

## The Untouchable Hollywood Italian

Regina Soria

College of Notre Dame, Maryland

Fall 1999 in the USA will be remembered for abundance of films, commercials and television programs portraying Italian Americans as violent, criminals and airing terms such as «Ginzo Gravy», «Wonder Bread Wop» and others on Time Warner web site.

Frank J. Guarini, Chairman of NIAF, the National Italian American Foundation, announced a media campaign to correct «the unfair impression of Italian Americans through media stereotyping», which, he writes «makes it harder for our young people to get into the best colleges or land jobs in corpora the America». Guarini announced the existence of a Bill, «The Ethnic and Minority Bias Clearing House Act of 1999 (HR 125)» introduced by New York Congressman Eliot Engel to report to Congress on the «media portrayal of Ethnic Racial and Religious Minorities». NIAF has also prepared a 37 pages report «Italian American in US History and Culture», to be distributed to Members of the Academy of Television Arts and Science, who select the annual Television Emmy Awards. This year the Emmy went to The Sopranos (a gangster family) cited by the syndicated columnist George Will «as an example of superb television». Mr. Guarini also announced «the commissioning of «a major study of how the media's portrayal of Italian Americans has distorted the public's perception of this large group of Americans.» In September also came out a study by the Italic Studies Institute of New York whose results published by the Italian language newspaper *Italia Oggi* show that in 71 years Hollywood produced 1001 movies with Italian American characters of which only 26 per cent has positive roles for the Italian Americans, 41 per cent has stereotypes of criminals tied to the mafia and 33 per cent is vulgar loud and repugnant typical of the well known four «M» type: mozzarella, mafia, mamma, mandolino style.

Frank G. Guarino suggests that a well documented history of Hollywood portrayal of the Italian Americans be published very soon. We already have it: it is the *Hollywood Italian* written by Paola Casella, published by Baldini & Castoldi in 1999, winner of the prestigious *Premio Donna città di Roma* for a first book, «opera prima». The book was very positively reviewed by such important Italian newspapers as *La Repubblica* with an article by Irene Bignardi.

The book is written in Italian, there is also an English version but, so far, it has not found a publisher in the US.

*Hollywood Italian* affords a complete history of the fortunes of Italian Americans in the movies industry. The title of first Italian American movie was «The Dago», one of the epithet given to the Italian immigrants. It was the story of a gondolier with a guitar, mustaches, exaggerated gestual expressiveness, loud laughter. The background is in a imaginary Italy with Venice on whose bridges sheep, donkeys and cows are strolling. The

gondolier is in love with Annette, a farmer's daughter also typical Italian. He came to America as to the promised land but life in New York disappoints him.

As Irene Bignardi writes *Hollywood Italian* has the wealth of an encyclopedia. It is divided in 10 chapters, each one presents a decade with its history, the movies and the protagonists. It has an impressive number of world famous names from Rudolph Valentino to Frank Capra, Frank Sinatra, Vincente Minnelli to Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Liza Minnelli and John Turturro to mention only a few. There is a complete bibliography and indexes of names and of movies.

The identity of the protagonists is discussed in each chapter. According to Casella, Frank Capra portrays America with that patriotic enthusiasm which is characteristic of first generation immigrants. As Scorsese observed, Capra «described America the way America wanted to be portrayed» His career was the classic American success story. Born in a family of illiterates, he insisted in getting a degree in Chemical Engineering. In Hollywood he soon reached the top. Director at the age 29, his first film was about the immigrant experience of a young Jewish boy, who will forsake his origins, his family and his name. Paola Casella's observation is how strange that Capra portrayed a success story of a Jewish boy rather than of an Italian.

As the years pass, the changes in the Italian American families is examined. In the Forties, Casella writes, the second generation of the Italian American reaches its maturity. The author comments the divided loyalties and the sense of shame that the children of the second generation felt about being Italian.

It is very important to remember that in the early part of the century the American nation faced with thousands of immigrants many of them illiterates, the American nation made an extraordinary effort to educate their children, Americanization was the operative word. By law the children stay in school until the age of 16. This was a hardship on the part of the family who would have preferred to send the children to work, but for the children it was an opportunity to prepare for a better life.

Casella, rather than comment on the good side of scholastic alphabetization, comments on the Truant Laws that made it mandatory for the parents to send the child to school and quotes the writer Nick Pileggi's father the Southern Italian proverb: «don't make your children better than thyself», as if the Italian fathers did not want his child to be better than himself. On the contrary in general it is proven that many parents were proud to send their children to school and even to college. There are many fathers who made a living in shoe repairing whose sons became doctors, judges, or lawyers, fathers who sent the daughter to college proud of having a teacher in the family.

Casella also mentions the loss of the Italian language, that is a very complex question. As for the language it is very true that the majority of Italian Americans don't speak Italian.

Until the Eighty Eighties the Italian immigrants to America had been cultivated Italians seeking freedom. The flood of impoverished immigrants came from the South and spoke in various dialects.

