

## Italians in Hollywood

Joey Skee (March 06, 2008)



Anna Magnani's and Raf Vallone's portrayals of Italian-Americans seen anew in New York.

The Film Forum, Manhattan's premiere art house movie theater, just finished its retrospective on the great American director Sidney Lumet. The Philadelphia-born filmmaker is known for tackling the thorny issue of morality, especially for those on the front lines of justice in courtrooms, jury rooms, and most especially police precincts. Lumet has made a number of movies featuring Italian-American characters, like *Find Me Guilty* (2006), *Prince of the City* (1981), and one of my all time favorites *Serpico* (1973). Last week we were treated to a rare screening of two powerful films *The Fugitive Kind* (1959) and *A View from the Bridge* (1962) based on works by the playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, respectfully, and featuring the great Italian actors Anna Magnani and Raf Vallone, respectfully.



This screening of *A View from the Bridge* was so rare that a Film Forum employee introduced it with the caveat that the movie was an archival print that had two separate one-minute breaks and that audience members should refrain from grumbling in protest. But the audience did react, quite vocally, to the two films, but in the most enthusiastic of ways. Throughout the screenings I could hear people at times laughing, then gasping, and finally weeping. Both films were met with resounding applause. When the lights came up after both screenings, audience members ardently exclaimed their admiration.

Both films are concerned with misfits who simply can't or won't fit in. In *The Fugitive Kind*, lovers Lady Torrance (Magnani) and Valentine Xavier (Marlon Brando) are out of place in the backwater Louisiana town where ugly secrets about prejudice, hatred, and violence fester. Particularly disturbing is Eddie Carbone (Vallone) in *A View from the Bridge* whose egregious violations of the mores of his working-class Brooklyn neighborhood drive him to irrational and destructive behavior. Eddie covets his niece (an incestuous desire he neither fully understands nor recognizes) and derides her growing love interest Rodolpho (sic) (Jean Sorel), one of two brothers who are illegal Italian immigrants (remember them?) living in Eddie's cramped apartment. He characterizes Rodolpho's singing on the docks and his knowledge of the "feminine" arts of needlework and cooking as sure signs of Rodolpho's homosexuality and proof that the carefree immigrant is using his niece Catherine (Carol Lawrence) to obtain American citizenship. When Eddie violently kisses first Catherine and then Rodolpho on the lips (considered the first same sex kiss on screen) we are aghast at Eddie's destructive unraveling.



These are dark, intense films, both of which end tragically. Immolation against the “dago” characters in *The Fugitive Kind* is white Louisiana justice administered furtively in retaliation first for transgressing Jim Crow and then for believing in the possibility of love and redemption. (Williams returns to the subject of conflagration as retribution in Eli Kazin’s sexually charged *Baby Doll* (1956), in which arsonists set ablaze a thriving cotton-gin owned by Sicilian Silva Vacarro (Eli Wallach) who is seen as both an economic and sexual treat.). In *A View from the Bridge*, what begins as a duel of honor with cargo hooks, a sort of Western shootout displaced to the rain-drenched streets of waterfront Brooklyn, ends with a proletarian hara-kiri after the utter lost of face.

Magnani’s and Vallone’s journey to Hollywood (this was Magnani’s third American film) resulted in riveting portrayals of Italian-Americans that exposed the sordid lives of provincial America.

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