

Bob Giraldi's movie "Dinner Rush": The future (if any) of Italian American culture

Tom Verso (April 14, 2008)



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In the first half of the 20th century Italian American culture was defined by the immigrants in their Little Italy urban villages. In the second half, Little Italy nostalgia, driven by Italian American movie makers such as Coppola and Scorsese, characterized Italian American culture. Today that culture seems adrift. The immigrants and their urban villages are gone and nostalgia has run its course. There doesn't seem to be any defining ideology to take their place. Italian American academicians have largely been silent. Those in the Italian American community promoting Italian language, history and culture courses in schools seem to think that we should become nuevo diasporic Italians; albeit in the suburbs. Our artist, while not having any answers, have dramatically presented the dilemma. Don DeLillo, for example, in his novel *Underworld* raises the generation question: what does it mean to be Italian American – if anything – out of the village and into the 'melting pot'?

Another artist, Bob Giraldi, in a little known but highly acclaimed and award winning film "Dinner Rush", brilliantly depicts the transition from the unequivocal Little Italy culture to the metamorphosing post-immigrant culture. What differentiates *Dinner Rush* from films such as *Godfather* and *Goodfellows* is its contemporary relevance. *Godfather* and *Goodfellows* look back telling us about our past. *Dinner Rush*, looking forward, is about the transition from the "Little Italy" Italianita generations to the younger generations questionable Italianita.

However, *Dinner Rush* is not a sociological study. It's a movie and movies are meant to be entertaining. *Dinner Rush* is a very entertaining movie; a kind of 'kick-back munch on your popcorn' type of movie. A great many reviewers rightfully recommended this movie for its entertainment value. It touches on a full range of melodramatic emotions: humor, suspense, fear, pity, a smidge of sex (without being obscene), a touch of violence (without being grotesque) and it has a fabulous sound track. The main reason we watch movies is because we want to be entertained and *Dinner Rush* fulfills this in spades.

However, *Dinner Rush* is much more than entertainment. It is a work of dramatic art. As such: the action, dialogue, spectacle, sound track, etc., while entertaining at the same time explores the cultural characteristics and values of Italian Americans. Unlike popular Hollywood movies with the sole purpose of entertaining; *Dinner Rush* rises to the artistic level by depicting a microcosmic view of the Italian American culture with macroscopic implications. It explores ideas and issues associated with the generational changes the culture is currently experiencing. Also, it follows the historic tradition of using drama as a medium to explore the horns of a perennial moral dilemma – a good man's struggle with evil.

A work of dramatic art, unlike scientific observation, is not something viewed objectively. In objective scientific observation, everyone agrees on what the object observed looks like. Regardless of the viewer's cultural background and experiences, a bug is a bug – so to speak. Anyone who looks at it will see the same features: size, color, shape, etc. Drama is not objective. Drama is art. Drama is subjective. Cultural background and experiences influence what the viewer sees and determines its significance. Accordingly, non-Italian Americans will not appreciate Italian American cultural nuances idiom, intonations, gestures, expressions, dress, behavior, etc.

The present review is from an Italian American point of view and directed to Italian Americans. Its purpose is to bring this little known yet great film to the attention of Italian Americans; celebrate yet another work of Italian American film artistry; and, most importantly, consider the significance of the cultural and moral ideas presented in the film.

The plot of *Dinner Rush* is driven by two conflicts: generational change and criminal extortion. The first conflict is represented metaphorically by food, the second by gangsters. In the classical tradition, the 'conflicts' are introduced in the exposition act, the 'crises' caused by the conflicts are developed in the middle acts, and conflict 'resolution' is achieved in a suspenseful climatic dénouement. Further, the film adheres to the "three classical unities": unity of action (no sub-plot), unit of place (all action in one physical place) and unity of time (all action within 24 hours). {"Forget about it" - Aristotle would absolutely love this plot, it could have been performed at Taormina.}

The opening scene of the exposition plunges the viewer in medias res ("into the middle of things"). Louis Cropa is having lunch in his New York City (TriBeCa) Italian restaurant, before the evening "dinner rush", with Enrico his good friend and partner in a bookmaking (gambling) business. They are eating a traditional Italian American dinner (rigatoni, fagioli, roasted peppers, cheese, olives, etc.). They are talking and joking about the "old days" and the "old neighborhood" and how things have changed. The whole movie, with the exception of a couple of short scenes, depicts one night in Louis' restaurant and much of the dialogue and action has to do with food. Food, in *Dinner Rush*, is the cause of conflict between Louis and his, chef soon to be owner, son Udo. Louis and his deceased wife built the business by serving traditional Italian food. Udo is a culinary school trained chef who is developing nouvelle cuisine such as carpaccio. When Louis complains about the change from traditional Italian cuisine, Udo says to his father: "we don't serve meatballs here any more." Meatballs vs. Carpaccio! Metaphorically: the old and the new!



