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Salute to Italian heritage

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By George Haas Pop culture writer

Dennis Farina is sitting on a stool in a darkened room, a few lights, a camera and every eye in a studio of WTTW-TV (Channel 11) trained on his every move.

Some actors might cringe at this assignment -- being himself -- but the Chicago native is one of those guys, or "fellas" as he might say, who is relaxed and comfortable in his own (deeply tanned) skin.

He knows who he is and how he got there, and he's only too happy to share his story and his family's story with documentary producer Gia M. Amella.

"I enjoy the way I was brought up, who I was brought up with. I thought my family was the coolest on Earth," he says. "Still do."

He is not alone.

Farina and a host of Chicago historians, activists, civic leaders and everyday folks offer a salute to their Italian heritage and the city that became their home in a fascinating new film.

"And They Came to Chicago: The Italian American Legacy" will air from 7:30 to 9:45 tonight on Channel 11. It is narrated by Joe Mantegna, another Chicago actor with deep roots in the Italian community.

The documentary makes great use of use archival footage, vintage photographs and recent interviews and footage to craft a moving history of the Italian-American experience in Chicago.

Like so many cultures that have taken root here, the Italians' story becomes Chicago's story as the film traces the massive immigration in the late 19th century and the massive growth that followed.

Also like many immigrant groups, the Italians assimilation in Chicago was a series of starts and stops as they experienced highs and lows, prejudices and injustices.

They rode a wave of pride during the Columbian Exposition in 1893 (Columbus, after all, was a son of Italy), they suffered through prohibition and the Capone years and they had their loyalty questioned during World War II, thanks to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's alliance with Adolf Hitler.

Listen to the sons and daughters of those Italian immigrants, however, and the picture you take away is an overriding sense of community.

"Life was beautiful on 24th and Oakley," Violet Valiani Chisholm says in the film.

Indeed, the interview subjects talk at length about the neighborhoods around west Taylor Street as self-contained worlds, places where schools, Italian-run businesses and places of worship all were within walking distance.

Farina talks about growing up on the city's North Side in the Little Sicily neighborhood near North Avenue and Mohawk.

"I loved the aromas of the city," he says. "After school, you could smell the cooking up and down the street.

"There were a lot of characters in my neighborhood. Most of 'em were in my family. We had the peanut man, Joe the ragman, the knife man. Everybody was a 'man,' " he said with a laugh.

His father was the neighborhood doctor, an Italian immigrant who put himself through medical school. His mom was an immigrant, too, passing through New York's Ellis Island in 1917.

"I have the manifest to prove it," he says.

Like many of those who came of age in the years following World War II, Farina enjoyed the fruits of his parents' labor. A longtime Chicago police officer, he eventually made detective but switched careers after getting a taste of acting while working with director Michael Mann, who was filming "Crime Story" in the city.

"My parents were very supportive of anything I wanted to do," Farina says. "They saw it as the opportunity that it was and thought I should take advantage of it. That was always very big in my family. Plus, there have been some great Italian actors, so that profession enjoys a certain stature, too."

Farina's lengthy credits include mostly character roles in films such as "Manhunter," "Get Shorty" and "Out of Sight," and as Detective Joe Fontana on NBC's "Law & Order" series. He left the TV series in 2006 to concentrate on film work, including producing his own projects.

He remains tied to the Chicago area and, like fellow actor and Windy City native Mantegna, feels an enormous pride in his city and his heritage.

Asked which he gravitates to most, Italian actors or Chicago actors, Farina said "the Chicago Italian-Americans get the nod."

He believes more than anything that Chicagoans are grounded in their approach, regardless of the work.

"I don't know what it is about the city. I think Chicago really is the city of big shoulders and it really is the city that works," Farina says. "I think for me it was knowing that you were at least going to get a shot at something, that you weren't going to be shut out of an opportunity."

"It's big enough, but you don't get swallowed up in it. For me, you could always talk to somebody about something, whether it was your family, your alderman or whoever. It works."

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