



The Film Festival of Positive Italian-American Images

Joey Skee (November 29, 2009)



Positive images of Italian-Americans that aren't.

I finally got around to watching the 2003 film *Uncle Nino* on DVD, more out of professional obligation



than personal interest. I had been [forewarned by various reviews](#) [2] that this was a feel-good, uplifting movie doused with a high level of saccharine. Thankfully, I don't suffer from diabetes.

The hackneyed plot involves the Michellis, a beleaguered, middle-class family struggling with the stress of contemporary, American suburban life. An overworked father's white-collar job keeps him from attending to the emotional needs of his family, especially his angry teenage son. The film's eponymous character arrives from Italy and his homespun philosophy ultimately results in the family learning to stop and smell the flowers (gardening is a major motif). And everyone lives happily ever after.

2003 film Uncle Nino

For some Italian Americans, this film is a welcome reprieve from the endless spate of mafia movies. The [call for cinematic fare depicting Italian Americans as law-abiding and successful members of society](#) [3], be they doctor, lawyer, or harried insurance executive, is a constant refrain of the anti-defamationist contingent. And in recent years there have been a number of movies featuring non-gangster, Italian-American characters—[The Amati Girls](#) [4] (2000), [The Bread, My Sweet](#) [5] (2001), *The Whole Shebang* (2003), [Everybody Wants to Be Italian](#) [6] (2007), and others—that make it easy to imagine a “Film Festival of Positive Italian-American Images.” (Given the little it takes to spark said Italian-Americans' indignation—see the [recent outrage at the MTV's “Jersey Shore” reality TV show](#) [7]—some of these films might set off the gavel radar.)

Yet these films, which range from domestic dramas to romantic comedies, are so utterly positive, sanitized, and simplistic that they cause a mind-numbing experience that ultimately detracts from any affirmative effect their creators may have hoped to achieve. Collectively, the upbeat representations and predictable storylines of these films create celluloid pabulum that erases nuance and complexity of the varied experiences of Italian Americans. Earlier films, like *Household Saints* (1993), *Mac* (1993), and *Big Night* (1996), succeed in providing fresh depictions with plots set in the past, while recent movies like [Dinner Rush](#) [8] (2001), [Puccini for Beginners](#) [9] (2006), and [Amexicano](#) [10] (2007) offer stories of contemporary Italian-Americans that are neither straight-forward or obvious.

In the end, the prosaic fluff of “positive images” is easily forgotten. Relegated to the museum of insignificant things, such films remain curious artifacts to be screened in some future Film Festival of Positive Italian-American Images.



images

Links

- [1] <http://iltaly.org/files/11989smelling1259530572jpg>
- [2] http://movies.nytimes.com/2005/02/11/movies/11nino.html?_r=1
- [3] http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&ei=BLUKS6e_CcLiAf_mPykDA&sa=X&oi=sPELL&resnum=0&ct=result&cd=1&ved=0CAYQBSgA&q=positive+image+italian+americans&spell=1
- [4] <http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/reviews/The-Amati-Girls>
- [5] <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B03E3DB1531F937A15753C1A9659C8B63>
- [6] <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/09/05/movies/05ital.html>
- [7] http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv/2009/11/25/2009-11-25_italianamerican_group_unico_national_asks_mtv_to_cancel_jersey_shore.html
- [8] <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F03E3DB123FF932A05750C0A9679C8B63%20>
- [9] <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/02/02/movies/02pucc.html%20>
- [10] <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/09/19/movies/19amex.html>