



The Officers' Log

HOW AURORA SYSTEM WORKS

John Mancini, Executive Director

Italian American education is, frankly, in the Stone Age. We may excel in every field of endeavor but we never grasped the concept of formally acculturating our children. Sure we send them to college but we leave their heritage to the American street. The results are not so surprising: our sons and daughters either abandon their heritage totally or embrace an outdated blue-collar version based on food and mafia movies.

The *Aurora System* was developed twenty years ago to formalize the teaching of Italian heritage without bricks and mortar. In other words, we created a standardized and portable teaching system that did not depend on having an actual Italian "cultural center" or "school house." Little did we realize that such a system could also not depend on Italian American parents or organizations to fund it. Few families would sacrifice \$200 -\$300 for a dozen Italian lessons, simply because it has never been our ethnic tradition. As for organizations there has been a long tradition of subsidizing assimilation (i.e., scholarships and medical charities) rather than acculturation. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, "You go into education with the

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We conduct two classes in Staten Island, a borough of New York City. Here, one of the parents brought in a tiny Fiat 500 to show the students.



MAFIA PLAY RAISES RED FLAGS

By Anthony Vecchione

A school play that parodies the HBO television series *The Sopranos* and other Mafia-themed material has been deemed inappropriate for middle school children by mental health experts and educators, according to an initial Italic Institute survey.

Prominent mental health professionals and educators I interviewed agreed that the decision by administrators at the Rotolo Middle School in Batavia, IL, to allow the production of "*Fuggedaboutit, A Little Mobster Comedy*" to go forward last November was clearly wrong. The play written by Rotolo M.S. teacher Matt Myers was riddled with sociopathic, depraved characters modeled after offensive and stereotypical Italian-American gangsters, with obvious Italian names (eg. Mamma Mia Caprese).

An Italian-American parent of a Rotolo student pleaded with school administrators to cancel the play pointing out how the play's main theme and stereotypical characters were offensive and inappropriate for children her son's age. Her pleas were ignored by school officials including the District

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TEACHERS BEHAVING BADLY

By Don Fiore, Vice Chairman (Midwest)

The City of Batavia, IL, some 30 miles west of Chicago, has a population overwhelmingly Nordic and Germanic in ancestry, with a smattering of Italians, Poles, Hispanics, and other latecomers.

Despite being decidedly in the minority, Italians have apparently left their mark on



These 12-year-olds have been coached in Italian American stereotypes at a public school in Batavia, IL.

the town. Sam Rotolo, for instance. Rotolo, a now-retired academic administrator and an Italian American, performed his duties so well that the locals named a middle school after him. Some may consider it ironic, then, that Batavia's Rotolo Middle School should be the scene of a recent controversy involving an Italian American family on one side, and just about everyone else in town on the other.

The problem began earlier this fall when Rotolo Middle School (11- to 13-year olds) drama teacher Matt Myers wrote a play for his students entitled "*Fuggedaboutit - A Little Mobster Comedy* by the Bada-Bing Players". The "Casta' Characters" (sic), of course, are crude Italian American parodies

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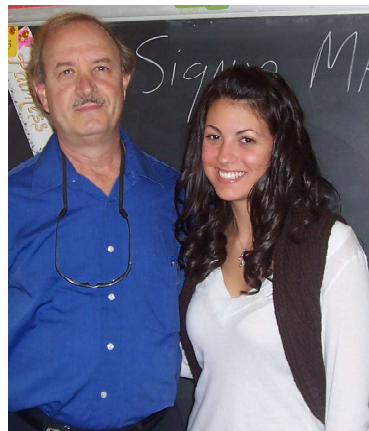
AURORA, from pg. 1

tools you have, not the ones that you would like.”

Through the hard work of people like Tony De Nonno, *Aurora's* first Director, and community activists like Angelo and Rosa Merenda and Loretta Zaino, a system of donated sites and legislative subsidies was put into place. *Aurora* uses every place from church basements to New York City public schools to hold its classes. Operating funds are raised through local and state grants. Students are recruited from elementary and middle schools around the class site. The 12-week course is free. Teachers and assistants are hired from schools or by word of mouth. But make no mistake, an awful lot of initiative and follow-up is needed every day to hold this system together. Grant writing alone is a science few Italian American groups have mastered. (Our secret weapon is Rita Mancini, my wife.) A perfect example came to light recently in New York State. While our Institute averages approximately \$5,000 in annual grant money from each legislator, Jewish-Americans in lower Manhattan managed to lock in \$997,000 from Sheldon Silver, their state assemblyman. Silver also gave \$250,000 to Chinese Americans. Italian American organizations just never developed community-based educational and cultural programs like the Jews and Chinese. Our community's forte is dinner dances!

