

Now the Cartoon Version of Italian American Identity

Donna Chirico (January 03, 2014)



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It turns out that the Netflix series Lilyhammer now has its imitators. As if one show promoting the typecasting of Italian American identity as dysfunctional mobsters and thugs was not enough.



That plotline focuses on Frank “The Fixer” Tagliano who, after ratting out his mob pals, joins the witness protection program and heads to Norway. Lilyhammer is rife with Italian American stereotypes (see my earlier piece), but is not even in the same league as the Hulu “original” series Fugget About It. Described as an “adult Canadian animated sitcom,” the show uses the same premise. Jimmy Falcone kills a mob boss and to save himself, squeals to the feds about the goings on of the Gambini crime syndicate. Falcone, now MacDougal, and his family end up in witness protection in Regina, Saskatchewan. Snow, check. A contemptible anti-hero, check. Italian American affronts, check.

At least in Lilyhammer, there are some genuinely funny moments, especially when the Norwegian producers make light of their cultural idiosyncrasies as seen through the American’s eyes. Fugget About It is an just ethnic train wreck leaving much destruction of ethnic sentiment in its wake. The fact that the show is not live action permits greater latitude to offend with its defamatory assertions.

The Brooklyn accented Jimmy character, who is almost never without a cigar dangling from his lips, is prone to malapropisms, one of which is to constantly refer to Regina as vagina. This was not funny the first time, never mind the twentieth. The animated caricature itself is of a fat, unshaven thug in a track suit who like Frank the Fixer turns to violence to solve life’s problems. The bonus with the Falcones is the foul language used throughout to highlight their emotionality especially when Jimmy is arguing with his wife Cookie who happily ends these verbal brawls by throwing knives at her husband. When seeking spiritual guidance Cookie prays to a not so typical Madonna enshrined in the bedroom that is equally vulgar. In one episode, Cookie asks her if she thinks Jimmy is having an affair, and our lady want to know if he is still porking her.

Even the episode titles rely on the basest semblance of humor such as “The Man with No Ass” and “The Horny Bastard.” A recent episode titled “Effin’ Neighbors, Eh?” nicely berate Italian Americans and Canadians.

Of course all representations presented of ethnic identity are prone to compartmentalization and as I have also written elsewhere, when this turns behavior into ethnic stereotypes it is not necessarily a bad thing. The Falcones are an archetypally close-knit Italian American family who eat pasta together, support each other, and in quirky ways, show their love for each other. Here though all of the positive traits are turned into negatives. After mom cooks a fine spaghetti and meatball dinner, the bulimic daughter asks to be excused to throw it up. After dad and Uncle Cheech teach the nerdy son how to box to protect him, they make him take a dive.

The biggest flaw is that the show is not funny. Everything has to be spelled out leaving little room for interpretation. There is no empathy to had for Jimmy or his clan. The cultural stereotypes Italian



Americans cherish are empty of meaning and without compassion in this household. Thus there is no identifying with their Italian identity. In this animated series, the characters are buffoons as cartoons – ugly Americans north of the border.

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