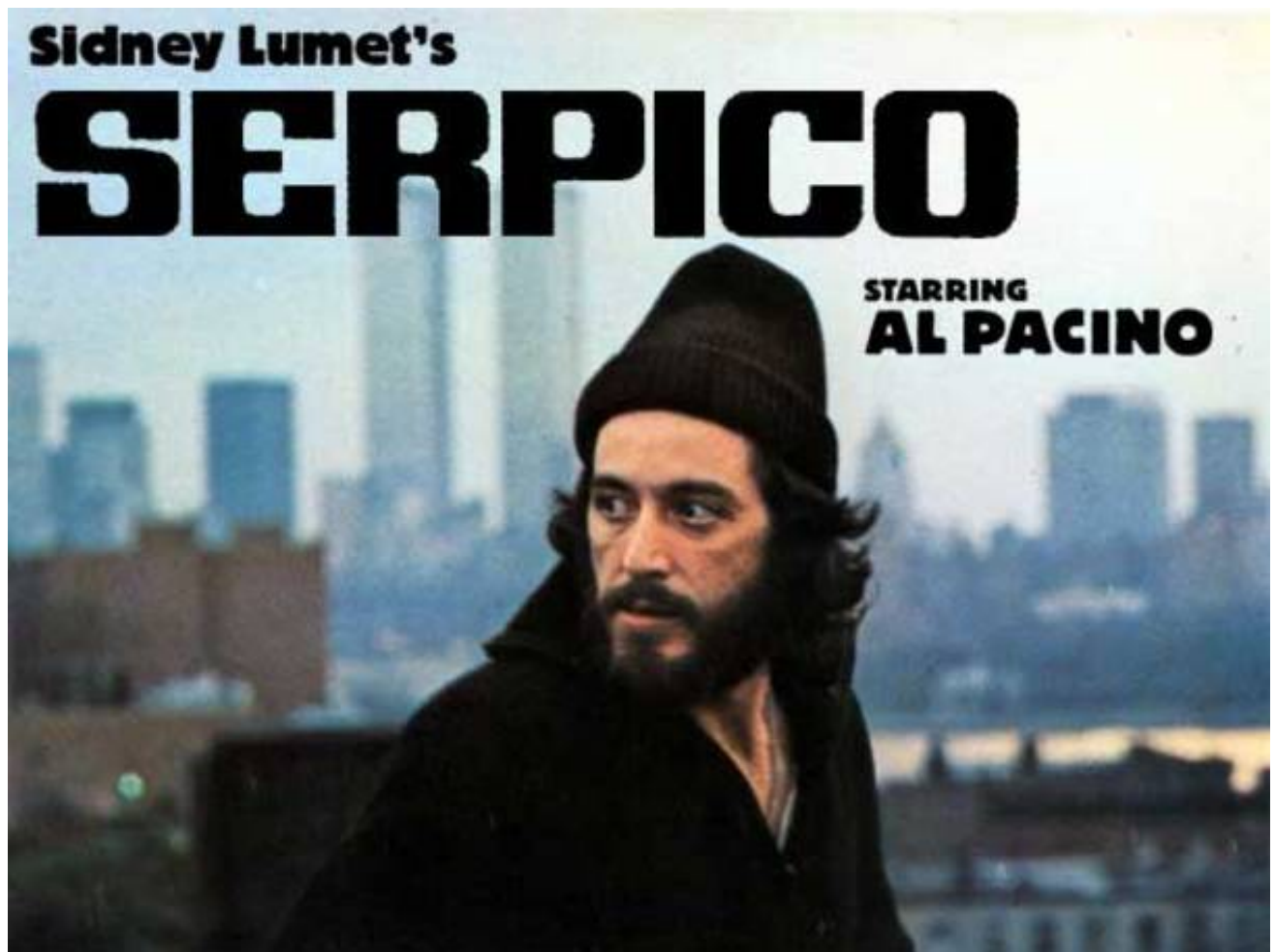




Watching "Serpico" with my Thirteen-Year-Old Son

Joey Skee (July 02, 2008)



Musings on heroes, role models, and the Italian-American imaginative

During a Sunday night downpour in Brooklyn, my son Lucca and I scrounged through our humble DVD collection for something new to watch. After reading aloud several titles, we both agreed on Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973), part of an Al Pacino collection I received as a birthday gift in April.

I was eager to re-watch *Serpico* with my son because the film had a special resonance for me. I had seen it at age 18 when it was released. With my long hair and Italian parents, *Serpico* was a larger-



than-life, celluloid refraction of who I understood myself to be, a Brooklyn Italian wannabe hippie. Untroubled by any ethnic identity crisis, I wasn't searching for a role model or an alternative Italian-American hero when I first saw the film. On the contrary, the cinematic representation of the New York City cop Frank Serpico became my first Italian-American hero.

The youngest child of an immigrant father and an Italian-raised mother, Brooklyn-born Serpico served on the police force from 1959 to 1971. He was an oddity; not only did he sport a beard and long hair as an undercover detective, Serpico was a ‘clean cop’ unwilling to take bribes and payoffs. In 1970, Serpico went public on widespread police corruption, prompting Mayor John Lindsay to establish the Knapp Commission, an independent investigating committee. Although he retired from the NYPD in 1972, Serpico continues to speak out on police corruption and brutality.



(Frank Serpico)

Frank Serpico is conspicuously missing or, at the very least, downplayed in the Italian-American pantheon of "positive role models." Italian-American hagiography obsessively calls upon the usual cast of characters in a [psycho-social commedia](#) [2] of uplift from disesteem and victimhood that has long ago become tedious, retrograde, and moribund. The canonization of Renaissance greats (Why no mention of that hooligan Caravaggio?), the repeatedly indicted Genovese profiteer (found guilty of "crimes against humanity" in my daughter's high school social studies class), second rate muralists, moneyed CEOs, conservative politicians, and the multiplicative Mazzei, Meucci, and Basilone is a project of ethnic boosterism cum therapy that sadly illustrates the cautious and uncreative ways that "Italian American" is imagined. Will we ever see New York's Italian Heritage and Culture Month Committee honor visionaries and heroes of social justice like Frank Serpico, Angela Bambace, James Groppi, Tina Modotti, Peter Panto, Mario Savio, and others? I'm not holding my breath. In the interim, I'm celebrating Frank Serpico Day in Brooklyn with my thirteen-year-old son.

Related Links: <http://www.frankserpico.com> [3]

Source URL: <http://108.61.128.93/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/watching-serpico-my-thirteen-year-old-son>

Links

[1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/3152serpicoposter1214968378jpg>

[2] <http://www.italian-american.com/famous.htm>

[3] <http://www.frankserpico.com>