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Italian-American TV show hits note 'The Sopranos' doesn't.(News)

Byline: Burt Constable

A lot of people are anticipating next week's much-hyped TV show featuring Italian-Americans doing what Italian-Americans do best.

Namely, settling in Chicago, establishing careers, raising families and spreading throughout the suburbs.

What? You were expecting some scoop about how fictional mob boss Tony Soprano will get whacked on "The Sopranos" finale?

While next Sunday's last episode of the HBO mob drama will grab more media coverage, Tuesday's full-length premiere of "And They Came to Chicago: The Italian American Legacy" (7:30 p.m. on WTTW-TV, Channel 11) offers an entertaining dose of reality.

"It's an antidote to the way the media, primarily the entertainment industry, portray Italian-Americans as mobsters and lowlifes," says Paul Basile, editor of Fra Noi, the Chicago area's monthly Italian-American newspaper.

Tony Soprano stomps heads and snuffs out the life of his own nephew in the make-believe world of cable TV, but real Italian-Americans such as Mother Cabrini, Enrico Fermi and John Cuneo worked to improve the lives of the community and beyond. It's history, not fiction.

"Listen, I do see the point of view of people who don't like these negative portrayals of Italian-Americans," says Gia Marie Amella, who wrote, directed and served as executive producer for the documentary. "But I wanted to tell a good story. I wanted to make a great film."

An award-winning film-maker who splits her time between Chicago and her home in Tuscany, Amella made a documentary that mentions Al Capone without glorifying his criminal life. It also shows Italian immigrants who were contemporaries and the opposite of Capone.

"There was a brilliant businessman named John Cuneo making legitimate millions," notes Bill Dal Cerro, a teacher at Fenton High School in Bensenville and national vice president of the Italic Institute of America, which helped bring the project to the screen. Cuneo's printing business was one of the early Italian-American success stories. The printer's estate in Vernon Hills now is the Cuneo Museum and Gardens.

Having spent a year and a half (and much of her own money) to produce the show, Amella says she's "telling a story most Italian-Americans don't know about."

The prejudice, poverty and persecution suffered by most immigrant groups didn't spare the Italians. Amella, a second-generation Italian-American who grew up in Bridgeport and moved north, remembers being called slurs. Now 43, Amella has a degree in Italian literature, was a Fulbright Fellow in Italy, and has taught in universities. Her company, Modio Media, produced the documentary with WTTW-TV.

While she "appreciates the art" of entertainment such as "The Godfather" or "The Sopranos," Amella says, "I am bored by" mobster fare.

Her documentary, similar to one she made about German immigrants, tells a far more universal story.

While members of other ethnic groups have been depicted as gangsters, Dal Cerro says Italians are different because bad guys are seen as part of the culture instead of as “aberrant thugs.”

“Both ‘The Godfather’ and ‘The Sopranos’ take that very strong portrait of the Italian-American family and wrap it into criminality,” Dal Cerro says. “They make criminality seem central to it. It’s frustrating.” And popular.

“I liken the image of the Italian mobster to a narcotic,” Basile says. “It brings together the two things Americans seem to love the most – criminality and the Italian-American ethos; family and passion and loyalty and the great food, of course.”

Growing up in Park Ridge, Basile is half-Italian, half-Yugoslavian and all-American. He never even learned to speak Italian. As the old Italian neighborhoods in Chicago were dismantled, a much more diverse and Americanized Italian population moved to the suburbs.

“I don’t know if there’s a more Italian suburb than Bartlett,” Basile says, noting his Fra Noi publication has done stories on people living in Wood Dale, Addison, Palatine, Bloomingdale Mount Prospect and beyond.

People who watch Tuesday’s documentary will learn of “a different sort of Italian-American” than the fictional characters on TV, Basile says.

“I want them to come away saying, ‘Oh, so that’s the real story,’as” Basile says. “This is a decent, noble people that contributed mightily to that which makes Chicago great.”

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