

April 2005 Column

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THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD

By Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D.

Uncle Nino is a sweet family movie about an elderly Italian who pays a surprise visit to his Italian American relatives in Chicago and turns their busy lives upside down. Through Uncle Nino, however, the family realizes the importance of the Old World values he lives by: place family first; enjoy the little pleasures of life and make each day count.

Uncle Nino opened nationally in February and was endorsed by the Sons of Italy, the National Italian American Foundation, UNICO National and other Italian American organizations, whose members flocked to see it.

As a result of this word-of-mouth publicity, the film ranked 33rd at the box office in its first weekend—a pretty good placement considering that it was only on 189 screens nationwide. For comparison purposes, the top 12 films that same weekend were shown on between 1,600 and 3,600 screens. *People Magazine* hailed *Uncle Nino* as a “sleeper hit.”

Despite these encouraging developments, some people in our community found fault with the movie. It seems the main character confesses that he missed his brother’s funeral 30 years earlier because he was in jail for petty theft. “Why must there always be some association of Italians with crime?,” complained one dedicated activist.

Of course, I understand his point and agree with it to some extent, but was this small plot device worth carping about? Don’t most characters in movies have flaws or make mistakes in their past that they come to regret? Isn’t that what helps to make them more interesting and complex?

ARE WE TOO SENSITIVE?

Italian Americans have finally realized the seriousness of the problem of stereotyping, but if our newfound militancy is going to be effective we must be careful not to become hypersensitive.

For example, a talented and dedicated activist, who worked long and hard to encourage the U.S. Postal Service to issue a stamp in honor of the late composer and conductor Henry Mancini, finally saw his efforts crowned with success last year.

Yet, when the design for the stamp was released, he sent a strongly worded letter of complaint to the postmaster general because the stamp pictured Mancini conducting in a turtle-neck sweater instead of the formal tux that most conductors wear.

Several years ago, Joe Mantegna starred in the short-lived television series *First Monday* in which he played a U.S. Supreme Court justice. Originally, Mantegna's character was to be Jewish, but he insisted that the character be Italian American and named after his own grandfather, Joe Novelli.

In one episode, Mantegna's character is falsely accused of having a connection with the Mafia. Some Italian Americans were outraged about that, but when we discussed it with Joe Mantegna, we learned that he himself had suggested the plot of that episode so that he could confront the issue of stereotyping head-on.

In December 2003, Coca-Cola pulled a two-minute short, *Mafia Movie Madness* from more than 10,000 movie theaters in the United States and Canada after receiving complaints from the Sons of Italy and other groups. Yet, some activists dismissed this gesture, pointing instead to the fact that Coca-Cola had run a TV ad campaign which featured Chazz Palminteri playing a Mafia boss.

A REALITY CHECK

“Perfection is the enemy of the good,” as the saying goes. It’s time for us to take a long, sober look at what we can and cannot accomplish to eradicate stereotyping and promote a more positive image of Italian Americans in the United States.

There is no question that every day we are bombarded by unflattering stereotypes of Italian Americans. We see them at the movies, on television and in advertising. We find them in newspaper op-ed columns, comic strips, political cartoons, video games and children’s books. Yet, our very legitimate complaints frequently fall on deaf ears. Why?

The fact is that most people in entertainment, the news media, government, the judicial system and the general public consider Italian Americans part of the “white majority.” In their minds, this means that we could not possibly be the victims of discrimination and prejudice.

As a result, newspaper editors, film producers, lawmakers and the average American believe we have had it easy. We suffered no Holocaust in Europe. We endured no slavery in the South. We experienced no genocide on the frontier.

Unfortunately, most people, including Italian Americans, know next to nothing about the discrimination, persecution and racism that our ancestors faced when they came here more than a century ago.

People know even less about what southern Italians endured for centuries in Italy where they lived lives of misery that shocked Booker T. Washington when he visited southern Italy. There, he wrote, he found families living in conditions that rivaled those of the slaves on plantations before the Civil War.

But the Italians who had the courage to cross the ocean were survivors. They left the tiny villages where their people had been for centuries and settled in the bustling cities of America where they lived in ghettos, suffered persecution and discrimination, but steadily worked their way up the American ladder of success.

These are stories that have only been told around family dinner tables. Clearly they need a much wider audience because, thanks to this ignorance about the Italian American experience, the stereotyping of Italian Americans is tolerated by the larger American society.

As a result, in a very real sense, today's Italian Americans have the worst of both worlds. We are part of the white majority, yet are treated like second-class citizens, who are denied the respect accorded every other ethnic, racial and religious group in this country.

Italian Americans are forced to live with an infuriating double standard that allows us and our heritage to be ridiculed and exploited in ways that would be unthinkable if applied to Americans of African, Hispanic, Jewish or Native American descent.

PICKING OUR BATTLES

How best to change this? We need to pick our battles. *Shark Tale* was one. *Uncle Nino* was not. Here are a few more:

- We need to convince the Motion Picture Association of America to add stereotyping to its list of criteria to use in its rating system.
- We need to work together to preserve and defend Columbus Day as a national holiday.
- We need to prevail on the major textbook publishers to give more attention to Italian Americans and their history.
- We need to promote the study of Italian in our schools and colleges.

These are all battles worth fighting because success in any one of them will make a difference to our children and our children's children.

The major Italian American organizations are working on all these initiatives and will be calling on you for support as they move forward. In the meantime, let's try to look at the big picture as far as

stereotyping is concerned. So perhaps *Uncle Nino* isn't perfect. But do we want perfection or progress? Given the choice, I'll take progress. What about you?

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