



The Other Rocky Movie

Laura E. Ruberto (November 22, 2008)

Paul Newman's turn as an Italian American boxer leaves me wondering where all those gum machines went.

A number of years ago I taught an Italian American film class at UC Davis, and one of my students put together a short video as part of a final project. He went around campus asking students and faculty alike if they recognized photos of famous "real" Italian Americans and famous "media" Italian Americans in order to make a point about how popular culture images of Italians were more widely known than historical figures. It was a straightforward piece, but smartly conceived and executed—Mario Cuomo vs. Super Mario; Al Capone vs. Al Pacino as the Godfather.

MARIO CUOMO

SUPER MARIO

I thought of this video recently when I finally got around to watching the Rocky Graziano biopic *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. My student had made a visual comparison between Rocky Balboa and



Rocky Marciano and the people he interviewed could all name Stallone's Rocky but not Marciano. Watching *Somebody Up There Likes Me* I wondered if anyone in my student's video would have recognized the other Italian American Rocky boxer? Would anyone have confused a picture of the real Graziano (né Thomas Rocco Barbella) with that of the one played by Paul Newman in the Robert Wise 1956 film? Probably not.

PAUL NEWMAN & ROCKY GRAZIANO

Peter Bondanella in his *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys and Sopranos* begins his capsule review of the film by suggesting that the Italian American "ethnic content is limited" (105). I'd disagree, and suggest instead that the film, as with many others of the era, offers an Italian American identity—situated primarily within New York's East Village—that is characteristically filled with subtly complex masculine bravura.

It places Italian Americans against a backdrop of a diverse urban cityscape, with a focus on a working class, young male protagonist. It's not that this is some kind of neorealistic gritty look at immigrant life, but there is a true-to-life ethnic feel to Newman roaming around the streets as a kid, getting in trouble, making his mother cry at his repeated arrests, fighting with his father, and yelling back at the old man: "All you ever gave me was a wine breath and the back of your hand!"



WATCH THIS SCENE BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD BUDDIES ROMOLO (SAL MINEO) & ROCKY (PAUL NEWMAN)

This question of realism and authenticity comes to have particular relevance, though, when we stop to consider the actors and the character's they played. In this film, a Jew plays an Italian, an Italian plays a Jew, and neither comes off as all that white. For the Jewish American Paul Newman, the film proved to be his breakout role. Newman's take on Graziano is compelling, although theatrical in style. And is it of interest to us (or not?) that Graziano's wife, Norma Unger, the Jewish refugee, was played by the Sardinian-born Pier Angeli (née Anna Maria Pierangeli)? I, for one, think it's cool to see actors cast against ethnic type.

And, by the way, can anyone tell me when gum machines disappeared from the platforms of NYC subways?

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