The logistics to sustain multiple *Aurora* classes is also daunting. Lesson books, attendance sheets, teaching materials, payroll and vendor checks, emergencies and a host of other managerial headaches are handled by Maria Peluso, an indispensable employee of IIA for over ten years.

We are currently conducting twelve classes, teaching some 290 children, using a teaching staff of 24 and occupying eleven separate sites in six Metropolitan counties. Our lean budget would be an insult to any other ethnic group. Nevertheless, these are the tools the community has given us. ****



Executive Director John Mancini visited the Staten Island classes and met former *Aurora* student KellyAnn Susino, who is now an intern assisting the teacher. KellyAnn is a high school student enrolled in an Advanced Placement Italian course. The *Aurora* Program not only passes on Italian heritage to children but trains new generations of Italian teachers.

SURVEY RESULTS

Here are the responses to the nine questions we asked you in the last *Log*. Although only 8% (40 out of 500) of the members replied they represent an average of 8 years of membership with three proudly claiming membership since the founding in 1987. Significantly, the overwhelming majority agreed on the following items:

- The Italic Institute is not merely a membership organization but an ideological movement. (78%)
- The Italic Institute is substantially different than other Italian American organizations. (93%)
- The current popular image of Italian Americans is not intellectually satisfying. (98%)
- The Italian American culture will be worse or buried by intermarriage two generations from now. (75%). Twenty-five percent (25%) thought our heritage will be the same or better.
- The Italic Institute is the best hope for preserving our heritage (53%). [NIAF came in second with 43%.]
- Italian American political power is nowhere near that of other groups. (95%)

As to what best describes our heritage today, the overwhelming opinion is that it is food-based (70%); and 33% thought it is senior-oriented. Only 28% consider it still positive and inspiring. On average 25% feel that our culture is anti-intellectual or religious-based. Eighteen percent (18%) believe ours is a humanist-based culture. As for being youth-oriented, only 8% think that is the case.

Two members included comments that are revealing. Regarding our lack of political power one said “we go tip-toeing to our graves”. Another noted that she was once told by a sociology professor that our attachment to family severely limits our aspirations. Richard Vanucci of California wrote of a recent experience he had speaking at a local high school. In an English Literature class the first thing he noticed was a poster of Brando’s *Godfather*. When he asked the class what came to mind when they think “Italian” they agreed it was gangsters. One black girl was more creative and answered “Mussolini.”

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send Johnny to a Montessori school to address his anxiety as well as educational needs.

For our part, the Institute will shortly award Marina and Johnny its Silver Medallion as Guardians of the Italian Heritage. In addition, if Marina pursues her case in court we will offer Johnny a school voucher for \$1,000 if they decide to seek private education. (Hopefully, the other organizations will follow our lead. As Johnny is in the 7th grade, he will need approximately \$10,000 to complete middle school.) There is no question that this issue can only be won in court. Neither the school nor the media will yield to the Protection of Minors argument. It is not in their bigoted interests.

We ask our members to assist us in making good our pledge. I do not know of any family that has made such a sacrifice to their heritage and for our community as Marina, Johnny, and husband Frank Levato.

John Mancini, Chairman

CHICAGO FILM, from p. 3

and WTTW Channel 11 (the show will also air multiple times on both stations’ HD channels). And although Amella is working with WTTW’s new general sales manager Howard Fisher, they are still seeking additional advertisers and sponsors to cover post-production costs for the show. To become a financial sponsor or to buy television commercial time for *And They Came to Chicago*, please email **Gia Amella at gia@modiomediamedia.com or call (312) 867-1644.**

Final note: Amella is also compiling a bi-lingual DVD version of the film, funded by a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council. Local Italian American Historian Dominic Candeloro and the IIA’s own VP, Bill Dal Cerro, are assisting her with the DVD, which includes extended footage from the film as well as additional special features such as “Chicago’s Italian Neighborhoods,” “Public Image,” and “Italian American Authors.” ****

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WHO IS SAM ROTOLO?

By Rosario A. Iaconis

Who is Sam Rotolo? And why did he betray his heritage and the children of the Batavia, Illinois, School District?

When *Fugeddaboudit: A Little Mob Comedy*, first came to light, I contacted the former school administrator whose moniker adorns the Middle School in question.

The man I discovered both saddened and perplexed me. As an educated, well-spoken Italo-American educator, Sam Rotolo undoubtedly cut a dashing intellectual figure amid the citizens of this Midwest suburb.

Indeed, in our telephone interview, Rotolo was justly proud of his many accomplishments in Batavia. However, when it came to crossing swords with the current administration at the school that bears his name, Sam became downright timorous.

Surely, I argued, this play introduces intolerance to impressionable children. The kids are at risk, I implored.

Rather than excoriating Myers, McKinney or Barshinger, the teacher, principal and superintendent of the Rotolo Middle School—and lauding the activism of his fellow Italian Americans—Rotolo came to the defense of Batavia's Three Stooges.

