

*Closing Time: Storia di un negozio.*

By Veronica Diaferia.

A Tiny Director Productions Film, 2005.

30 minutes. DVD format, color.

In 1910, Neapolitan immigrant Ernesto Rossi opened a shop at 187 Grand Street, in the heart of New York's Little Italy. In 1930, the eponymous E. Rossi & Company moved just down the street to 191 Grand, at the corner of Mulberry. In 2004, after nearly a hundred years in business, the shop closed, a victim of escalating Manhattan rents and the decline of the ethnic neighborhood that had supported it. Italian-born director Veronica Diaferia's documentary *Closing Time: Storia di un negozio*, winner of the Best Short Documentary awards in the 2006 Atlanta Film Festival and the 2006 Big Apple Film Festival, is a fine, if incomplete, account of E. Rossi & Company's last month in business, and a charming tribute to an Italian America that has all but disappeared.

In *Closing Time*, which she calls in the press release material "a handicraft film, intentionally rough," Diaferia uses a combination of informal interviews and archival footage to construct a paean to an urban Italian-American community facing obsolescence. Most of the action takes place within the cramped, claustrophobic quarters of E. Rossi & Company, where its present proprietor, Ernie Rossi (grandson of Ernesto) packs and talks, talks and packs, in advance of his eviction date. The longtime lease deal, negotiated on a handshake decades earlier, has been called in by Rossi's new landlord, who plans to raise the monthly rent to \$25,000 and wants Rossi to vacate the premises by the end of 2004 (the film does not mention that the Rossis reopened a few doors down on Grand Street, in a much bigger space, in 2005). The story of E. Rossi & Company is presented as an oral history told during the Rossi family's bemused preparations for the move, gleaned from Diaferia's numerous interviews with shoppers, neighbors, Italian tourists, and members of the Rossi family, including Ernesto Rossi's nonagenarian son Luigi, who sits in despair in a corner of the shop as he watches its piecemeal demise. These conversations are skillfully edited by Michael Slavens, giving the overall effect of a foray into ethnography; and certainly, to an Italian like Diaferia, Little Italy is a foreign country of sorts, where a third-generation Italian-American shopkeeper purveying T-shirts that plead "Pray for me, my wife is Italian" may have only a passing acquaintance with the language and culture of his forebears.

The danger in all of this is that, in spite of her obvious affection for her subjects and her wise decision to let them speak for themselves, Diaferia exaggerates the present-day influence, and even existence, of Little Italy, and in so doing runs the risk of parodying the very people whose culture she aims to preserve. Robert Rossi, a grandson of Ernesto who, with his long gray hair and beard, resembles an aging Garibaldi, complains to the camera that "when people look at our people, it's gangsters, it's loudmouth comics, it's more gangsters . . . but this romanticism . . . *la dolce vita*—that's what our people are really all about, and it would be nice if once in a while someone would find that out." But surely, as representations of Italian Americans from *Marty* to *Moonstruck* suggest, the Italian American as gangster is only one side of a binary stereotype. In the nonethnic American imagination, Italian Americans—urban, passionate, fetishizers of family and food—are, in their very difference, romantic, and one suspects that Diaferia sees them as such herself.

For, ironically, in spite of her sympathy for the plight of the Rossis, Diaferia is guilty of her own ethnic idealizing. The camera pans on shots of delivery trucks emblazoned with Chinese characters as Ernie Rossi's sister-in-law says, "You see more and more different ethnic groups moving into this area, and little by little the feeling of Little Italy is not the same as it was maybe thirty or forty years ago." A neighboring shopkeeper, like the Rossis forced out by skyrocketing rent, tearfully embraces the local barber, whose shopfront sign is in English and Chinese. Ethnic encroachment is hinted at darkly. But even thirty and forty years ago, Little Italy was rapidly losing ground to expansion from Chinatown to its south. The intrusion of chic from SoHo to the west is of a more recent vintage, however. Robert Rossi, walking around the overstuffed shop and indicating the plaster images of saints and the piles of "Kiss me, I'm half-Italian" baby bibs, asserts that "a world that is as clean and as neat as the SoHo that you know about—that doesn't exist. That's somebody's fantasy. This here is what's *real*." But is it?

In its heyday at the end of the nineteenth century, New York's Little Italy boasted 40,000 residents of Italian descent and covered seventeen city blocks; in the more than a hundred years since, however, its Italian population has shrunk steadily as Italian immigrants became acculturated and moved to more desirable climes. The Immigration Act of 1965 and the improving postwar Italian economy sealed the fate of the neighborhood once and for all. Little Italy now spans little more than two city blocks, and the 2000 Census reported that the neighborhood's residents claiming Italian ancestry had dwindled to a mere 1,211. Over the past thirty or forty years, Little Italy has become a *de facto* museum and gift shop for tourists—many of them, like Diaferia, Italian nationals. The neighborhood now employs two public-relations executives, a grant writer, and a bus-tour coordinator.<sup>1</sup> As sad as the story of E. Rossi & Company's closing is, one can't help but sense that the store's number actually came up long ago. Owing, perhaps, to her status as a relative newcomer to New York and an outsider to the culture of Little Italy, Diaferia either ignores or neglects the sociohistorical context for E. Rossi's closing.

Another disappointment is the surprisingly short shrift Diaferia gives to the store's early days as a center of Italian-American music publishing. Ernesto Rossi was one of the leading publishers of Neapolitan and Italian-American songs during the prewar years, an important American distributor of Neapolitan art and popular music as well as an exporter of songs by Italian-American composers written in Neapolitan style, which were shipped back to Italy (making E. Rossi & Company an early force for cultural globalization; one wonders how much of the Neapolitan ethos in the twentieth century was actually created in Little Italy). The musical legacy of E. Rossi & Company is alluded to briefly in shots of yellowing sheet music and photos of Enrico Caruso and Giovanni Martinelli, and in Ernie Rossi's comment that his grandfather "got involved in music." In fact, the music archives of Edizione E. Rossi are significant enough to be of great interest to scholars of Italian American studies and historians of music and popular culture; this reviewer would have liked to see Diaferia explore this aspect of the store's history more extensively.

By the time *Closing Time* was filmed, however, the wider cultural significance of E. Rossi & Company was virtually forgotten by all but a few scholars and aficionados, and the store is shown as a present-day purveyor of Italian-American kitsch. Toward the end of the film, Ernie Rossi expresses the wish that future generations might be

able to visit some semblance of his grandfather's shop and, in so doing, discover that Little Italy is not "all about . . . pasta and spaghetti and meatballs and cannolis." They might then, he hopes, find out "what Little Italy is all about." But the question, in her affecting ode to a Little Italy that exists only in the shared cultural memory of the Italian-American diaspora, goes unanswered by *Diaferia*: What is Little Italy, and, by extension, Italian-American culture, all about?

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## Notes

1. Bill Tonelli. "Arrivederci, Little Italy." *New York Magazine* (September 20, 2004); <http://nymag.com/nymetro/urban/features/9904>, accessed September 23, 2009.