



CiaoDC!



CiaoDC.com Interview with Award-Winning Actor, Joe Mantegna

Where are your Italian roots?

I'm half Sicilian and half Barese. My father is from a small town in Sicily called Calascibetta. My mother is from Acquaviva Delle Sante in Bari in the Puglia region.

Describe your Italian upbringing.

To me, I feel like I don't know how it is not to grow up Italian. I grew up in the inner city of Chicago in Little Italy. There was a strong Italian influence all around us. In fact, the famous Mama Celeste was right near my grammar school. At the time, it was a restaurant and years later they started packaging their food. I have a strong Italian influence in the city of Chicago. My grandfather owned the house where we lived upstairs. My grandparents spoke broken English having come over as immigrants from Italy. The food, the holidays, the family gatherings – it's what growing up Italian means to me. Everything about it has rubbed off on me.



Actor, Joe Mantegna

When did you first realize that you wanted to be an actor, and how did growing up Italian influence or discourage you from choosing this career path?

There was a theatre audition in my high school that I went out for and I did not get cast. But the whole experience was so exciting that I knew I had to choose this path. I certainly had a lot of role models in the movies that looked like me; growing up there was an influx of Godfather movies and icons like Sinatra and Dean Martin. It was 'hip' to be Italian and that opened some doors.

Being an Italian American actor, do you find your casting calls to be stereotypical?

There is a certain degree of character portrayal that is not a bad thing. And the fact of the matter is that there are some negative "characters" in the Italian culture – and in all cultures. But the key is not to glorify these traits or characters but to revere the fine Italian American actors that portray and craft these roles like Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, and the list goes on. I'm not that sensitive about role playing. But if history is being rewritten to purposely show our culture in a negative light, then I have a problem. I would think the public is intelligent enough to know the difference. There is room for all of it.



(L) Retired AFL-CIO International President John Sweeney and Mrs. Sweeney and (R) Joe Mantegna

How do you balance playing these roles?

Once I started working in the industry, I often made it a point to find positive roles to portray. Although I have no apologies for gangster characters like Joey Zasa from *Godfather III* or Fat Tony from *The Simpsons*, if I can also play Supreme Court moderate Joseph Novelli in a series like *First Monday*. Numerous times I've had producers change my name to an Italian American name to prove we have other jobs outside of "bang-bang".

I made my character in *Joan of Arcadia* Italian American. And he spoke to God – how more positive can you get? The same went for my character in *State of Emergency* and in Woody Allen's *Alice*. And currently I did it with David Rossi in *Criminal Minds*, and I make reference that I am Italian American. You can reach a certain level in this business where you have that flexibility.

What influence did you have in shaping the character of your current role as David Rossi in *Criminal Minds*?

When I was offered the role, I said that my only request is to make the character Italian American. I got a chance to name this character after a real person, a policeman named David Rossi who was the first guy to testify in the O.J. Simpson trial. He showed such poise in the face of a circus trial. He was the only policeman that dressed in his blue uniform against the advice of the police department. He said, "I've been a policeman for over 25 years; I'm going up exactly as I am and what I am." I admired his integrity so much that I thought, "Someday I'm going to name a character after this guy."



(L) Then-Italian Ambassador to the U.S. Giovanni Castellaneta and (R) Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

As an Italian American audience, do we miss the art of *The Godfather* and movies of this genre?

Take yourself out of the equation. It's okay to be sensitive, but you can't put rubber gloves over the art form. So if we don't talk about it, does it not exist? I don't think those films are intended to glorify. At the end of the day, *The Godfather* was the greatest movie ever made. Why is that? It wasn't because of the violence or mob theme. It was a movie about family, loyalty and trust. When you look at all three movies, *Coppola* did not try to glorify this world. If anything, he horrified it. Can you think of any worst possible thing than to have a daughter killed in front of you because of you? Let's embrace the artists that are doing the art form. You don't embrace Michael Corleone; you embrace Al Pacino.

How can we, the viewers and aspiring writers, directors or performers carry out the Italian American culture in Hollywood via the entertainment industry?

You have to go where your heart tells you to go. Speak from the heart – we are people with a lot of heart and passion and we should not try to censor ourselves.

How was working with Madonna in the Broadway production of *Speed-the-Plow*?

It was a wonderful experience. I think it helped that we were of different generations. We had a lot of respect for each other and developed a friendship. I have nothing but respect for her. She continues to reinvent herself. She is hard working and keeps herself at the forefront of the industry. She stays "A" talent

always. I hope to try to do the same as I approach my 46th year in show business.

You're hosting two wonderful events this month in Washington, DC: Master of Ceremonies for the 22nd Annual Sons of Italy Foundation's (SIF) National Education Leadership Awards Gala (NELA) and the National Memorial Day Concert at the National Capitol. How long have you been hosting these events, and what is your affinity to these tributes?

Both of the events are very meaningful to me. I have been hosting the **National Memorial Day Concert** for nine years and for five as a co-host with **Gary Sinise**. The event draws a large audience of over 300,000 people. What's important is it is a non-political holiday. Memorial Day is for all Americans. The military should not be politicized. I had five uncles who spent time in the war. This holiday celebrates our rights from back to 1776. At the end of the day we have to put ourselves in the shoes of those who put their lives on the line.



(L) Joe Mantegna and (R) Vice President Joe Biden

The Sons of Italy Foundation's NELA has always been a very successful event. I have been their Master of Ceremonies for seven years. It has been a pleasure getting to know and work with SIF's Executive Director, Dr. Phil Piccigallo all these years. It's a grass roots organization. They have had members since the turn of the century. I really like that aspect of it. The event is very intimate, and I have been honored to introduce and become acquainted with

many powerful people. I met **Nancy Pelosi** at the event and now I call her Nancy, and she is the 3rd most powerful person in the U.S. It afforded me the opportunity to introduce many dignitaries such as **Hillary Clinton**, and last year **Joe Biden** when he said, "I'm not Italian American, but I'm married to one." This year they are honoring **Bill Clinton**. They stretch beyond the great Italian American; they honor great citizens that have done great things.

During your annual appearances in Washington, DC, are you able to be a tourist?

The first time I discovered Washington, DC was when I did the movie *Suspect* in '97 with Cher. I loved the city from that first moment. I like going to Arlington Cemetery and I frequent the same restaurants and see the same people at the hotels and events each year.

What is your advice to young Italian American actors today?

Don't worry so much about the Italian American aspect. You are who you are. Go out there and be as professional as you can be, especially if you have a name like me and look like me. My advice is to go out there and be the best that you can be – the rest will take care of itself.

Acting, producing, directing, you've done it all. What do you like best?

Acting has always been my day job. The other jobs have been possible as a result of my acting. I also like doing books on tape and animation voice work. I like it all, but acting is the dance.

What can we look forward to from Joe Mantegna?

Cars II; more Fat Tony on *The Simpsons* now going on 18 years; more David Rossi and the gang with *Criminal Minds* going into its 6th season. I'm working on a book, "Boardwalk Empire" based on Martin Scorsese's upcoming HBO TV series. My daughter Gia will be in her first TeenNick series, "Gigantic" with Meryl Streep's daughter. Then my wife, Arlene has a restaurant in Burbank, CA called *Taste Chicago*. It serves authentic Chicago style food with a strong Italian influence. We try to keep it diverse and always have fun!

Photos by Max Taylor Photography