What about the fact that Myers, an employee of the taxpayers, penned the play that brings Tony Soprano to the schoolyard? Doesn't that make a mockery of freedom of speech? How can you justify the principal McKinney's vindictiveness? And why hasn't the school reached out to Italian American parent (and taxpayer) Marina Levato and her son John?

In the final analysis, how can you allow students to be indoctrinated on the taxpayers' coin?

At long last, sir, have you no shame?

Yet Rotolo wouldn't budge. Fearful of losing his precious edifice, Sam Rotolo became, in effect, the Fourth Stogie.

The play is indeed the thing wherein we'll catch the conscience of the king—or the starstruck school administrator.

OFFICERS MEET FOR *THE ITALIC WAY*

It's been awhile since the last issue, due to belt-tightening but issue XXXIV is being planned for the new year. As usual, it will be informative and unlike other Italian American periodicals.

(l - r) Rosario Iaconis (Vice Chairman East), George Ricci (President), Alfred Cardone (Financial Secretary), John Mancini (Chairman), Tony Vecchione (Treasurer), David Vecchione (Art Associate).



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CHICAGO FILM PROJECT ON SCHEDULE

By Bill Dal Cerro, Vice President

As the Batavia situation sadly demonstrates (see related articles), negative images of Italian Americans have become so widely accepted that they're even being peddled to impressionable young children.

One antidote to such prejudice is very simple: create positive, high-profile media projects which present balanced portrayals of our community to the general public.

The IIA is happy to report that one such project with which we're acting as fiscal sponsor, *And They Came to Chicago*, an hour-length documentary about the 150-year history of Italians in Chicago, is proceeding as scheduled.

Produced, written and directed by Gia Amella of Modia Media LLC, *And They Came to Chicago* has wrapped up its shooting phase and now moves into post-production (writing and editing). In addition to this exciting development, two more members of the Caputo family of Chicago, Joe (Joe Caputo and Sons) and Angelo (Caputo Fresh Markets), have each matched brother Pasquale's (Wiscon Cheese) previous pledge of \$5,000, bringing their combined total to \$15,000. Such selfless financial leadership is key to preserving our magnificent heritage for generations to come.

For the benefit of sponsors and viewers, Amella and her

Filmmaker Gia Amella was recently featured in *Today's Chicago Woman Magazine* for her landmark film on the Italians of Chicago.



partner/husband, Beppe Mangione, have edited a stirring five-minute trailer of the film, now available for viewing on the newly re-designed ModioMedia website: www.modiomediamedia.com, click on "View The Trailer."

Local Chicago media is also beginning to pick up on the positive vibes of the film. Amella was profiled in *Today's Chicago Woman*, an influential local magazine, as well as in the *West Taylor Street Gazette*, the newspaper for Chicago's historic Taylor Street neighborhood. She is also scheduled to be the guest speaker at the annual "Chicago Media Luncheon" sponsored by the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) on Jan. 23rd, 2007. The NIAF, along with other prominent Italian American organizations, has already pledged a donation to the film.

Although 50 hours worth of footage has been shot, Amella has now created two versions of the show for NBC Channel 5

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WHAT NEXT IN BATAVIA?

Hopefully, you have read the various articles our officers have written in this Log concerning the disturbing events in Batavia, IL. For those of you who are familiar with the Institute's major battle against DreamWorks Animation during *Shark Tale*, you know that we were the first to alert the Community of its need to protect minors from media defamation. We lost that battle because there was no total mobilization of our community. Politicians ignored us, the wealthy refused to sustain us and the celebrities ran for cover.



The first strategy meeting after a negative court ruling.
(l-r) Attorney Ted Grippo, Vice Chairman Don Fiore,
Marina Amoroso-Levato, attorney Joseph Rago

The result, as predicted, was open season on our children. The chickens have come home to roost in Batavia. Twelve-year-old children at a public school were actually coached to mimic Italian American characters for the laughter of fellow students and parents. Neither teachers nor school officials saw the harm in molding the minds of adolescents in negative stereotyping. Even the federal court judge refused to read the script, only preaching that "...the schools cry out for free speech." What the judge chose not to understand was that the 12-year-olds of Rotolo Middle School did not write the play *Fuggedaboutit* and coach themselves. I hardly think that parodying *The Sopranos* and Italian American subculture was their obsession.

To continue the struggle, our Vice Chairman (Midwest) Don Fiore called together a meeting of interested parties for a strategy session after the disappointing court judgement. Marina Amoroso-Levato, the parent who protested the play, as well as her attorney Joseph Rago, attended the meeting. Also there were Ted Grippo, a highly respected civil rights attorney in Chicago with some of his staff. Representatives from the various national and local organizations were also present. The bottom line is that an appeal is to be filed in federal court. So, this show is, hopefully, not yet over.