The first generation kept the dialect and learned enough English to get by. The second generation underwent Americanization, learned English, went to school until 16 years of age, spoke English adequately and some dialect. The third generation learned some dialect from

their grandparents who for the largest part, were adored by the grand children and many after their death wished to learn Italian as a way to keep alive the memory of their love. One of the most fortunate book is by Joseph Polizzi *Diceva la mia Nonna* with proverbs and family photographs. The fourth generation is much more interested in learning Italian and the great number of Colleges Universities of programs of study in Italy in growing all the time.

Casella seems to have heard that Italian Americans were discouraged to speak Italian during the Second WW as it being the language of the enemies. which is completely non sense. Colleagues and universities continued their teaching of Italian language and literature. The War Department created special courses for Italian American soldiers to prepare them for a possible invasion of Italy teaching them everything about the nation history, geography, costumes and so on. One such course took place in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University. Furthermore the Italian soldiers who had been taken prisoners by the allies and had sworn loyalty to them where permitted to receive Italian American visitors in their camps. One of them was at Fort Meade (MD) and a great cordiality developed between the Italian prisoners and the Italian Americans who visited them. Dances, spaghetti, diners. Visits to the city created a climate of great cordiality which, when the war ended, even culminated in weddings.

The examination of the various movies proceeds until the Sixty's when the most remarkable fact is the fascination of Hollywood for European women, from Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida to Claudia Cardinale, Silvana Mangano and so on. However Hollywood expected these actresses to perform according to the Hollywood cliché, gesturing, talking with a loud voice. None of the Italian actresses cared to perform that way. As for the men, the Latin lover image did not work with authentic Italian actors, such as Rossano Brazzi and Raf Vallone. «America was not ready for them». Among others Casella describes Frank Sinatra as the first superstar.

Casella opinion in regard to neorealism is very positive. Her sources, from Guy Talese to Martin Scorsese and Jack Valenti declare that the influence of the neorealism of the Italian, movies had a very important part in giving an identity to the Italian community. De Sica, Rossellini, Fellini, Antonioni were Hollywood's teachers.

In the Seventies the success of *Roots* encouraged everybody to turn to his own ethnic heritage. This was encouraged by cultural association, TV programs and ethnic festivals. The great novelty was a new concept of the mafia, its power as a family and dynasty born from *Il Padrino* written by Mario Puzo and transformed into a movie by Francis Ford Coppola which went to from a best seller to an Oscar. The wedding scene made an enormous impression on the Italian American audience, they saw themselves, they way their families lived, it gave them a tremendous sense of pride. To the non Italian, it inspired a feeling of admiration almost of envy. They understood that the power of a family is to be together, to participate together to the family events.

Not all saw it that way, of course, many even especially among the Italian Americans were disgusted by the double dimension of the plot: the devotion to the *pater familias* and the brutality of the gangster. At the beginning group of protesters attempted to have the movie banned in the neighborhood movies, but soon they gave up. The *Padrino* is a powerful work of art. Unfortunately through the years it spanned hundreds of violent movies, and created a

climate of violence which is still with us in the whole world.

As Casella proceeds to examine the work of the two among the major directors of our time, Scorsese and Coppola, we can conclude that the Hollywood Italian, born with the birth of Hollywood itself, through Scorsese and Coppola reached the highest point of popularity. No wonder gangster movies, TV movies, fill the air with their stereotypes. They have become so familiar, that to produce show based on them is cheap and completely effective.

The best way to fight the onslaught of bad movies is to give the audience something good. In the Fall '99 the New York Historical Society with the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute Queens College (CUNY) organized a symposium and exhibits to celebrate the five hundred years of the Italian presence in New York City. The same September in Baltimore, Little Italy and the Senator Theatre organized a Film Festival featuring the best Italian movies of the last 40 years, from *La Dolce Vita* to *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*. The whole city invaded Little Italy to see them and for so many it was a revelation. Many Italian Americans who had moved to the suburbs returned to the old neighborhood which many of them had left when children, recovering their sense of community. Next September the Festival will be repeated.

In her research Casella interviewed 40 Italian American and Italian actors and asked them how to be of Italian origin has influenced their whole career, she also asked them how the Italian image in America has changed through the years. She concludes that there are not only stereotypes about Italians in the America movies, though there is a realistic evolution especially brought about by the most famous Italian Americans the most popular themes have remained the same «Mafia and family, circus and passion, religion and food».

Casella feels that of all immigrants the Italian is the one most strongly attached to his roots. She asks how can the American melting pot welcome unconditionally an individual who refuses to be completely integrated. This idea does not have any place in my opinion: first of all, the melting pot theory has disappeared and has been replaced by the salad bowl concept; second, many Italian Americans, especially in the arts, when asked «who are you» will tell you «I am American but I am also Italian». Italian Americans have a right to be proud of their distant brothers, and to feel after all half Italian. However the Italians neglected them. Many still look at them as stereotypes. It is high time that the Italians admitted that those of them who emigrated proved to be among the best: they have the courage to leave their homes and to go off in search of a dream.