

Rico's Not On A 'Rolla

Anthony Dion Mitzel (March 28, 2012)



What has turned into a sort of Commedia all'Italo Americana for Santorum has shown that the Republican electorate can't seem to figure out who they want to run in the general election. I still can't figure out if he's Pantalone, Dottor Balanzone, Tartaglia or a mix of all three (also referred to as "masks", these three principle characters or archetypes are pivotal to the Italian Commedia dell'Arte). With time ticking down, it's pretty much statistically impossible for "Puerto" Rico Santorum to win the GOP nomination. He has reverted to parlour gags accompanying the image he has created for himself as a modern day Savonarola.

I'm thinking that Rick Santorum is wishing right now that he had a magic Etch A Sketch to erase the poor results in this recent round of high stakes political poker.



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The Italian American community has taken a number of hits in the past few years regarding its image. Santorum, while the polar opposite of Guido culture, demonstrates just how bi-polar the image of Italian America has become. From one extreme to another we are constantly bombarded with televised, passive ignorance versus televised, active ignorance. It's anyone's guess which is which. Don't get me wrong: like mafia, only a certain percentage of the population are actually represented by these images but the impact is disproportionate.

And no one has more impact than a candidate for President of the United States.

But I'm not sure that Rico actually represents Italian America. We see very little in the way of signs that make this distinction. Sure, he has what seems to be an Italian, or rather Latin, surname but that doesn't tell us anything. While coming back to the States a couple of years ago from Italy as I was waiting on the tarmac a flight attendant struck up a conversation by asking where I was coming from. I told her Italy and she went on to say that she had an Italian surname. At which time she also said that her surname was in fact her ex husband's and, for aesthetic purposes, kept the name. "I love being Italian" she said.

See what I mean?

We know he has a fondness for the Catholic church and Opus Dei, even going so far as to be in Rome for the celebration of 100th anniversary of the controversial catholic splinter group. This doesn't really tell us too much other than Papa Santorum takes his catechism very seriously and I'm not sure that faith alone, while a distinct marker, truly defines Italian Americans much less modern Italians. Just because there is a church on every corner that doesn't mean they're actually filled. High church attendance is an American marker when compared to Italy.

Sadly, the most tragic part of Santorum's story is that he is the proverbial candidate that could have been. Son of an Italian immigrant from Trentino, the Santorums moved around while Rico was growing up and in particular spent time in western Pennsylvania where Italian Americans are woven into the cultural fabric. The Penn-Ohio, West Virginia tri-state area is synonymous with working class, ethnic culture and a political must-win region. "Empires" (read elections) go there to die. He has multiple degrees and was very successful in a Pittsburgh private law practice before politics got a hold of him. Maybe Attorney Santorum began to see that instead of the priest just using the bully pulpit once or twice a week, he could actually run for office and do it week in, week out. That way he could keep the Mrs. popping out the kids.

Santorum will be remembered for many things: as a 1400'ish throwback to a simpler time when men were men and women did what they said, the infamous Etch A Sketch gag and, my personal favorite, the "snob" comment.

Speaking at a Tea Party "tea party" in Michigan this past February, Santorum said, "President Obama wants everybody in America to go to college. What a snob!...Oh, I understand why he wants you to go to college. He wants to remake you in his image."

Awesome.

I'm not sure if he understands the hypocrisy of a multiple advanced degree holder telling an audience that someone else (President Obama) who has more or less the same credentials is a snob. What is snobbish is to pander to the working class people of Michigan who have been disproportionately hit by the 30+ year long dismantlement of heavy industry in the Rust Belt. As a former Ohioan I can tell you that we've gotten promise after promise from the travelling political



theatre road show. College education is well out of reach for many of these voters and by extension, their children. And it's education and hard work that give people a greater chance to break poverty's cyclical nature. While it's not impossible with all the colleges and state universities of varying cost in the Midwest to earn a bachelor's degree, the student debt issue for middle to low income American families is beginning to rear its ugly mug. This affects decisions to take on debt associated with higher education.

And, besides, the only image Papa Santorum wants to remake you in is his.

To his credit, though, he did speak about the trades as a viable option to college education. Finally, something we agree on. Rico's only problem is that most of those jobs are union organized and probably won't be voting for Santorum, let alone republicans. What comes across to me is his uncanny ability to fall into the paternalistic "do as I say and not as I do" category.

In the end, I think Bad Lip Reading's faux political add for Santorum on [YouTube](#) [2] said it best. "I'm crazy, and I'm right".

That about sums it up.

So it would seem that Rico's chances of being the Republican candidate seems rather far fetched. But the good news is I think I figured out which character from the Commedia dell'arte he is: Il Dottore. Known as Balanzone, he can be wealthy, angry and egotistical, someone who loves the sound of his own voice. He also doesn't listen to anyone because only he knows what is right, even if they are experts. Often depicted as elderly and constantly speaking nonsense, many of his jokes are made at the expense of women.

Il Dottore is the alter ego of Pantalone played by Mitt Romney. The embodiment of greed and status, "Mittalone" often carries a concealed money bag causing him to walk with a hunched back that often gets stuck requiring assistance to help right it. Newton Gingrich embodies Tartaglia, who was turned into a statesman by Carlo Gozzi (read Nelson Rockefeller), never quite losing the habit of pontificating. His work status is in continual flux from politician to professor to lobbyist and back to candidate again. No one really knows where he'll land. And it's because of characters like these that the GOP is in disarray.

And so, thus ends our Commedia della Primaria or Comedy of the Primary.

In his black cape, cap and moustache exit stage right Santorum.

Curtain.

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