

*Chippers.*

By Nino Tropicano.

Fall Films, Ltd., 2009.

52 minutes. DVD format, color.

Who first brought to Ireland the quintessential British street food, fish 'n chips, and made it the fast food of choice for three generations of Dubliners, long before McDonald's and Burger King even appeared on the horizon of the Emerald Isle? Italians, of course.

The documentary movie *Chippers* narrates this seemingly odd, but I would say absolutely typical, tale from the Italian diaspora, mostly by way of interviews with its protagonists. In the 1920s, a few young men from the small town of Casalattico, in the Ciociaria area (halfway between Rome and Naples), emigrated to northern England to peddle ice cream. After a few years, they moved to Dublin, sent for their families, and reconstituted the tiny community around the Savoia Restaurant, where they started to serve the staple dish of the English working class. The economic situation in Casalattico after World War II prompted men to immigrate to Dublin, following networks established by earlier immigrants. Some of these men opened small fish 'n chips shops. They took a risky chance at entering virtually the only independent occupation open to them given the very limited capital they had. All of them "had never seen a fish before," as one of the immigrants interviewed for *Chippers* confesses, which of course speaks volumes about how ethnic traditions are made. There is a general agreement among the first-generation witnesses that the role of women was decisive. As soon as immigrants established their tiny restaurants, they sent for their wives, arranged proxy marriages, or rushed to Casalattico to marry and return to Ireland. These young wives and mothers worked incredibly long shifts, provided the family business with free skilled labor, and, last but not least, ran these Spartan fish 'n chips places with the air of a family-like environment.

Whether the postcolonial Irish snubbed the idea of cooking the food of the imperialist British, or they simply thought that the fish 'n chips business was too much work for too little money (as one of the older Italian witnesses suggests in the movie), Italians developed a near monopoly over the trade. Moreover, as the narrative that "if you want good fish 'n chips you gotta go to Italian places" spread, Irish fish 'n chips became culturally entrenched with its Italian makers. Now in their second or third generation, these businesses are still highly profitable, if very labor intensive, but many of the founders chose to return to Italy as retired, well-to-do, successful migrant entrepreneurs, and many of the younger Italian Irish seem to prefer a university degree and a professional career rather than the oily atmosphere of the fish 'n chips restaurant.

*Chippers* is a meta-narrative in that it follows the efforts of a second-generation member of the Italian-Irish community who compiles a comprehensive collection of photographs and newspaper clippings and organizes an exhibit and event in which this community history is presented. The film follows Barbato Borza's travels between Dublin and Casalattico, as he meets and interviews people from whom he collects photographs and information. This footage material is interspersed with many interviews with other first- and later-generation men and women in Ireland and Italy. As a result, a significant variety of points of view is provided, and the notion of the intensely transnational lives most of the people portrayed and interviewed have lived fully emerges. For example,

the fact that young people were discouraged from pursuing an education because they were expected to help in the fish 'n chips restaurant with both their manual work and their familiarity with English is candidly revealed. In addition, the film shows how a kind of "Italian identity" was maintained even with the near absence of leisure time for socialization outside of the group and the fact that girls were generally prohibited to date non-Italians. In the same perspective, young people regularly visiting Casalattico today for summer vacations (sometimes, it seems, against their will) candidly confess that they would never even consider "moving back" there. Rare Irish TV newsreels from the 1950s and 1960s documenting the popularity of Italian fish 'n chips among Irish consumers complete the material the director and producer Nino Tropicano was able to assemble.

Tropicano, who was born in Monopoli (Apulia) and immigrated to Dublin as a young film student, is not part of the Casalattico community but obviously looks at it with a sympathetic, knowledgeable, and participating eye. Documentaries by or about immigrant communities that are meant to represent and perhaps celebrate local culture are at high risk of romanticizing the immigrant saga at best, suggesting its exceptionalism and even transforming it in a chauvinist discourse at its very worst. The sensibilities of the people behind and in front of the camera will determine the outcome. *Chippers* emerges from the challenge remarkably well. The direction is honest; the filming is good given the evident technical and assumed budget limitations that add a sense of authenticity rather than thwart the narrative flow; the editing has a fast-paced rhythm that is not easy to find in similar documentaries; and the soundtrack mostly steers clear of obnoxious stereotypes. Immigrants are open and straightforward in their recollections, demonstrating a significant reflexivity in interpreting the meaning of their own lives as mobile people, representing the identity and experiences of the others they have met in the process, and pondering on the future and the past. While not strikingly original, *Chippers* is a more than decent, interesting, informative, and totally viewable documentary, besides being an obvious act of love for a community.

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