

Family Drama. What Happens When There is Mental Un-Wellness

George De Stefano (January 27, 2015)



An Off-Broadway revival of Joseph Pintauro's play *Snow Orchid* inspires a conversation about mental health and immigration at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan (co-sponsored by Calandra and the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance - ILICA)

Immigration is literally an unsettling experience, especially when harsh conditions – poverty, war, political oppression – push people from their homelands. If immigration can be traumatic, resettlement can bring new problems. When mental illness enters the picture, it not only affects individuals. It also can ripple through and destabilize the structure that should provide material and emotional support – the family.

Immigration and mental health was the topic of a January 22 roundtable at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan, co-sponsored by Calandra and the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance (ILICA). A new, Off-Broadway production of *Snow Orchid*, a 1982 play by the Italian American author Joseph Pintauro depicting the effects of mental illness on an Italian American



family, inspired the event.

Donna Chirico, a psychology professor at York College and the new president of ILICA's U.S. branch, said the play explores "a topic we often don't like to discuss – what happens when there is mental un-wellness in a family."

The roundtable panelists – two clinical psychologists, one of the stars of the Snow Orchid revival, and playwright Pintauro – took the play as a point of reference for the evening's discussion.

Set in Brooklyn in 1964, Snow Orchid focuses on the Lazarra family – American-born Rocco; his Sicilian-born wife Filumena, who came to America after World War II with her G.I. husband; and their two sons, Sebbie and Blaise. Rocco returns to his family after a year in a psychiatric hospital following a violent breakdown; he has been diagnosed as manic-depressive (a condition now called bipolar disorder). The family members are uncertain how to welcome Rocco, who had been an abusive husband and father. Filumena, who has never adapted to America, longs for her native Sicily; agoraphobic, she hasn't left the house since before her husband's hospitalization. Sebbie, who is gay, wants to escape the family; Blaise longs for the love Filumena has never shown him.

If the "upheaval and anguish" of the Lazarra family is "painful to experience as an audience member," it is "heart wrenching and difficult to treat as a clinician," observed Maria La Russo, one of the roundtable's two clinical psychologists. La Russo, who has treated Italian immigrant and Italian American families, praised Snow Orchid for its "raw portrait of a family in crisis trying to reconstruct their lives."

In 1980, La Russo began to work with families in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. She said that although Italian culture often is nostalgic about family, she has encountered "a high degree of anger, anxiety, and despair; feelings of betrayal and disrespect," as well as "cut-offs from nuclear family members and extended relatives." When treating troubled families, she doesn't "focus on any one individual" but works "to help the family unit examine the patterns of communication between members, from a multigenerational perspective."

Harry Pitsikalis, also a clinical psychologist, referring to Rocco Lazarra's institutionalization, said that forcible hospitalization itself traumatizes, especially when police bring the distressed person – in handcuffs – to the hospital: "Not only do you have a mental illness, but you're treated like a criminal."

Donna Chirico, however, noted that the experience of mental illness – and treatment – varies with economic class. Affluent people have more resources, they can maintain privacy so that no one outside the immediate family knows, and they can retain more autonomy. "Obviously it's very different to be taken in handcuffs by police to a psych hospital than to go to the nice sanitarium in Connecticut," she observed.

Speaking after the psychologists, Joseph Pintauro remarked, to laughter, "I'm a little bit afraid of being Italian American, afraid of my own anxieties, which resurfaced in listening to you."

"It's not an easy thing to be an Italian American," he observed. "But I don't think it's easy for anyone in this country to be from anywhere else."

Pintauro said the genesis of Snow Orchid was an experience he had as a social worker in his grandparents' Brooklyn neighborhood, in 1964. A Sicilian immigrant woman had become a familiar figure as she enacted public expressions of grief, weeping outside her apartment building and pleading with passers-by to "please do something for me, I want to go back home."

"Everybody considered her crazy," Pintauro recalled. He referred her to two Italian psychiatrists who, in their Queens practice, treated Italian immigrants. One of the psychiatrists told Pintauro that there was nothing wrong with the woman other than being homesick.

"She touched my heart," Pintauro said. "I started writing what I thought was about her, and then other things sort of came in." His character Filumena, like the Sicilian woman in Brooklyn,



immigrated to America after World War II. Pintauro also drew on the experience of a playwright friend who committed suicide, as well as conflicts within Italian American families over homosexuality. Pintauro is gay and much of his work deals with gay experience. Perhaps the most powerful scene in *Snow Orchid* is the explosive confrontation late in the play between Rocco and Sebbie, the gay son he has never really loved or understood.

Angelina Fiordellisi, the accomplished stage and film actor who plays Filumena in the *Snow Orchid* revival, and Valentina Fratti, its director, also spoke briefly at the roundtable. Fiordellisi, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s, said that in playing Filumena she is "channeling my mother, who was very volatile, felt dislocated, and torn from her family" in Italy.

The Calandra-ILICA roundtable was, said Donna Chirico, the first of a series of "conversations" between Italians and Italian Americans. A group Italian business people founded ILICA, a nonprofit foundation, to promote Italian language and culture. Vincenzo Marra, an ILICA founder and its past president, said the foundation aims "to present Italy as it is today." He said many Italian organizations in America are losing members because "people are looking for something new, especially new Italians [immigrants]." He said that the Italians who have come to the United States in recent decades are not like earlier generations – they are better educated and more culturally confident.

Left unsaid, however, was the fact that the new immigrants, like their predecessors, are being pushed out of Italy as much, if not more, as they are pulled to America by the opportunities here. A weak and stagnant economy; high unemployment, especially among young people; rampant political corruption and dysfunction; and the intractable North-South divide – these contemporary conditions are not very different from those that spurred prior mass migrations. Like the earlier, more proletarian immigrants, today's newcomers – advanced degrees notwithstanding – are leaving a madrepatria that doesn't love them enough to keep them.

The new production of Joseph Pintauro's [Snow Orchid](#) [2], directed by Valentina Fratti, begins performances February 3 at the Lion Theatre, 410 West 42nd Street, Manhattan. The limited engagement opens officially February 8 and runs through February 28.

For more information about ILICA, visit the foundation's [website](#) [3].

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