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THE SOPRANOS....THEY'RE BA-ACK!

By Dona De Sanctis

A few short weeks from now, on March 12, the American cable-viewing public will once again be exposed to one of the most violent, immoral and profanity-ridden series ever to disgrace the airwaves. On that date, HBO will premiere for the sixth season, its hit series, *The Sopranos*, a show that single-handedly has rekindled America's love affair with the Mafia-as-entertainment.

Television critics and social commentators have enthusiastically reviewed the series since its premiere in 1999. They, along with much of the news media, have hailed it as intelligent and engaging -- "far and away the best show on television," according to *Newsweek*.

High praise indeed for a cast of characters who beat up women, betray their wives, "earn" a living through prostitution, drug-dealing, hijacking, extortion, and illegal gambling while murdering anyone who gets in their way. What's not to like?

Bill Cosby has noted that if all the profanity in *The Sopranos* were deleted, each episode would last about seven minutes. Not too much of an exaggeration. The penultimate episode of the second season, for example, used the "f" word 95 times in 50 minutes.

To rationalize their enjoyment of a series so dependent on violence and bad taste for its plot lines, critics are reading deep social import into *The Sopranos*. Several pundits find in the protagonist, Tony Soprano, an angst-ridden, Prozac-popping Everyman, struggling with problems and situations found in contemporary society. For example, when taking your

daughter to visit prospective colleges, is it all right to sneak away and whack a stoolie while she is being interviewed? Or, if a business associate fails to pay back a loan on time, do good customer relations preclude running him over and breaking his legs?

TO DELIGHT AND INSTRUCT

The Ancient Romans believed that art serves two purposes: to entertain and to teach. But one would be hard pressed to find any worthwhile lessons about life in *The Sopranos*. Instead, the series offers plots that distort the meaning of right and wrong, good and evil, and crime and punishment. Despite his profound moral and ethical shortcomings, Tony Soprano is presented sympathetically while those held up to censure and ridicule are the law enforcement officers trying to put him and his crew behind bars.

Compare this series to the NBC series, *Law & Order*, the longest running crime drama series on television. Since its premiere 16 years ago, *Law & Order* and its two spin-offs, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* help the TV viewer to examine the causes of crime and the meaning of justice in episode after riveting episode with little on-screen violence and no nudity or profanity.

Still there are those critics who would elevate *The Sopranos* to art. A *New York Times* reporter has even compared *Sopranos* creator David Chase to Honoree de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Emile Zola -- the great 19th century novelists who used their artistic vision to expose very real social evils. *The Sopranos*, however, has no such altruistic mission. In fact, it does not even have a unified artistic vision, given the fact that it is written by Mr. Chase and a stable of 10 writers and produced by a cadre of no fewer than 13 directors.

In a public discussion of his series at New York's Museum of Modern Art several years

ago, Mr. Chase described the script-writing process. He and his associates sit around a table each week and throw out plot ideas until several “catch fire.” Often the writers do not know what will happen from one episode to the next.

As an example, he gave the mysterious disappearance of Tony Soprano’s best friend, “Big Pussy” Bonpensiero during the series’ first season. Why did he disappear? Mr. Chase didn’t know. Where did he go? The writers never figured that out. They debated for a long time over whether or not to “kill” him in the second season and wound up taking a vote.

From this brief insight into the creative processes that drive the popular series, it seems fairly evident that the writers’ principal objective is to shock and surprise their audience. This makes for good story-telling but not art.

THE REAL VICTIMS

But perhaps the people who have the most to complain about when it comes to *The Sopranos* are Americans of Italian descent, the nation’s fifth largest ethnic minority, who see their customs, traditions, values, and even their religion used week after week to give complexity, depth and authenticity to what is essentially a mob soap opera.

Italian Americans have long seen their heritage exploited by the U.S. entertainment industry. For more than 75 years, -- since the 1930 premiere of *Little Caesar*, Hollywood has persistently portrayed Italian Americans as crude and violent gangsters. Many Italian Americans have ignored such stereotyping, believing that no sensible person would think they were really like those characters on television and in the movies.

After all, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, two thirds of the Italian Americans in the workforce are in white collar positions as physicians, attorneys, teachers, executives, managers,

and the like. Meanwhile, the U.S. Justice Department estimates that less than .0025 percent of the estimated 26 million Americans of Italian descent are involved in organized crime.

Unfortunately, these facts are not reflected in the public's opinion of Italian Americans. After decades of exposure to us as fictional hoodlums like Tony Soprano, many Americans take the fiction created by the entertainment industry as fact. This holds especially true in Middle America whose cities have few to no "real" Italian Americans. The truth of this statement was revealed several years ago in a study by the Princeton-based Research Analysis Corporation, which found that three of four people in this country associate Italian Americans with crime.

WHERE'S THE JUSTICE?

We live in an age of great political correctness. *Little Black Sambo* has been banned from the nursery; *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Merchant of Venice* are no longer required reading in many high schools, and the Cartoon Network dropped a dozen Bugs Bunny cartoons from its programming because they made fun of African Americans, Indians and Eskimos.

Yet the nation's estimated 26 million Italian Americans and their children continue to see themselves relentlessly stereotyped by the U.S. entertainment industry as gangsters and buffoons while their very legitimate protests are dismissed by the news media.

Thanks to *The Sopranos* and the Mafia-themed commercials, movies and television shows it has spawned over the past seven years, knowledgeable Italian Americans have come to realize that "make believe" *makes* people *believe*.

As a result, with *The Sopranos* we have a series has led millions of Americans to equate "good television" with the portrayal of ruthless people of Italian background doing despicable acts. But that is not art or entertainment. That is discrimination and prejudice pure and simple.

What are you going to do about it?

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