The predominate role of food in this movie has led many reviewers to conclude that the movie is "about food." To say that Dinner Rush is about food is like saying Oedipus is about incest and Medea is about infanticide. Food, in the film, is a metaphor for the Italian American culture and the generational change it is currently undergoing. Third generation Italian Americans (grandchildren of the pre-WW I immigrants) are in the process of passing the baton to the forth generation. The forth generation has no living memory of 'nonna' wearing their hair in a bun, dressed in black and praying the rosary. In short, the food conflict in Dinner Rush is a metaphor for the future of the Italian-American culture. Dinner Rush dramatizes this generational cultural change. It forces Italian American viewers to think about the change and the question: "were do we go from here?"

The second conflict and parallel plot of Dinner Rush is criminal extortion. This too is laid out in the opening lunch scene of the exposition act. Louis refers to two gangsters called, "Black and Blue". Reference is made to them hustling Louis and Enrico. Louis tries to convince Enrico to give them the bookmaking business. He says: "These guys are not nice guys, let's give them the book". Enrico refuses and, foreshowing future action in the plot, says: "Give these guys an inch and they'll take a yard. The next thing you know they'll want the restaurant." Louis responds emphatically, creating the basis for the second conflict. "Never the restaurant!"

In the next scene of the exposition act, out on the street, Black and Blue shoot and kill Enrico. As Louis had observed: "they are not nice guys." But, what carries the action of the plot forward is what Enrico, oracle like, foretold: "The next thing you know they'll want the restaurant" and Louis' vow: "Never the restaurant."

Between the exposition act and the dénouement the action serves to develop both conflicts between: Louis and Udo, Louis and gangsters. Udo's Nuevo Cuisine is becoming renown and the restaurant is filled with a Nuevo patronage that is consistent with the food (food critics, artist, and generally upscale New Yorkers). As one character rhetorically asks: "When did it all change? When did eating dinner become a Broadway show?" Enrico's daughter says to Louis: "The problem with your world is no one gives a [expletive] about it any more." Gesturing to the restaurant crowd, she goes on: "Welcome to the new world." Louis resigns himself to the change and is prepared to let Udo have the restaurant. But, Black and Blue have other plans in mind.

Louis invited them to come to restaurant for dinner and to offers them the bookmaking business.



Louis goes to their table and says: "OK the book is yours. Now finish your dinner and leave." As Enrico had predicted, they now want more - the restaurant. Louis tells them "that is out of the question." "We are not leaving until we are partners the food business," they respond. Leaving the table, Louis makes an oblique comment about "greed." The conflict has entered the crisis stage and the film moves into the dénouement act - the resolution.

Why was Louis determined not to give them the restaurant? Because, as he says in one scene: "A real man takes care of his family." Udo was his family. If he gives the restaurant to Black and Blue, he hurts his family. This was: "out of the question." "Take care of your family!" Easily said and routinely done by most men. But what does a man do when there is a threat to his family?

An absolutely brilliant visual poetic scene introduces the climaxing act of the movie. The scene is set with a wide-angle view of the restaurant floor. Udo is walking towards the viewer on the main floor in the middle of tables filled with customers. On the terrace level (about four steps above the main floor) directly behind him are the gangsters who have come to extort the business from his father. At one point all three heads are in a line. Udo is framed between the two gangsters. He is dressed in all white chef's garb and smiling - personifying innocents. They are dressed all in black with sinister looks on their faces - quintessentially evil. As he walks, the gangsters stand up. At one point the gangster Black, who shot Enrico, actually seems to be hovering over him. Symbolically in the scene and literally in the plot, he is about to pounce on his victim. Udo is innocent; he has no idea what is transpiring. Only his father knows. A father who believes: "A real man takes care of his family." What is a father to do when confronted with brut force driven by unmitigated greed and a society (police) that does nothing about it? A GOOD man does what? Turn the other cheek and accept injustice, even at expense of his family's well being? Or, like Hector at Troy, forsake security, overcome paralyzing fear, and confront the perpetrator? This is the question Louis must answer in the concluding act of Dinner Rush.

No review of Dinner Rush would be complete without reference to the brilliant cinematography. For example, how can a sauté line and waitresses running up and down stairs be made beautiful? This beauty is achieved by controlling the speed of the film and the use of perfectly selected background music. More importantly, this beauty is not spectacle for spectacle's sake, not visual art for visual art's sake. It is used to punctuate and enhance the dialogue and contributes to the overall dramatic effect.

In sum: by any generally accepted standard of dramatic film excellence - Dinner Rush wants for



nothing. The artist's muse speaks to us, hermeneutically, through the artist's medium. Italian-Americans should: See this film! Think about it! Talk about it! Learn what Bob Giraldi's muse is calling on them to consider: the perennial philosophical question about good and evil, and the more recent Italian American question: "where do we go from here."

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