Acknowledging that the legal battle is of primary importance, Don Fiore asked all the organizations to sustain Marina and her son Johnny, morally and materially, during this traumatic time. Johnny, 12-years old, has refused to return to school fearing retribution and shunning. Marina has expressed the desire to

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straight from *The Sopranos* and countless other mob and “dumb Italian” depictions: a predictable New Jersey-accented mix of mafiosi, crude, dim-witted thugs, and sleazy, gum-chewing women, all with Italian names. Myer’s original script even used the term “greaseballs” to describe various characters. The non-Italian characters in the play were, also predictably and stereotypically, on a higher level of civilization, such as a couple of Irish FBI agents, and a sophisticated Englishman.

Students were invited to audition, and one of them, and Italian American youngster, brought the script home to his mother, Mrs. Marina Levato, who was stunned that a public school teacher would actually present something like this to his students. After a month of appeals to principal Don McKinney and district superintendent Dr. Jack Barshinger, an ad hoc coalition was formed by local representatives of the Italic Institute, the Sons of Italy, the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, The Italian American Human Relations Foundation, and NIAF, but by this time the public performance was only a week away.

Responding to our appeals for intervention, Jesse Ruiz, Chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education, Hon. Eugenio Sgro’, the Consul General of Italy in Chicago, and even Rev. Jesse Jackson likewise sent similar letters to Principal McKinney, Dr. Barshinger, and the Batavia School Board.

Meanwhile, local attorney Joseph Rago offered to assist the Levato family on a *pro bono* basis. Rago filed for an injunction and temporary restraining order against the school in Federal Court. He based his case on Protection of Minors. An emergency court hearing was held in Chicago two days before the public performance. The presiding judge, John Grady (who declined to read the script), ruled in favor of the school, citing the teacher’s and students’ right of free speech. Bolstered by this victory, the school allowed the play as scheduled.

Fuggedaboudit ran for two evenings (Nov. 17 & 18) before audiences described in the local press as “large and enthusiastic.” Despite the Coalition’s announced intent of pursuing justice through the courts, Principal McKinney requested a heavy uniformed police presence in and around the auditorium to make the students “feel safer.” McKinney also provided counselors to the “Badda Bing Players” who might have been upset by the controversy. (Ironically, to date, he has offered nothing similar to the Italian American student who was initially offended by the script. Johnny, that 12-year-old, has refused to return to school since November 16th, citing fear and shame.)

Before the curtain went up, a short lecture was given on the importance of freedom of speech. Then, Matt Myers stepped on stage to cheers and a standing ovation. This teacher, a devoted fan of *The Sopranos*, who lacked the courage to even respond to the Coalition’s request for a face-to-face discussion, has now apparently become a folk hero in Batavia for his bold defense of “freedom of speech.” To drive home the point, the school aired a video-tape of the play on a local cable network the following week.

MAFIA PLAY, from p. 1

Superintendent.

The mental health experts, sociologists and educators I spoke to asserted that this type of stereotypical and negative material is harmful to Middle School-age children who are highly impressionable.

One expert, Dr. Richard Alba, professor of sociology and public policy at SUNY, Albany, NY, put it this way, “I’m surprised that the school would have allowed such a parody to go forward, given the stereotypes it conveys to impressionable youngsters, many of whom do not have the experience to distinguish what is fictional and what is real.”

The National Education Association has taken a strong stand regarding the importance of bursting stereotypes and teaching tolerance. Recognizing the dangers posed to children who are exposed to inappropriate material, The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) sounded an alarm recently on advertising’s effects on children and issued recommendations regarding the importance of being “media literate.” “*Fuggedaboudit, A Little Mobster Comedy*” was advertised throughout the Batavia school system and in the Batavia community. The AAP outlines several recommendations to help mitigate advertising’s harmful effects, and recommends that parents work with schools and community groups to curtail negative school-based advertising.

In addition to the play’s potential harmful effects on children, it has demonstrated that the virus of “Italian mafia-culture” has infected elementary school educators. Psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Messina says: “The Batavia incident is an example of deep seated ethno-cultural prejudice. Anti-Italian American prejudice is so embedded in the American psyche that it has, unfortunately, become normative and as a result, few recognize that it is a modern form of ethnic prejudice/racism.”

Have we passed the point of no return when our culture is the butt of grade school parodies and self-righteous educators? Young Matt Myers probably never saw the ethnic-neutral *Guys and Dolls* (eg. gangster Nathan Detroit), a popular stage play from the 1950’s. His field of reference for the three decades of his life has only been the *The Godfather*, *GoodFellas*, and *The Sopranos*. Is that what he wants to pass on to his impressionable charges?

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