

SHARK TALE WRAP UP: WAS IT WORTH IT?

By Dona De Sanctis

As expected, Steven Spielberg's children mafia movie, *Shark Tale* opened with great fanfare nationwide on more than 4,000 screens October 1, 2004, the first day of Italian American heritage month.

For the 10 months prior to that premiere, Italian Americans coast to coast had been fighting this movie that passes the stereotype of Italian Americans as gangsters to children around the world

THE CARRES ALLIANCE

Most of these efforts were coordinated through the Coalition Against Racial, Religious and Ethnic Stereotyping (CARRES), an alliance of more than 30 organizations, including Italian American groups, the Arab American Institute, the Polish American Congress and the esteemed civil rights organization, the National Conference for Community and Justice.

CARRES was formed in January 2004 by the three leading national Italian American organizations-- the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice, the National Italian American Foundation and Unico National together with the New York-based Columbus Citizens Foundation and the Italic Institute of America. These founding members also pooled their resources to hire a large public relations firm to help them in the fight.

THE CARRES CAMPAIGNS

From January to October, CARRES and its members devoted enormous time and energy to *Shark Tale*. They sent out press releases protesting the film and met with political leaders to express their concerns about *Shark Tale*'s influence on children. They organized letter-writing campaigns to Spielberg and DreamWorks, asking them to change the names of the gangsters.

CARRES and its members also lobbied the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to give *Shark Tale* a PG-13 or R rating. It launched a boycott of products like Burger King and Coca-Cola that were helping to promote the film and protested the honorary citizenship that Italy was planning to give *Shark Tale* star Robert DeNiro during the movie's premiere in Venice last September.

Meantime, DreamWorks, one of Hollywood's most powerful studios, spent \$75 million to make this movie and another \$145 million to market it. Clearly this was a David and Goliath struggle. So who won?

Let's start with what CARRES did not do. It did not stop *Shark Tale* in its tracks. It did not get the names of the gangsters changed. It did not convince the MPAA to give *Shark Tale* an "R" or even a "PG-13" rating. It did not gain the support of political leaders like Mario Cuomo

or Rudy Giuliani or of the NAACP, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, the Hispanic La Raza and other civil rights groups, who refused to join CARRES or even criticize *Shark Tale*.

So what did CARRES accomplish?

THE CARRES SCOREBOARD

First, CARRES sent a very powerful message to the media, to the MPAA, to our political leaders, to corporate America and most of all, to Hollywood that *Shark Tale* crossed the line by passing mafia stereotypes to children too young to distinguish fact from fiction.

CARRES put DreamWorks' feet to the fire. In interview after interview, this mega-studio was forced to defend *Shark Tale* and its stereotypes—often with weak arguments. “They’re fish,” DreamWorks spokesman Andy Spahn told one reporter. “They don’t speak Italian.”

But CARRES relentlessly countered that the gangster characters all had Italian last names and were voiced by some of the most famous “Mafia” actors in the business, including DeNiro along with Vincent Pastore and Michael Imperioli from *The Sopranos* and *GoodFellas* director Martin Scorsese.

THE MPAA

As a result of *Shark Tale*, CARRES established contacts with the MPAA, the movie industry’s powerful trade association. While declining to give *Shark Tale* the rating CARRES argued it deserved, the MPAA is now considering adding ethnic stereotyping to racial and religious stereotyping as part of its rating criteria.

CARRES will continue to lobby for this addition to the MPAA rating system. It is important because a film’s MPAA rating can affect its box office gross and, as everyone knows, Hollywood is guided more by the dollar sign than by artistic merit in choosing which films to produce.

THE MEDIA

The CARRES campaign reached the desks of many reporters here and abroad. Consequently, when the film opened, a number of movie critics commented on the movie’s stereotyping of Italian Americans, including reviewers from *The Washington Post*, *the Village Voice*, *the Boston Globe* and the Associated Press news agency.

Significantly, such observations were a first. The stereotype of the Mafia gangster is so much a part of the entertainment landscape that reviewers invariably fail even to notice how it maligns an estimated 16 million Italian Americans. With *Shark Tale*, CARRES succeeded in sensitizing movie critics to this issue.

DE NIRO CITIZENSHIP

The honorary Italian citizenship for Robert De Niro appears to be on indefinite hold, thanks to the protests the Sons of Italy and other CARRES members made directly to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Equally important is the fact that more than 100 newspapers in the U.S., Europe and even Asia reported that Italian Americans were criticizing Robert De Niro for his role in *Shark Tale*, bringing the issue of Italian American stereotyping before an international audience for the first time.

The criticism reached De Niro who was forced publicly to defend the mafia movie roles he has chosen over the course of his long career. Adding insult to injury, the NIAF, which had honored De Niro in 2002, published a letter it sent him expressing its “extreme disappointment and feelings of betrayal” over his role in this film.

AN HISTORIC ALLIANCE

But the most important achievement of CARRES and its struggle with *Shark Tale* is the fact that this is an historic alliance. For the first time in our history, the major national Italian American organizations with support from smaller state and community groups, banded together to fight the issue of stereotyping.

CARRES plans to remain active and is prepared to challenge any unfavorable portrayal of Italian Americans by the U.S. entertainment, advertising and news industries. We have just begun to fight!

Dona De Sanctis is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America, the oldest and largest national organization in the United States for men and women of Italian heritage... During the CARRES campaigns, she was its media spokesperson. For more information about CARRES or to join the Sons of Italy, see www.osia.org or call 202/547-2900 in Washington, D.C.