



Jersey Boys: Italian Americans Beyond Stereotypes

Benedetta Grasso (April 24, 2010)



Going to see the Broadway hit "Jersey Boys" with an Italian and an American friend made me reflect on the representation of Italian Americans in show business and my personal history.

"You're just too good to be true...can't take my eyes off of you...", "Oh...what a night...", "Walk like a man"...lyrics and music that played on a stereo at home, or that I picked up from movies at an early age that evoked a few simple images: skyscrapers, yellow cabs rushing up and down, handsome men with a cigar singing and entertaining the audience with seductive and smooth dance moves. This was basically my dream image of New York City.

When I finally got a sense of the real New York City, with its grungy and wild youth culture and hectic work life, that old-school image still stayed with me. Four years of college turned me into a Manhattan "socialite", a New Yorker before anything else, one of those people who would look at New Jersey snobbishly, as the suburban frame of a pulsing intellectual and fun island. I looked at my journey here as a social experiment. Like an anthropologist, I immersed myself, forgetting my roots in order to be completely absorbed by another culture. This allowed me to blend in and build



friendships and relationships without trying to seek refuge in any sort of Italian circle in the city. My childhood and adolescence in Italy stayed with me, as images of paradise, a fantastic treasure box of memories, a warm sense of friendship and culture. I came here to start my life from scratch, to actually build something new and not to live stuck in the middle between the two continents. I decided to give myself completely to this new land and I benefited from growing up in the 90s and the 2000s surrounded by a much more "borderless" web-based culture with very few differences between me and someone who grew up in New York. Once here, I also discovered and started to explore Italian American culture, but it always seemed remote to me.

A few nights ago, I took a couple of friends to see the Broadway play "Jersey Boys", without knowing what to expect. I chose it because I knew it got great reviews but I walked in blissfully, simply ready to enjoy the show. When "Jersey Boys" began all these reflections on my personal history, on the two countries and the cultural references linked to Italian Americans started rushing into my brain, while the music gently swept me away; I began to forget where I was and followed the story.

What enhanced this experience even more was that I went to see it with two people: an old friend from Rome and a college friend from Texas. It's hard to categorize both of them and to fit them into a stereotype, but at least on the surface, they were to a certain extent the typical Italian and the typical American. Their jokes, their comments and the memories they shared made me reflect on the importance of an artistic success such as "Jersey Boys" as a representation of Italian immigrants.

Jersey Boys is the story of Frankie Valli, Tommy DeVito, Nick Massi and Bob Gaudio, four young Italian American guys from New Jersey who in the 60s sold almost as much as the Beatles in the United States. At first, the issue is how the band will come together, how to make a name out of four turbulent fellows who share little but a growing talent. The group changes members and names. From "The Variety Trio", to "The Four Lovers", to "The Four Seasons", we follow the lives of the four Jersey boys as well as their loves, financial pitfalls and their commercial partnerships until their climatic reunion at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. They are enthusiastic, spontaneous and somewhat troubled kids with a very frank way of talking and a very ironic and yet passionate take on life. Going in and out of jail, mentoring each others at various stages, having small but sometimes significant connection with mob-like figures, they come of age together, living all the typical cliches of a rock band's "life": the mutual discovery of talent, the creative partnership, the rush of the beginning of success, sexual initiations, fame, #1 hits (Sherry, Big Girls Don't Cry and many more) and national triumph.

The story touches also on sadder moments such as Frankie's divorce, the death of Frankie's daughter, Nick leaving the group for his family and some tension with the mob. The focus is on Frankie: will he manage to push his talent and the musical boundaries and create the perfect hit? The musical is hilarious at times and the songs are incredibly tender and sentimental, while also being catchy and energetic. Already in the first intermission we had a lot to comment on.

My Texan friend and I couldn't help but think about the very controversial MTV show, The Jersey Shore. Although we both don't appreciate the show's vulgarity, we were baffled by the elements of the "guido" attitude in this performance, which were similar to those in the TV show: the slang, fashion style, and philosophy of life. The Jersey boys are boasters, loud, and sometimes aggressive, and they throw in Italian words in their speech, often vulgarities. The difference in perception, we thought, must be the context. "Jersey Boys" seems almost like the romanticized version of Jersey Shore.

Obviously Jersey Boys is wrapped in that glow of Broadway tradition, in the intellectual frame of a documentary-style story with the real life events of famous persons. We noticed how ironic it is, though, that the "guido" style on stage is revered by critics, while TV immediately seems to worsen the content and be more criticized. This is in a way true and the two experiences are hard to compare; but what we noticed though is that if there are things in common, there must be a sense of realism and pride within the Italian American community towards certain attitudes.

The Four Seasons are like any other pop band, but they meet while eating pizza, they have their first



"auditions" in front of mafia leaders and their traditional Italian American family and upbringing clashes with following the American Dream. While watching these scenes with my Italian friend, I felt both slightly embarrassed and highly entertained. "Do they still look at us this way? You know the real Italy is very far from the Sopranos" he said. As obvious as this statement may seem, it's something that matters to both Italians and Italian Americans and it makes us wonder why for certain other minorities the stereotypes and artistic representations shifted considerably through the years within comedic characterization and complexity. However, this hasn't been the case for Italian Americans. At the same time, every dramatic characterization has within it realism and cultural projections.

Half of the audience of Jersey Boys often comes from Jersey, and they shout out when they hear their state mentioned, or when they recognize a similarity between them and the characters. Also, characters like Tony Soprano, Frankie Valli or Don Vito Corleone are cult icons that inspire more pride than resentment, by simplifying and yet exalting some traits. It's hard to establish what makes someone a true Italian. Obviously, some of the so-called 'stereotypes' tend to reflect real life.

In my personal memories and as my Italian friend also mentioned while laughing, "In the end it's kind of what we do...we eat well, we like to sing, we are romantic at heart, but sometimes aggressive.." Italian American culture is primarily American. My Texan friend was already familiar with these characters, these iconic pop stars as famous as John Travolta's Saturday Night Fever's walk and as Joe DiMaggio's home-runs. This made me realize that any kind of artistic experience, even in the "low" form of the reality show, gives the benefit of the doubt and can't be simply banned as a negative stereotype.

The more I come in touch with Italian American culture and the more I understand how important it was for the fabric of this country: how it managed to become mainstream without losing its spontaneity, but also how much there is still to be done for its authentic voice to come forth. One's Italian roots especially, which brought about certain standards and stereotypes, are something one cannot take neither lightly nor heavily: both extremes are dangerous. One cannot look at a show without some humor. Maybe the perfect way to characterize typical Italian American "heroes" is through a musical, through ballads that uplift the spirit, snapshots of real life moments and most importantly, through a script with a lot of self-irony.

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