MADE IN HOLLYWOOD:
ITALIAN STEREOTYPES IN THE MOVIES

By Rosanne De Luca Braun

Behind the camera, the early Italian immigrants helped launch Hollywood's film industry while on-screen they were typecast in roles still recognizable today.

Among the Italians who immigrated to America 100 years ago were men and women whose talents were useful to the brand-new American movie business. Their training in stonecutting and sculpture, church decoration and garment-making made them natural resources as costume designers, set decorators, painters, masons, and the all-purpose artisans desperately needed on the movie set.

Their long history with spectacle and festivals made them comfortable with filmmaking's monumental tasks while their natural inventiveness and mechanical aptitude were essential to an industry creating itself at breakneck speed.

Italian Americans like director Fred Niblo, cinematographer Tony Gaudio and writer/director Frank Capra rose to the top even before talking pictures were invented. But on-screen, Italian Americans fared very differently. Why?

FOREIGN INVADERS

While Italian Americans behind the scenes were largely unknown to early moviegoers, onscreen Italian characters were highly visible and evoked the American audience's complicated feelings about the foreigners "invading" their shores.

Between 1870 and 1920, the United States absorbed nearly 18 million immigrants – by 1930, more than five million were Italian – 80 percent of whom settled in New York City, home of the first American filmmakers and audiences.

To the established American population, descended from earlier British, Scandinavian and German immigrants, these foreigners were a new breed who looked, dressed, spoke and prayed differently. In fact, because of Italians' olive skin, the Americans thought they were racially different, too – somewhere "in-between" black and white – and attributed to them different emotional traits and sexual behavior.

The Italians themselves did not help. Unlike the immigrant Jews, southern Italians had little experience assimilating into a foreign culture and lived tightly inside their own communities. The Americans thus marked them as a stubbornly separate group, probably dangerous and destined to remain outside mainstream society forever.

Sensationalized newspaper reports of urban crimes and brutalities fanned this flame, and history

bears witness to a cruel pattern of anti-Italian discrimination. Between 1890 and 1915, for example, at least 47 Italians were lynched in the South.

ITALIAN TYPECASTING

But the Italians also fascinated Americans, who considered them as passionate, sensual, violent, exotic and deeply familial – characteristics that differed markedly from their own Protestant mores. Repelled and yet attracted, they wanted to see this world in action, from a close but safe vantage point. Enter the movies.

When movies with Italian American characters began appearing early in the 20th century, they were written, cast and directed by the first New York-based movie makers: white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who shared their audience's fears and biases. Set in New York, the films tended to be about love and betrayal, sex outside marriage, sacrifice for the family and impulsive behavior that sometimes stepped outside the law.

Although the Italian American gangster didn't fully surface until talking pictures, a few early films had Mafia themes: *The Black Hand* in 1906, *The Italian Blood* in 1911, *The Last of the Mafia* in 1915. Most movies featuring Italians, however, were operatic melodramas of love and revenge set on the Lower East Side such as *The Italian* of 1915 (originally titled *The Dago*) or *Sin* (1915) with Theda Bara. Sometimes parts of the stories took place in Italy, featuring seductive but evil Italian noblemen.

The Italian American gangster didn't surface until talking pictures in the 1930s, but a few early films had Mafia themes. This scene is from "The Black Hand" in 1906.

With few exceptions, Italian and Italian American characters were portrayed by Anglo American actors, who used exaggerated gestures, seemed to speak at the top of their lungs and behaved melodramatically, throwing themselves on their loved ones' graves in anguish. By the 1920s more than 50 American films presented Italian characters from this Anglo Protestant perspective. Work for Italian actors was limited to small, cartoonish parts – organ grinders and barbers, and even these parts often went to actors of other ethnicities.

VALENTINO'S ROLE

It was no accident that Rudolph Valentino's popularity coincided with the beginning of the Roaring Twenties, when American society in general and women in particular were struggling to break free of hundred-year-old sexual, gender and racial taboos.

America needed a groundbreaker and the movies produced him. Darkly handsome, muscular yet lithe and graceful, Valentino's on-screen persona represented long-forbidden eroticism to American women, and on his slender shoulders his fans hung the mantles of passionate lover, sex icon and exotic liberator of sexual mores.

Ironically, his real life bore no resemblance to his screen persona: biographers have since speculated that Valentino was probably impotent, his professional and personal life managed by a succession of powerful wives.

Nevertheless, the stir Valentino created helped Americans redefine the boundaries of acceptable romantic behavior; his ambiguous sexuality (men were certain he was homosexual) and foreignness enabled movie audiences to explore their own repressed emotions at a safe distance.

Italian American director Frank Niblo (L) with Rudolph Valentino on the set of "Blood and Sand" (1922). Talents like Niblo, cinematographer Tony Gaudio or writer/director Frank Capra helped create Hollywood.

But his unprecedented popularity set in motion a film icon – the Latin lover – that has lived on in characters as diverse as those played by Dean Martin, Armand Assante and John Travolta.
By the late 1920s, then, even though newly-minted laws restricting immigration were reducing Americans' anxiety over a foreign invasion, the Italian "types" were already established on American movie screens: urban brute, Latin lover, sensual earth mother, musical clown, gluttonous outsider.

SAD CONSEQUENCES

When talking pictures arrived in the early 1930s, these stereotypes became fixed and live on today, more than 70 years later, as the gangster and the boxer, the buffoon and the sex goddess. The early Italian immigrants who sat in the darkened movie theaters looked at themselves through their new countrymen's eyes and were humiliated. They taught their children to reject their own backgrounds and "become an American!"

These two parallel histories – the invisibility of the Italian American filmmakers who help create American film art and commerce, and the visibility of rigid Italian American on-screen stereotypes – continue to this day.

According to the Italic Studies Institute, of the more than 1,000 Hollywood films featuring Italian or Italian American characters made between 1928 and 2000, nearly three-quarters portray them as gangsters, boors, buffoons, bigots or bimbos.

These characters are instantly recognizable to both American and international movie audiences, the same audiences that don't know the names Vincente Minnelli, Henry Mancini, Santo Loquasto or Richard La Gravenese – and or those of the legions of Italian American film artists who create the American movie experiences we all share.

One story has been told all too often, the other not at all. It's a story whose time has come.

Rosanne De Luca Braun is currently seeking funding to co-produce, with award-winning actor/writer/director John Turturro, a television documentary about the Italian American contributions to the movies. Contact her at 631-754-2491 or roxypro@optonline.net.