Italian republic.

The Sons of Italy faxed a letter of protest to then-Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. Plans for the citizenship were put on “indefinite hold” and the news of what the Sons of Italy did went around the world.

While most Italian Americans applauded this bold move, a vocal minority was actually offended. Their loyalty was with Robert De Niro! They had no problem with the violent and ignorant Italian American characters he portrayed in “Mean Streets,” “Godfather II,” “Raging Bull,” “Jackie Brown,” and “The

Untouchables” in which he played Al Capone.

It didn't bother them that for “Analyze This” he made \$8 million playing the disturbed Mafioso, Paul Vitti and then cleaned up \$20 million more when he reprised the role for “Analyze That.” No. He was “a great actor” and the Sons of Italy was...well... unprintable.

INSTITUTIONAL ADVOCACY

The situation is equally unsettling in some Italian American organizations, which are convinced “there's no money” in anti-defamation.

They believe, perhaps rightly, that an Italian American organization that is too vocal in its fight against stereotyping might lose the support of Italian Americans at the corporate level, who are in a position to bring in considerable and much-needed funding for scholarships and other programs.

They rightly point to the fact that many Italian American executives are men and women who, in a sense, have been shielded from the aftershocks of stereotyping. Some have denied their Italian roots by changing their last names or using a married “Anglo” name. Others have embraced their heritage and point to their professional success as proof that discrimination against Italian Americans does not exist.

But whether Italian Americans are being denied housing, jobs, promotions or admission to top schools because of their heritage is beside the point. Such discrimination is hard to prove since we are part of the white majority so sociologists and other researchers do not study how stereotyping is affecting the average Italian American.

The anecdotal evidence we receive at the Sons of Italy would indicate that it

does, in fact, exist, but whether it does or doesn't, the fact that Italian Americans are blatantly stereotyped on television, in the movies and in advertising is still wrong and disrespectful.

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While it is unfair to blame the victim, Italian American organizations and individuals have to assume at least some of the responsibility for the frustratingly slow and relatively unsuccessful battle over several decades to end the stereotyping.

The anti-defamation programs in the large national organizations are underfunded because the rank-and-file members do not contribute to anti-defamation campaigns or pressure their leaders to “beef up” anti-defamation efforts.

So we can write indignant letters to the producers of TV shows and directors of Hollywood movies. We can complain to the manufacturers whose products are hyped by using Italian American stereotypes. We can threaten, cajole or implore the media to treat us with more respect and compassion.

But until we can speak with one voice against the stereotyping of Italian Americans and put our money where our mouth is, like Sisyphus, we will be pushing the same boulder uphill for eternity.

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at d-desanctis@osia.org or call (202) 547-2900.